

Anthropology and Composition:

*Some Notes Towards a Descriptive Composition Pedagogy*

James Luberda, University of Connecticut

<http://members.aol.com/jamesl4242>

Before I answer your questions, I feel that some preliminary remarks are in order.

Roland Barthes, "Literature/Teaching" (234)

At the beginning of my first semester as an instructor (and also a graduate student) at the University of Connecticut, I was provided with several articles from various composition journals that the Director of the Freshman Writing Program, Tom Recchio, thought would be useful preparatory material. In going over them, I came across one article whose title struck me as rather odd. It contained an acronym that I had not expected to see in the context of a composition journal: "WPA." The full title of the article, which happened to be written by Tom Recchio as well, is as follows: "WPA on Campus: Parallel Academic Lives: Affinities of Teaching Assistants and Freshman Writers." For whatever reason, I had not yet come across the phrase represented by that combination of letters in a composition setting: Writing Program Administration. So, naturally, I translated the acronym into the only expression with which I was then familiar: Works Progress Administration. Unable to make an immediate connection between WPA as I understood it and freshman writing, I considered the meaning of the WPA further, and in so doing, recalled the Federal Writers' Project, an arm of the WPA dedicated to employing writers. Pressing my (mis)reading forward, I was suddenly struck by the novelty of what I took to be Tom's idea: just as the writers of the WPA were engaged in a massive project to document the textual fabric of America, transcribing folktales, songs, narratives, histories and

geographies wholesale, so freshman writers, in their attempts at composition, inscribed the textual fabric of their (not always American) lives.

Upon further reading, however, I discovered that, even though the WPA of the title was never specifically identified in that article, it was clearly not the one I had in mind. The upside, of course, was the idea for the present essay, for both the work of the writers under the WPA and the writers in my freshman composition classes, while given to different ends and means, deal with much of the same kind of material: personal histories, folk- or family tales, commonplaces, sayings, private and public narratives. However focussed upon a particular text or approach a composition assignment may be, a measure of all of these other texts inform and speak through student essays. Across the country, then, we have a far greater number of writers presently employed, in the guise of students, in recording the world they know.

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For a long time, and according to a variety of sometimes unstated pedagogies, the student material just described has been regarded as only so much unacademic dross, when it is acknowledged at all. That is, however, not the greater loss; rather, the qualification, "when it is acknowledged at all," points in the direction of the real loss, one borne by students and instructors alike when the texts of students' lives are not recognized in the texts they come to produce. The potential gain in learning to read these "hidden" or sublimated pretexts is twofold: on the one hand, we are presented with an embarrassment of previously unseen riches, texts that serve as records of individual cultural histories, of Bakhtinian discourses inflecting one another, that form a richer picture of contemporary cultures; the second gain, and the one that is the concern of this particular essay, is the pedagogical gain, whereby a better understanding of the textual apparatus that students bring to the classroom yields a better understanding (for both teacher and students) of the texts that the students come to produce in that classroom. And in this understanding lies the possibility for self-reflection and change.

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In any given historical moment of verbal-ideological life, each generation at each

social level has its own language; moreover, every age group has as a matter of fact its own language, its own vocabulary, its own particular accentual system that, in their turn, vary upon social level, academic institution (the language of the cadet, the high school student, the trade school student are all different languages) and other stratifying factors. (Bakhtin 290)

Bakhtin's analysis of novelistic discourse in "Discourse and the Novel" extends usefully to an analysis of almost any prose discourse, as the author himself suggests at various points. As he describes "heteroglossia," the "interanimation" of various discourses, he could well be describing freshman composition papers, which demonstrate a vast range of discourses often in competition with one another as well as with institutionalized "academic" discourses. These student discourses encapsulate the kinds of stratifications Bakhtin identifies above: class, age, generation, as well as place of institution, among many others. Each of these stratifications impacts the others, so that a complex of languages is generated, and it is from or through this complex that student writing is produced. The distinction between "from" and "through" is an important one, as it is a determinant of the real success of student writing; the two terms mark two different ways of dealing with language, ways that will be later identified and discussed.

The Federal Writers' Project became, in many ways, an essentially anthropological exercise. So it is with the reading of freshman composition papers in a Bakhtinian mode. Parallels between the fields of English and anthropology are nothing new. Robert Scholes notes the recent exchange between the two: "Anthropological analysis, as Clifford Geertz has shown in *The Interpretation of Cultures*, has come to resemble literary criticism, and literary criticism now leads back toward the cultural and institutional coding of human behavior" (3). However, linguistics, a field whose home is often adjacent to English, and whose investigations are often used as the basis of literary-critical approaches, served as the basis of the very anthropological approach Geertz is writing against. We need only turn to the essays of Claude Lévi-Strauss, collected in *Structural Anthropology*. In the second chapter, "Structural Analysis in Linguistics and Anthropology," Lévi-Strauss affirms that, though linguists and anthropologists had long

exchanged ideas, explored common issues, the appearance of structural linguistics on the scene was nothing less than a "revelation" for anthropologists (33). He exudes:

Not only did it [structural linguistics] renew linguistic perspectives; a transformation of this magnitude is not limited to a single discipline. Structural linguistics will certainly play the same renovating role with respect to the social sciences that nuclear physics, for example, has played for the physical sciences.

(33)

Structuralism in anthropology is not unlike a formalistic approach to the teaching and evaluation of composition. As structural anthropology searches out the universals in human behaviour, attempting to code ever more deeply and yet ever more completely the essentials of human existence, formalist pedagogies code specific patterns of writing behaviour that stand as universal ideals or universal errors. Both approaches tend to eliminate or ignore elements that do not fit their models. As Tom Recchio observes in an unpublished manuscript on a Bakhtin-inflected pedagogy:

In rejecting the notion of a generic student writing and of the classroom as an isolated, inviolate space, I am arguing that formalist pedagogical paradigms (even social constructivist paradigms) are inappropriate in light of the realities of disciplinary and social life. (19)

Recchio goes on to contrast the obviously heterogeneous nature of contemporary culture with the "formalist rhetorics [that] imply a homogeneous culture with common social concerns, modes of thought, and verbal practices." Quite literally, the application of the latter to the former must result in a loss of the "social concerns, modes of thought, and verbal practices" belonging to anyone outside the culture that is the source of those rhetorics; it further seeks to eliminate their impact upon those who are within that culture.

The paradigm shift from the structural anthropology of Lévi-Strauss to the descriptive anthropology of Clifford Geertz is paralleled by the recent shift (in some quarters) from a formalist composition pedagogy to an arguably anthropological-descriptive composition

pedagogy, one not always identified with but having much to gain from Bakhtin. The conflict that Recchio notes, between heterogeneous student cultures and the homogeneous assumptions behind formalist approaches, is one that should be apparent to any composition instructor today. Certainly, the "temptation" that Geertz suggests anthropologists face is not one that any composition instructor should fear: "For anthropologists are forever being tempted--as Lévi-Strauss himself once was--out of libraries and lecture halls, where it is hard to remember that the mind of man is no dry light, into 'the field,' where it is impossible to forget it" (359). One might point out that composition instructors are "always already" in "the field." It is not surprising, then, that some have discovered the limits and lacunae of formalism; what is surprising, rather, is that so many still blindly employ it. We face a multiplicity of voices in every discussion, in every piece of writing; how we respond to them, whether or not we hear them as voices and not errors in communication, ultimately determines the purpose and success of our pedagogies.

Performing anthropological and/or Bakhtinian-informed readings of student papers might seem inappropriate, evidence of a mushy interdisciplinarity. This perception, however, would rely on a very questionable assumption: that student writing belongs to a special class of texts that are of limited use (and interest), whose qualities are specific and institutional. While a primary context for such writing is admittedly institutional, if one grants Bakhtin's vision of discourse any weight at all, it is absurd to conclude that it is *wholly* institutional, a univocal echo of the classroom, a Foucauldian product of an educational structure.<sup>1</sup> Scholes suggests, as does Recchio, that in academia, "We distinguish between what is 'real' and what is 'academic' to our own disadvantage" (Scholes 5). Scholes charges academics with privileging the academic over the real, on grounds ultimately untenable. Recchio, focussing on composition instruction, asserts that "the idea of 'student' writing as a category of writing, of student language as somehow distinct from 'real' language" is one of the larger problems his discipline faces (14). With Recchio (and composition), then, the division is not one of academic/real but of real/student. The difference in emphasis aside, both Scholes and Recchio suggest that operating on the assumption that student writing is somehow outside of the other activities and texts that occupy English

departments is neither reasonable nor useful. To do so results in an attitude accurately characterized by Scholes:

What *can* be produced in the academy is an unreal version of it [non-literature], "pseudo-non-literature," which is indeed produced in an appalling volume. We call the production of this stuff "composition." (6)

A reevaluation of the status and place of student texts in the context of other texts, academic and otherwise, makes clear the applicability of complex reading and interpretive strategies to student writing. In short, such writing may be taken seriously. Indeed, given the humanistic thrust typical of "English" pedagogies, it would seem that this seriousness is long overdue. No longer, as well, can the conventional formalist criteria by which the worthiness of writing is judged ("thesis, organization, and diction") be assumed as either correct or useful (Recchio 11).<sup>2</sup> This expanded forum for the study of student writing permits, even encourages, the application of texts and ideas such as the following:

Any stylistics capable of dealing with the distinctiveness of the novel as a genre must be a *sociological stylistics*. The internal social dialogism of novelistic discourse requires the concrete social context of discourse to be exposed, to be revealed as the force that determines its entire stylistic structure, its "form" and its "content," determining it not from without, but from within; for indeed, social dialogue reverberates in all aspects of discourse, in those relating to "content" as well as the "formal" aspects themselves. (Bakhtin 300)

Although part of a lengthy discussion of the novel, a genre typically held as belonging to writing of another order altogether, once the limits imposed upon "pseudo-non-literature" are removed, this passage becomes equally applicable to student essays *and* Dostoyevsky. Indeed, one might suggest that the relationship between social context and form as well as content, as identified here, reveal the problems inherent in a rigid formalism that attempts to divide form and content, and further divorce those from any social context but the academic. It suggests that the tensions within student essays among various interanimated discourses will inevitably demand their own

form in conjunction with their expression. This new freedom to read student texts in other ways fully demonstrates the caprices and artifices of the former ones. The sociology invoked here reverberates off an anthropology cited earlier; it emphasizes the unchangeable interrelationship between context and content, between society and individual expression. It also alleviates a difficulty Recchio identifies, a feeling I fully understand; he cites a sample student introductory paragraph and laments, "I have found that responding to such writing in terms of the principles of thesis, organization, and diction to be an exercise in frustration for me and for my students" (12). Recchio is frustrated because of the inadequacy of formal principles as guidelines for judging writing; his students are frustrated because the formal principles ignore their real difficulties, those presented by the discourses from which they write.<sup>3</sup>

Without intending to overemphasize the significance of descriptive anthropology in relation to the reading of student essays, the first chapter of Geertz's book, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, entitled "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture," might serve as a better primer for would-be (and present) composition teachers than most ostensible "composition" texts. In this chapter, Geertz introduces and employs two terms coined by Gilbert Ryle, "thin description" and "thick description." In the process of explaining the nature of each, Ryle (as paraphrased by Geertz) offers a hypothetical anthropological scene: two boys rapidly contracting their eyelids, one as a result of an involuntary twitch, the other as a signal to a friend. Though to an observer, Geertz notes, both movements are identical, their meanings are radically different. Ryle then proposes a third boy, who begins to parody the wink of the first boy; again, Geertz points out that his movements will appear indistinguishable from those of the other two boys, even though a third distinct meaning is introduced. Working from this hypothetical, "thin description" consists of the (apparently) objective record of that which is observed, which in this case would be three boys rapidly contracting their eyelids. "Thick description," however, incorporates interpretation, the attempt at understanding the meaning behind observed behaviours; applied to the aforementioned scene, it would result in a record of "a stratified hierarchy of meaningful structures in terms of which twitches, winks, fake-winks, parodies,

rehearsals of parodies are produced, perceived, and interpreted, and without which they would not . . . in fact exist" (7). Where the former simplifies to the point of meaninglessness, removing the behaviour from its immediate social context, the latter apprehends the complex social nature of signs, and finds them deeply implicated in "a stratified hierarchy of meaningful structures," which may be read as Bakhtinian discourses. It is, in more familiar terms, the difference between studying words randomly plucked from a text and reading the text itself; between reading the text as a solitary object and reading in it the other texts that inform it.

The concepts "thin description" and "thick description" present, for the evaluation of student essays, two modes of reading (for composition instructors) as well as two modes of writing (for student writers). A composition instructor who practices what might be called "thick reading," a mental version of the descriptive act, reads student essays with an eye for the implicit interpretive acts that resulted in the text on the page. A thick reading will seek to uncover *why* sources, for example, are employed in a specific fashion, rather than simply being content to critique *how* they are used. It will try to distinguish among the various voices and styles the text employs, from the "correct" academic, third-person impersonal, to the confessional, the preacherly, and the confused, among others. "Errors", in this view, have a history, and are not mere textual aberrations. Thick reading works to reveal the forces, the various intentions of various discourses, that produced the structure and content of the text. It points to the ways in which the student has read the texts of his or her world, including those of the classroom, instructor, and "text-book." Recalling Geertz, a thick reading distinguishes between the "twitch" that is an accidentally muddled sentence and the "wink" that is a sentence grappling with unfamiliar ideas.<sup>4</sup> Such a reader knows to address each differently.

A "thin reading," the more conventional approach, almost exclusively concerns itself with the text as it exists on the page, not how it came to be.<sup>5</sup> Such a reading will critique the (mis)use of sources on the assumption that the issue is merely one of "right" or "wrong," with the latter eventually corrected through study of a model. Indeed, thin readings function against an implicitly or explicitly posited model of student writing, identifying deviance and rewarding

congruence. The appearance of a confessional voice in a formal essay will, in a thin reading, be marked as student error, perhaps in words to the effect of "Avoid first-person," or "You sound uncertain here. Look for more evidence in the text." Further, such a reading will fail to understand the relationship between the voice that produced the confessional material and the academic voice that dominates the essay (or fails to). Thin readings also delight in working out issues of sentence structure, punctuation, and other technical matters, because they most readily lend themselves to an "objective" critique. A student's perhaps inappropriately placed reflection on the frustrations of living at home is not so easily dealt with in a thin reading, nor can a model or rule ("always use 'different from' rather than 'different than,'" "Tom was awarded a scholarship" is passive voice; avoid it") be offered in its place. One might summarize the critical approach of a thin reading in the following opposition: reading/misreading. A student has either read correctly or incorrectly, never "differently."

A thin reading assumes a monologic, fully intentioned voice realized in the production of the text; it does not acknowledge the stratified hierarchy of discourses that compete and cooperate in that text. Many writing instructors, however, are not merely guilty of this assumption, they are responsible for its promulgation, through what Recchio identifies as "the demands of generic student writing: to produce a single-voiced, impersonal, objective text that demonstrates a command of academic conventions" (63). Students then learn to share these assumptions as well. Just as one may "thickly" or "thinly" read a student essay, so may a student write "thickly" or "thinly."<sup>6</sup> The majority of entering freshmen and novice writers perform the latter kind of writing the majority of the time; it should be the goal of a composition program to help them write in the former mode, a goal that Recchio also promotes in a Bakhtinian context. It is important to note here that all texts, regardless of how they are written or read, are inherently "thick."<sup>7</sup> That is, every text is composed of a complex of discourses, whether they are recognized as such or not. Students especially, however, are not initially aware of these discourses in their own writing or others'. They assume that all texts, including their own, are each speaking a single tongue. Thus, as they read and write (thinly), they do not consciously observe and mediate

among the multiplicity of voices that wish to speak for them, through them; they are (at best) only crudely aware of the interpretative acts inherent in every reading and writing of a text. They often sense that something does not "fit," or they cannot see how to make quotations from other texts work within their own, but they do not understand why it is so in either case. In his manuscript, Recchio asserts:

One task for the writing teacher is to put the student into a position to recognize context and contexts, to recognize multiple points of view and multiple discourses within the same text and to mediate their conflicting demands. It is through such efforts at mediation that one's own context can become visible, one's own voice can be forged. (63)

In exploring this possibility, he works several student essays, identifying in each various points at which two or more discourses collide. Two of the more interesting cases involve what might otherwise be called problems of word choice or "logical contradiction." To fully appreciate what a Bakhtinian (or thick) reading can do, one must turn to Recchio's text, but it may be noted here that his analysis suggests that conventional readings of student essays are far more likely to do harm than good. Where a thin reading would result in marks of "w.c." or "this contradicts the idea in your previous sentence" and go no further, a thick reading would distinguish (as Recchio does) between errors as a result of inattention or simple misuse of vocabulary and those that are symptomatic of larger issues, such as attempts to mimic or adopt academic discourse, or implicit and conflicting points of view. The thin reading fails to address the real problem, sending the student off to the dictionary or thesaurus in the case of "w.c.," and with the "contradiction," throwing the student back upon his own text which (probably) does not appear to him the least bit contradictory. In contrast, the thick reading provides these students with another way of examining their own writing; it provides an interpretation, and with that, a new perspective.

Earlier in this essay it was suggested that an important distinction lies between the idea of students writing *from* the complex of discourses that comprise their individual languages, and *through* that complex. To write "from" suggests that one is wholly located within that complex,

that it is immanent; writing "through," on the other hand, implies that one is removed enough from the complex to be in the capacity to selectively employ it. While it is true that it is impossible to be outside discourse altogether, by shifting one's own relation to various discourses through being conscious of them, a useful distance may be attained. The ideas of distance and writing "through" language have already been addressed by Bakhtin. One particularly good passage is worth quoting in full:

Thus a prose writer can distance himself from the language of his own work, while at the same time distancing himself, in varying degrees, from the different layers and aspects of the work. He can make use of language without wholly giving himself up to it, he may treat it as semi-alien or completely alien to himself, while compelling language ultimately to serve all his own intentions. The author does not speak in a given language (from which he distances himself to a greater or lesser degree), but he speaks, as it were, *through* language, a language that has somehow more or less materialized, become objectivized, that he merely ventriloquates. (299)

Ultimately, if students can begin to see these discourses, these contexts, they will gradually acquire the ability to manipulate them rather than be fully manipulated by them.<sup>8</sup> They will write (and read) "thickly," aware of the interpretations, the intentions always already embodied in all discourse.<sup>9</sup>

Regardless of how appealing the approach to composition instruction outlined in this essay may be for some, it does offer one arguably universal caveat. The way that we read student papers in turn instructs students how to read their own texts, as well as others. Our approaches, the emphasis we place on aspects of student work are consciously and unconsciously adopted by our students. A telling example of this surfaced in a controversial student paper that recently made the rounds in our department. It was a paper written on Richard Rodriguez's "Achievement of Desire," and its central thesis was that Rodriguez was a fraud, because, as the student painstakingly tallied, his essay was full of grammatical "errors." These "errors" were almost

wholly violations of the dictum "Never begin a sentence with 'and,' 'but,' or 'or.'" Setting aside, for the moment, the agenda behind the student's essay, the tool that he used to perform his critique is clearly one that he learned through its application to his own writing. But what is perhaps more alarming is the larger picture it reveals: which aspects of writing "count." In this case, the message from his previous writing education has come through perfectly: form matters more than content; the technical is more important than the substantive; "grammar" is a measure of ability, not "ideas." The student never considered that even if Rodriguez's style or technique were deeply flawed, the material of his essay demonstrated an insightful, critical mind at work. But of course he couldn't; for him, such an oddly weighted evaluation would be, literally, unthinkable.

The shift from a formalist composition pedagogy to a descriptive one (anthropological, Bakhtinian) is a moral shift; it acknowledges the complexity that constitutes every use of language, every expression, and seeks to restore the heterogeneity forsaken by high formalist paradigms. Its goal is to empower students with language, and bring them to understand the responsibility they must take in mediating the language that works through them. In the classroom, everything inflected by a descriptive approach serves to turn students from being merely the instruments of language, who themselves believe they use language instrumentally, to being conscious of how fully implicated they are in language as language is in them.

### *Notes*

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<sup>1</sup>If student writing *were* merely a product of a Foucauldian institution, then the high formalist pedagogies would, in fact, be appropriate and reasonable.

<sup>2</sup>And, as Joseph M. Williams' landmark essay, "The Phenomenology of Error," makes clear, pseudo-formalist critiques of error, sometimes classified under the rubrics of "style" and "usage," are very questionable in terms of intent as well as applicability. As he suggests, following an extensive discussion of the vagaries of error classification, "Certainly, how we mark and grade papers might change. We need not believe that just because a rule

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of grammar finds its way into some handbook of usage, we have to honor it" (164). Of course, this didn't stop a recent *Hartford Courant* from crafting a front-page article on a decision by the editors of an Oxford American dictionary to eliminate the split infinitive from a list of grammatical "errors."

<sup>3</sup>Recchio notes that these formal principles "do have the virtue of clarity" (12). Setting aside the question of the value and meaning of "clarity," if these formal principles are ever to play any significant part in composition, they should come well after students have been given the opportunity to objectify the discourses that constitute them, to do the real work of distinguishing among the words that want to speak them.

<sup>4</sup>Or, as he describes his own vocation, "Doing ethnography is like trying to read (in the sense of 'construct a reading of') a manuscript--foreign, faded, full of ellipses, incoherencies, suspicious emendations, and tendentious commentaries . . ." (10). A manuscript? Or a fall-term first essay draft?

<sup>5</sup>I confess I especially like the term "thin reading," because it sounds exactly like the kind of reading it describes: shallow, slight, superficial.

<sup>6</sup>The worst-case scenario in a student-teacher exchange might be captured in the quip, "thinly written, thinly read." In such a case, little communication is actually taking place between the two.

<sup>7</sup>As Geertz describes anthropological records: "what we call our data are really our own constructions of other people's constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to" (9).

<sup>8</sup>This, of course, does not really explain how or why being aware of discourses necessarily will grant a student some control over them. Such an explanation really belongs to another essay altogether; suffice it to say that feedback is essential to biological and communicative existence. When we speak, we await a response both to confirm we have been heard and to determine what we should say next. This feedback enables us to make choices about our future utterances. Being conscious of the discourses that constitute one's speech provides a kind of feedback; it is an attempt to hear oneself as another might, rather than remaining immanent in one's own speech. It is something that most of us (academics) have already been trained to do, and thus now do quite naturally. Essentially, the idea is to get students to take over the role we play in the classroom: that of a highly attentive listener who provides detailed feedback on what is heard. The difficulty, of course, is estranging students from their own speech.

<sup>9</sup>[What follows is a section of text that originally appeared in the body of the essay. As I was not

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completely satisfied with it, indeed did not know whether it belonged to this essay, I have placed it here, that you may read it separately]

There is a problem, however, and it is one that is implicit in the nature of the analyses Recchio offers in his manuscript. After each Bakhtinian reading of a student essay, the reader is inevitably left with the question: "And how did the student use your critique?" Indeed, given the extent of some of the analysis, a reader might have first asked: "How did you present this critique?" Yet these questions remain in the air, unanswered. The students did not receive these critiques. The process ended with the analysis.

The immediate reason for this is evident: the essays were selected for analysis specifically for use in the production of the manuscript, and were possibly provided by other instructors; they have not been done in the context of a "real" classroom. Yet there is another reason, one that cuts to the heart, in many ways, of the dominance of formalist approaches and the marginal efforts at descriptive pedagogies. It is centered on a question of pragmatics coupled with a closely related question of economics. First, the pragmatic question: How can one produce such analyses? As Recchio presents them, they are complex, psychological portraits of intentions and interpretations. Indeed, if the long quotation may be excused, Bakhtin captures perfectly what direction this must take:

This is why we constantly put forward the referential and expressive--that is, intentional--factors as the force that stratifies and differentiates the common literary language, and not the linguistic markers (lexical coloration, semantic overtones, etc.) of generic languages, professional jargons, and so forth--markers that are, so to speak, the sclerotic deposits of an intentional process, signs left behind on the path of the real living project of an intention, of the particular way it imparts meaning to general linguistic norms. These external markers, linguistically observable and fixable, cannot in themselves be understood or studied without understanding the specific conceptualization they have been given by an intention.

(292)

In short, one cannot rely on specific "markers" of vocabulary or usage to identify the play of specific discourses. Recchio himself acknowledges this problem in one analysis, when he at first identifies the phrase "so

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caught up in" as evidence of a "speaking voice break[ing] through" (36). Yet only a sentence later, in a parenthetical, he admits that the phrase could "be taken as a convention of contemporary speech, not a mark of the individual voice of the student." How does one decide? As Geertz notes of the analysis of the winking boys, "Complexities are possible, if not practically without end, at least logically so" (7). Indeed, more than one reader may be frightened or appalled to come across the following parenthetical in the midst of a later analysis: "First of all (and I grant that this is guess work)" (62). Guesswork? As a methodology, this is certain not to earn much approval except in the most progressive quarters. Yet it is worth noting here that most of what is done, except under perhaps the most formalist of pedagogies, is guided by a great deal of guesswork, of intuition and Psych 101 analyses. But this does not solve the problem; it only points to another one. To be able to perform a Bakhtinian or thick reading of a student essay one must give oneself over to extensive speculation with little guidance, save the text itself, whatever interpersonal exchanges the instructor and student have had, and the much-maligned criterion of "reasonableness."

The kind of thinking and work required to produce such readings invokes the second problem: it is simply not feasible, in terms of time and effort, to descriptively read more than a few student essays and arrive at usable results. Even then, one may discover that a reading has left out something of key importance; in a published article relating a Bakhtinian reading, Recchio admits that he remained unaware of one of the key discourses present in a student paper until it was pointed out to him ("Bakhtinian Reading" 453n1). One can only imagine the time spent doing these analyses, not including the time spent typing them up, as well as the imagined time required to fully explain them to the students who are to receive them. Thus the prevalence of formalist pedagogies; beyond the fact that they provide specific rules and guidelines for evaluating writing, they also streamline the process by focussing on the surface of the text, by taking everything as the product of one intention, fully voiced. Their thin readings may not solve real problems, but they do save composition instructors from descending into the whorl of discourses contained in every student paper. Given the fact that in many institutions, composition instruction is performed by people who are themselves students, one can imagine the appeal of any approach that looks to *increase* the time and effort spent evaluating essays. Of course, if one then spends less time searching out thesis statements, critiquing structural elements, delineating the qualities of a good introduction or conclusion, etc., then the time spent doing a Bakhtinian or thick reading is not wholly additional time. In my own practice, I have found

that sacrificing the former in favour of the latter has not made my schedule too unbearable.

[Now follows an ending I had originally considered, with or without the preceding material]

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And did not Spinoza think in Judeo-Portuguese, obstructed by and contending with Dutch?

Miguel de Unamuno, *The Tragic Sense of Life* (310)

The epigraph to this essay is plucked from a 1975 interview with Barthes, republished in *The Grain of the Voice*. It is on the subject of the teaching of literature, and more generally on writing and reading. Before Barthes addresses any of the specific questions asked of him, he offers some "preliminary remarks," the body of which are directed at the "gap" he identifies between his position and that of secondary-school teachers, which ultimately evolves into a discussion of the (unbridgeable) gap between theory and practice. His warning, that he is "unable to address the concrete, practical problems of your [teaching] profession," is fair, if one takes it to mean that he cannot provide a system or method in response to specific, real concerns (235). One might even applaud Barthes for his honesty, if one considers what Erving Goffman has said on the subject, in the introduction to his *Frame Analysis*:

There is a venerable tradition in philosophy that argues that what the reader assumes to be real is but a shadow, and that by attending to what the writer says about perception, thought, the brain, language, culture, a new methodology, or novel social forces, the veil can be lifted. (1)

It is a tradition that Goffman goes on to criticize as arrogant and false. Recchio weighs in on a similar note in his own context:

He [Bakhtin] has, emphatically, not provided me with a system of practice, which has replaced my former practice. (emphasis in original, 27)

It would seem, then, that the value of theorizing about composition (or anything else for that matter) is limited, at least as it relates to altering the way "real" work is done. Certainly theory, and especially some composition theory, has been roundly attacked for failing to offer specific remedies, step-by-step methods. Yet theory remains: Goffman wrote well past page one, and Recchio presents his Bakhtinian analyses in such detail that

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one might ignore his protest and try to turn his work into a model for a new practice. As Goffman writes, following his various caveats, "Nonetheless, some of the things in this world seem to urge the analysis I am here attempting, and the compulsion is strong to try to outline the framework that will perform this job, even if this means some other tasks get handled badly" (13). Theorizing, it appears, is an inevitable consequence of practice, of being in the world.

It is not feasible to perform a Bakhtinian or thick reading of every student essay; it is probably not too much to say that it is not feasible to do so for any student essay, save in the few cases where the potential rewards overwhelm. How, then, can the clear value of descriptive readings be reconciled with their inherent impracticability? The difficulty is essentially a moral one; anyone who can see the costs of formalist pedagogies will want to do anything to avoid their excesses. Yet this cannot include fully embracing a descriptive pedagogy. Perhaps what is left is that which Recchio gets out of his reading of Bakhtin: "new conceptual tools," and a "deepen[ed] . . . engagement" for himself, his teaching assistants, and their students with "the lived world through our and their practice as readers and writers" (27-8). Being conscious of the forces that direct and shape our language can only increase our responsibility to understand those forces and mediate among them when possible.

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