In an essay on the relationship between relativism and rhetoric, Barry Brummett argues that philosophical relativism is compatible with the practice of rhetoric. As Brummett tells us, “If truth for relativists is consensus or agreement, and if rhetoric is the way in which agreement is secured, then relative truth is the product of rhetoric” (91-92). To a relativist like Brummett, the ethical purpose of rhetoric is simply “to work” as a tool to persuade someone that an idea is consistent or inconsistent with a given system of values; it has no inherent purpose to be “always fair, honest, decorous” or to serve “dominant ideologies” (90). Brummett suggests that rhetoric enables the practice of relativism as a metaphysics, a science of truth-seeking. He also presumes an altruistic end to the struggle for relative truth through the practice of rhetoric. He claims “the rhetorical critic who is informed by relativism is unavoidably a social critic, charged with demystifying perceptions of the given and showing what is both relative and socially, symbolically created about them” (93). For Brummett, the critic informed by the power of rhetoric and the philosophy of relativism “intervenes not only to change how the past was seen but to shape how the future may be experienced” (93-94).

An assumption underlying Brummett’s view of the social critic is that the critic is “unavoidably” driven to suggest change for the better—what other aim would there be “to change how the past was seen” and thus “shape how the future may be experienced,” except to improve upon the current situation? Yet the practice of rhetorical relativism guarantees no reliable standard for judging action; it merely provides a tool to distinguish a difference between one way of seeing and another, a perception that left unguided by some ethical stance could lead either to endless and unresolvable bickering over which position holds greater value or to a truth accepted on the sole basis of a rhetorical argument which proved most powerful. This vision of truth-seeking and rhetoric declares endless agonism and display of rhetorical power to be the only means of dealing with the diversity of individual practices and values. It is a vision that, if accepted, categorically dismisses the idea that rhetoric and its practice in writing can lead us to a common truth.
And consequently, I would argue, it is a view that divests both written argument and literature of their ability to achieve an ethical stance. In this essay I set out to restore truth-seeking in writing through extricating writing from the philosophy of relativism and its corresponding rhetoric. I shall do so by performing a critique of written arguments by two scholars who hold that truth and value are relative in both written argument and literature.

In *Plato, Derrida, and Writing*, a study of Plato's and Derrida's views on writing, rhetoric, and critical theory, Jasper Neel dismisses the relationship of truth to writing. He distinguishes truth from writing by claiming that writing is strong discourse and strong discourse is not truth but a critical strategy; we need not mistake writing for truth and, further, in evaluating writing we should not concern ourselves with it. In *Contingencies of Value*, Barbara Herrnstein Smith tackles the problem from the other end; she dismisses the notion of truth and reifies value in its stead. She claims that truth—as it has been conceived philosophically as an absolute good—is nonexistent; what exists is value, which is a function of exchange (that is, something is gained in giving value to something else); the reason that writing or anything else is valued, therefore, has no relation to truth, but rather to what is secured by declaring it has value. Achieving truth is not possible; rather, it is possible only to determine what is better or worse in a given situation.

Both Neel and Herrnstein Smith extricate truth from writing and value from truth, but in doing so they do not prove either that writing cannot be truth or that truth is not possible. Instead, they interpret truth and writing in ways that make them necessarily incompatible, a conclusion that is justified by philosophical relativism. In presenting a case against their claims, I offer first an introduction to the major arguments made by both these theorists. I follow with a critique of the positions they share. This analysis reveals that their vision of writing and truth is bolstered by three questionable premises about the nature of truth in human experience:

- a historicist interpretation of human will as it is determined by ideology
- an essentialist interpretation of objective truth
- a fundamentalist interpretation of human activity as it progresses over time

In concluding, I suggest ways of looking at truth that can lead us away from these perspectives to restore the possibility of truth-seeking through writing.

**Neel's Rejection of Truth in Writing**

In *Plato, Derrida, and Writing*, Neel attempts to create a morally defensible role for writing through dignifying the aims of rhetoric while denying that writing seeks truth. This stance shapes his effort to redeem writing as it is accused of displacing truth in Plato's *Phaedrus* and of erasing it in Derrida's critical theory. Neel argues that questions about meaning in language are separate from questions about the essence of human knowledge, being, and
behavior—that is, questions about truth in human experience. He claims that the obstacle to an effective theory of writing and practice is the philosopher’s quest for truth, and he sets out to liberate composition studies—badly in need of theory with practical implications—from the philosophical aims against which Plato and Derrida assess writing. Neel characterizes the pitfalls of giving in to a philosophical view of writing, one that measures its relationship to truth, thus:

Writers who give in to Plato in effect cease to be writers and become philosophers on a quest that . . . requires writers constantly to admit abashedly that they do not know the truth. Writers who give in to Derrida become philosophers who never finish unworking all those discourses that conceal or remain ignorant of their own written rhetoricity; such writers feel obligated always to work backwards in order to show that what would be required to begin a discourse is already gone. (203)

Neel poses a categorical distinction between the aims of rhetoric and philosophy and draws the conclusion that to have one is not to have the other. At one point in his argument he concedes that this distinction is not a necessary or even helpful one, noting that writers who are liberated from philosophy “need the Platonic ideal, the notion of the forever-absent truth toward which discourse moves” and “at the same time, writers need deconstructive strategy to prevent discourse from presenting itself as the truth” (203). But having made this concession, Neel chooses to recognize neither Plato’s nor Derrida’s work as philosophical, work that in itself seeks truth. In order to discuss Plato’s and Derrida’s contribution to explaining the role of writing in conducting the quest for truth, Neel elects to interpret their writing as purely rhetorical, a device for persuading someone to accept a position. He thus renders irrelevant the success of their works as attempts to seek truth, and, further, he interprets the search for truth in writing as fruitless.

Neel’s chosen perspective on the aims of writing is most evident in his deconstructive analysis of Phaedrus. Neel asserts that Plato lied in writing through making ambiguous the authorship roles of Lysias, Socrates, and Plato. As the reader will recall, the claims which are made about writing in Phaedrus are conveyed in the speech of Lysias and in the dialogue about it conducted by Socrates and Phaedrus—a dialogue conceived and written by Plato. Among the many controversial passages in this work is Socrates’ declaration that “nothing worth serious attention has ever been written in prose or verse,” which as Neel claims, “effectively excludes writing from the highest forms of thinking, understanding, and communicating” (3). In deconstructing Phaedrus, Neel exposes Plato’s voice which lies behind the words of Socrates, Lysias, and Phaedrus. He notes that Plato writes the dialogue as if Socrates were living, and in it Socrates directs Phaedrus to carry his message to Homer and other philosophers and speech writers who had died before Socrates’ time. This evidence and other details pointing to
historical anachronism and an overtly fictional stance demonstrate that “Plato is mounting an effort to destroy time by using writing to kill all the voices of the past while at the same time using it to preclude its use in the future” (Neel 7). The result is a rereading of Phaedrus to cohere with current rhetorical theory about the unreliable presence of meaning in texts:

Reread texts do not say the same thing over and over again. As we “begin” to (re)read Phaedrus, having finally reached the end where true beginning begins, we can “begin” to see the absences through which the text exists and Plato—the most influential writer and sophist of all time—is caught stealing writing from us. (24)

It is with some delight that Neel catches Plato “stealing writing from us” through deconstructing Phaedrus, but the discovery is a fairly hollow victory. It is surprising that he does not draw this conclusion himself, given that he devotes several pages to demonstrating how Derrida fails to deconstruct meaning in Phaedrus by revealing “Plato’s inability to control the signification” (197). Neel’s claim of having “caught Plato stealing writing from us” seems little different from Derrida’s conclusion, as Neel interprets it, that “Plato cannot simply present the truth in Phaedrus, or anywhere else for that matter” (199). Deconstruction as an analytical tool reveals the potential for multiplicity of meaning, but cannot support Derrida’s contention that truth is not found in writing nor Neel’s conclusion that Plato steals writing from us. Neel admits, in fact, that he has not proven the latter, yet he chooses not to explore the consequences. For example, he notes that Plato’s dialogue is structured overtly to set up writing as a “corrupt” replacement for dialectical speech, but at the same time this structure covertly redeems writing as the preferred medium to pursue knowledge: “Structure is what remains behind as the trace of the effort to create a place in which knowledge can come to know itself and present itself to the world” (38). Then, as if disappointed in an interpretation of Plato that celebrates writing as a means of preserving knowledge, Neel adds, “I wish I didn’t think Plato knew that” (38). To deal with Plato’s work as the trace of a progressive quest for knowledge would require him to interpret Plato’s writing as a means through which we might seek truth in human experience. He concludes instead, “Plato wants to use writing, rhetoric, and sophistry to destroy themselves. What he must leave behind to do so, however, is writing” (23). True to his rhetorical stance, Neel prefers to cast the fact that Plato leaves writing behind as Plato’s mistake rather than probable intention, reminding us that Plato held that “truth as a possibility depends on the impossibility of truth’s appearing in writing” (80). Thus, we learn that the goal to seek truth in writing is fruitless.

Having shown how Plato makes truthful writing an impossibility, Neel proceeds to show how Derrida makes writing truthfully an impossibility. For Derrida, writing is “recursive, repetitious, never finished, never present; in short, an eternal différence” (Neel 200); hence, anything written is a concealment of both truth and the continual play of meaning that is writing. Neel
attempts to define Derrida's unusual terminology in a way that makes the terms represent stages in an argument that reaches a conclusion. He does so by showing "what each term 'indicates' about the process of writing, especially student writing" (142). In nine brief passages, each offering an interpretation derived from his extensive reading, Neel defines presence, transcendental signified, the trace, absence, and five other terms in the Derridean lexicon. He concludes that though the terms certainly are different and point to different ways of seeing, his definitions read "like a one-note samba, the same term defined the same way nine times" (141). In each case, Neel finds Derrida's notion of the infinite play of meaning in writing to be a terrifying prospect for writing and specifically for writing teachers. He says, for example, of Derrida's concept of the "transcendental signified" or the idea of "meaning without a signifier,"

If Derrida is right, no such transcendental signified exists or could exist outside the presence of God. Thus, when we tell our students to pick a thesis or to discover a central idea and treat it fully, we merely exacerbate their fears of writing. They believe in self-presence and the transcendental signified. Though perhaps not consciously, they also know all to well that the more they write the less their own presence is self-assured and the further the transcendental signified that would pin (or pen) down their meaning in absolute clarity slips away. (150)

This lapse into uncertainty in search of the transcendental signified is an undesirable state, Neel claims, because it leaves writers unable to assert anything in writing; a representation can never produce the transcendental signified, an absolute meaning or truth which Neel assumes is God. The only way out of this situation of never being able to express an absolute truth, Neel claims, is to liberate writing from philosophy—that is, from any concern with notions of truth conceived as absolute but unwritten (Plato), or as written but indeterminate (Derrida). The goal that writing should achieve in truth's stead is to produce "strong discourse," discourse that withstands "the scrutiny of public life" and leads "to a best choice at a given time, in a given place, with a given set of circumstances" (Neel 208).

According to Neel, "any discourse that has been expressed publicly and found adherents becomes strong" (208). And strong discourse is what creates "critical truth" (209), the only truth available to humans. Critical truth is quite simply that view which manages to survive when contested by an opposing view. The only other kind of truth, the philosopher's truth, as Neel would call it, is unknowable. Hence, writers who seek it "in effect cease to be writers and become philosophers on a quest that will never produce any inscription at all, a quest that requires writers constantly to admit abashedly that they do not know the truth" (203). Neel outlines principles in the practice of sophistic rhetoric that guide the practice of "strong discourse," among them a firm trust that "language has the power to fabricate what seems to be realities and to generate belief" (207). The "well-trained" sophist, Neel tells us, not only knows "exactly how any decision or action emerged," but
also "knows both how to undermine such decisions and actions and how to explain their effect on others" (207). Though Neel defends the practice of sophistry through strong discourse as a means of developing an ethical self, he chooses not to question the ethical value either of knowing how to create the illusion of truth through fabricating "what seems to be" a reality or of aiming to know "exactly" how a "decision or action" emerges in order to "undermine" it. The objective of strong discourse, as Neel defines it, is to create the illusion of obtaining truth through developing a good argument. This strategy amounts to conceding that writing expresses a kind of fake truth always already positioned for an imminent takeover by yet another fake truth which is forever never the truth. Truth, the thing one is after in the first place, remains unattainable after all, with writing left over to compensate for its loss. But, as I hope to show, we need not accept Neel's compromise because we can show him to have misconstrued truth as unattainable in human experience.

The clue to Neel's singular perception of truth in human experience lies in his reported classroom experience of guiding students away from truth-seeking in writing. Neel reports the frustrations of a female student faced with writing a "balanced" essay on the topic of abortion. Her trouble is that she already has a truth she believes about the subject: "abortion is wrong and oughtn't to be allowed" (93). Neel claims that Plato's theory of dialectic as working toward an unattainable truth leaves this student unable to write her truth, even though it has an existence, unless she resorts to what Neel calls "antiwriting" (93). The latter results in an essay in the required argumentative form expected by the teacher. He experiences a similar struggle with a "young man planning to become a minister" (93) who was writing essays for an honors composition class. When reading the text of Job for the first time as an assignment for Neel's class, the young man found he could not make sense of it; the text simply did not jibe with sermons he had heard about it in the past. Neel reports that he had several conferences with the student who wrote several essays on Job, each of which "undid" the other (94).

Neel admits that he wished to force both this student and the female opponent of abortion "to contemplate" when he assigned them writing tasks which forced them to confront their accepted values—values with which they felt secure and adequate. In each case, the purpose of the classroom writing experience was "to change from the simplistic, fundamentalist 'delusion' of adequacy to the self-dialectical, contemplative, (p)sophisticated [Neel's term for Plato's version of dialectic] 'reality' of inadequacy" (95). This approach is wrong, Neel concludes, since it leaves the students feeling as if they have failed and the teacher without acceptable student essays. To escape the trap of condemning students to inadequacy, Neel concludes, one must give up the idea that writing seeks truth.

It seems to me that Neel's students had difficulties precisely because they already had given up the idea that writing seeks truth. Both students opted
to deny truth-seeking by writing essays that, as Neel himself describes, could be refuted categorically as not true or "that did not pretend to truth" (95). Neither understood how to convey truth-seeking in writing, which is not to believe that writing is truth nor to deny writing's possible truth, but it is rather to understand how writing and writer can grow toward truth; it is to examine truth through writing as a dynamic, organic, and developmental component of human experience itself. Neel's approach to both students was, by his own admission, to force them "into a Platonic frame of reference" (95) that required them to search for unattainable truth in writing about topics that they were not ready to investigate that way. At the same time, the students thought they were supposed to write traditional essays which Neel claims he did not expect. But, in fact, a traditional essay is what he did expect or wanted to believe he could expect from having students engage in truth-seeking through writing. As he admits, every time the student who aimed to be a minister gave him an essay, he "gave him an A and then took the essay apart, showing him in detail why it was not 'true'" (95). Unable to locate a presence of truth either in the student's didactic declarations of belief, nor in his own denial of those declarations, Neel is forced to conclude that a search for truth has no truck with writing. And it is no wonder that his classroom experiments with dialectic lead him to this conclusion.

In an illuminating essay on Plato's *Gorgias*, James L. Kastely remarks that scholars, such as Neel, have repeatedly misunderstood the notion of dialectic as it is presented in Plato's writing. Although his remarks specifically address scholarly readings of *Gorgias*, they apply to Neel's reading of *Phaedrus* as well. Kastely concludes that the outrageous arguments presented by Socrates in *Gorgias* force us "to question Socrates, Plato, and ourselves" (107). This condition of "questioning," he finds, is highly relevant to the situation of dialectic. A misunderstanding of the role of questioning, I believe, informs Neel's distaste for dialectic as a rhetoric for writing. Kastely explains the role of the teacher in facilitating dialectic like this:

Being a teacher can no longer be read as a professional role that one assumes; rather, it marks one of two positions in the dialectic. To teach is to question.... To fulfill one's position as a teacher is to practice philosophy as rhetoric—to understand the particularity of the other member of the refutation (that is, to recognize the historical, passionate, and rational elements of the other person as they have been brought together to constitute an individuality), to be sensitive to the language and the commitments informing that particularity, and to induce reflection on the language lived with and by the other individual. (107)

Neel felt uncomfortable with the role of teacher imposed upon him by the dynamic of dialectic, perhaps because he understood that role as one of counterattack and not as one that required him "to be sensitive to the language and the commitments informing that particularity" that marked the other in his confrontation. To do so, would require some slippage on his part, some uncertainty, some uncomfortableness, some letting go of the
strangle hold he longs to keep on his truth. It would require him to practice "philosophy as rhetoric," as Kastely tells us, rather than practice rhetoric (that is, his version of agonistic rhetoric) as philosophy.

To seek truth must involve an open admission of uncertainty about what to believe; the alternative is to stick with what we already know or exchange that for a new belief. Neel's students chose the former alternative and would do so again if confronted with his version of dialectic. A truth beyond what they knew was simply unattainable because to obtain it they were forced to give up values that they are not willing to surrender to an attack or to substitute for another truth, one more acceptable to the teacher. The collusion of rhetoric with philosophical relativism puts the students in this predicament, leaving them powerless to discuss in writing the issues and beliefs most meaningful to them. To do so would be to put their beliefs at risk of being labeled merely an idiosyncratic representation of the truth—a judgment relativists levy on every human claim to a philosophical principle. This homage to relativism renders human judgment about matters of value essentially irrelevant. As I show later, through questioning the stability of the premises which underlie Neel's argument, rhetoric can be disentangled from philosophical relativism, writing can be freed from the limitations of strong discourse, and we can assume again moral responsibility for the truth of our discourse.

Herrnstein Smith's Rejection of Truth in Human Experience

In Contingencies of Value, a critique of the notions of truth and value in art and life, Barbara Herrnstein Smith attempts to prove not only that truth is contingent on local criteria which we protect from surrender (whether these be criteria for a well-formed argument, political action, or moral behavior), but also that truth without contingency—that illusive unattainable truth of Plato's speculation—does not exist. For Herrnstein Smith, contingent truth is a reality we can and must live with because it is all there is. Unlike Neel, Herrnstein Smith does not deal with how truth-seeking remains separate from writing, art, or any other human enterprise. Instead, she tries to explain how we came to believe that what we value is truth, separating this truth from objective truth which simply doesn't exist. Herrnstein Smith demonstrates that value is radically contingent on criteria which are supported socially, and she argues, as well, that so must be truth. She claims that since I am different from you and always will be, what you value must be different from what I value and always will be—"value is radically contingent" (30). By extension, truth, which is after all what we believe to be behind value, is radically contingent. In effect, Herrnstein Smith does not attempt to explain truth or value but rather illustrates how our diverse claims about what we value in art, writing, politics, or religion ultimately become separate truths which can never be enfolded by one truth.
In the initial stages of her argument, Herrnstein Smith tackles the question of what really happens when a work of art or literature is declared to have aesthetic value, that is, judged to be superior aside from "all other nameable sources of interest or forms of value—hedonic, practical, sentimental, ornamental, historical, ideological, and so forth" (33). She deftly illustrates that aesthetic value is seen to be non-contingent or devoid of any economic utility simply because judgments in value "appear to reduce to differences in the 'properties' or 'qualities' of the objects themselves" (39-40), an illusion which is maintained when members of a community are in strong agreement. Herrnstein Smith explains this occurrence like this:

A co-incidence of contingencies among individual subjects who interact as members of the same community will operate for them as non-contingency and be interpreted by them accordingly. (40; emphasis omitted)

Hence, what is a contingent value quickly becomes seen as an objective value. In a chapter on axiologic logic or the logic of philosophical judgments of value, Herrnstein Smith goes on to explain how contingent value becomes conflated with objective truth. Here she examines "Hume's Natural Standard" and "Kant's Pure Judgments" and concludes that logic about matters of value inevitably comes down to contesting one person's authority over another's. To concede a change in value would require someone to give up authority. To declare a consensus about value is to assume that consensus is good for everyone. She believes that "an ideally achievable consensus is not only not good for everyone but tends inevitably to operate to the advantage of the majority and those with de facto social power and to the disadvantage of the more 'different,' 'idiosyncratic,' 'singular,' and otherwise innovative and/or marginal members of any community" (72). The axiologic project, then, even in its most democratic guise, always has "the contested legitimacy of someone's evaluative authority" at stake:

Though not all the battles are fought out in drawingrooms or classrooms, they are inevitably fought out in social arenas and along lines of authority and power defined by social, institutional, and economic categories: age and gender, class and political status, teacher versus student, censor versus citizen, bureaucrat versus artist, and producer versus art distributor versus art consumer, and so forth. (72)

Battles about value shall continue for two reasons: first, because value is radically contingent, the theme which Herrnstein Smith repeats continually and demonstrates in every conceivable manner; and second, because there is in the end no objective truth to which any value has a claim.

In short, all evaluations of all kinds are contingent, including moral judgments. No evaluations operate autonomously, that is, bereft of any influence from the conditions in which they are produced. As Herrnstein Smith explains,
Expressions such as “It is right,” “It is good,” “Murder is wrong,” and “Business is business” cannot embody objectivist appeals in spite of how they are being used because, aside from how they are being used, there is no way for them to embody anything at all. (89-90)

The essential good or truth of such claims is often based on their acceptance as a norm and the resulting benefits to a community; as Herrnstein Smith points out, it is often believed that “a community prospers... in proportion to the extent that its members have achieved consensus or that it prospers more as communal norms become more uniform, coherent, and stable” (93). However, the opposite is also sometimes believed; that is, communities prosper to “the extent of the diversity of the beliefs and practices of its members and thus their communal resourcefulness, and the flexibility of its norms and patterns and thus their responsiveness to changing and emerging circumstances” (93). Hence, Herrnstein Smith concludes that values and truths, for that matter, are pretty much a relative thing; there is no bottom line, no ultimate truth. The fact of this matter, indeed, is quite inescapable and oppressive, as can be assessed from the tone of Herrnstein Smith’s concluding argument:

There is thus no particular single dimension or global parameter, whether “biological”/“material” or “cultural”/“spiritual”/“psychological,” with respect to which entities can be tagged or tallied as, “in the last analysis,” good or bad—profit or cost, reward or punishment, pleasure or pain—for any subject or set of subjects, much less for man in general. There is thus also no way for individual or collective choices, practices, activities, or acts, “economic” or otherwise, to be ultimately summed-up, compared, and evaluated: neither by the single-parameter hedonic calculus of classic utilitarianism, nor by the most elaborate multiple-parameter formulas of contemporary mathematical economics, nor by any mere inversion or presumptive transcendence of either. There is no way to give a reckoning that is simultaneously total and final. There is no Judgment Day. There is no bottom bottom line anywhere, for anyone or for “man.” (149)

If the “bottom line” isn’t, if there is no supreme value and no uncompromising truth, what is there? Well, what there is is our own personal standard of truth which we establish according to criteria that, again, are personal and have personal value. Truth is relative and relativism cannot “deduce or demonstrate its own rightness” (183). Instead, relativism “recognizes... that ‘the way’ will be perceived and pursued differently by each to whom it is pointed out” (183).

Having accepted relativism as the natural state of things, we also have accepted that value and truth are in constant flux and multiply various. Forevermore, we must conceive of the “irreducibly various as irreducibly various, and of the multiply configurable as always configurable otherwise” (183). What keeps things in this state of constant flux is the fact that value and truth are always relative to the conditions of the moment which affect the cost at which they are purchased; things always change into something else because we perpetuate an endless system of “(ex)change” (144), where, as
Herrnstein Smith suggests, one good is purchased at the cost of another. Hence, all human activity, including the desire to locate a value or declare a truth, consists of "a continuous exchange or expenditure (whether as payment, donation, sacrifice, loss, or destruction) of goods of some (but any) kind, whereby goods of some other (but, again, any) kind are secured, enhanced, or produced" (144). She interprets truth as a real-world commodity constructed by individuals and groups and bought, paid for, and traded as a way of maintaining integrity and authority.

In support of her relativistic philosophy, Herrnstein Smith creates a Weltanschauung that is compatible with events as she has personally experienced them. She dismisses absolute truth and in the process resolves a personal dilemma, a crisis of seeming inconsistency in her own action which acknowledged her own diversity: she found that she had changed her mind about something she had thought true in the past and had to justify why. Herrnstein Smith opens her discussion of value with a recollection of this personal dilemma, an account of her changed perception of the value of Shakespeare's Sonnet 116. Reporting the history of her judgment of Sonnet 116, she claims,

For a long time, I didn't much like it at all. As a discriminating young snob, I was predisposed to find the value of any poem inversely proportional to the frequency of its appearance in anthologies. . . . So it stood until several years ago, when I was immersed in teaching the plays, editing the poems and rereading the critics, and immersed also in my own life and a second marriage—of true minds, of course, or maybe . . . or maybe not. And, at that point, I discovered an altogether different 116. . . . To be sure, the arguments are frail and the sentiments false and strained: but this is nonetheless a powerful sonnet because, among other things, that very frailty and strain and falseness are expressive of what is strong and true, namely the impulse not to know, not to acknowledge, not to "admit" what one does know and would wish to be otherwise. (6-7)

Herrnstein Smith creates a philosophy of value that allows her to reconcile what appear to be incompatibly diverse evaluations, each believed with sincerity by herself, and one replacing the other. She concludes her personal parable with this assessment of her new evaluation of Sonnet 116: "A lovely reading of the poem, I think . . . when I believe it" (7). This personal tale rationalizes Herrnstein Smith's assessment of value in two ways. First, it defines value as a position, a stance, a reading at a point in time which has a life or substantiality of its own that does not change. A value experienced at a point in time shall forever differ uncompromisingly from some other value for which it is exchanged at some other point in time. Second, it defines value as something that is true or not true, present or not present, advocated or denied.

There is nothing in Herrnstein Smith's conception of value which suggests that value is developmental, evolutionary, or even accumulative. The possibility of viewing valuation as a continuing process instead of reifying the separate moments in which value is exchanged is never explored.
overtly by Herrnstein Smith. Admittedly, she does narrate a series of events in her own process of evaluating Sonnet 116, but she does not see these parts as they contribute to a seamless whole. Herrnstein Smith chooses not to acknowledge that she incorporated her earlier pejorative assessment of Sonnet 116 in her later belief that its “frail” and “false” arguments serve admirably to express the difficulty of being straightforward about what one knows, the important meaning which she claims to have found anew when she reevaluated Sonnet 116 in her later years. Her more recent judgment did not wipe out or change her earlier belief: it subsumed it, incorporated it, expanded it, and even blessed it; the seemingly diverse claims grew into one complex evaluation. Yet the model Herrnstein Smith proposes to explain these events does not account for them as a narrative of growth. It is the choice not to view evaluation as a process that leads Herrnstein Smith to see value and truth as local, contingent, locked into the framework of time and place. It is what leads her to declare that diversity obviates truth and contingency displaces universality.

Contingencies of Denial
To deny that anything but relative truth can be found in human experience (as does Herrnstein Smith) and consequently that anything but relative truth can be obtained through writing (as does Neel) is to deny the organic, developmental, and evolutionary nature of all human activity. It is to conclude that all human activity, including truth-seeking and writing, is meaningful only in its singular moments, a conclusion that makes life akin to a chess game in which one piece is continually poised to wipe out or replace another in the next move. This is a very old and seductive idea; it is derived from a limiting belief in three epistemological perspectives: ideological historicism, essentialist objectivity, and temporal fundamentalism. In the sections that follow, I examine Herrnstein Smith’s argument that truth is contingent and Neel’s assertion that truth in writing is unattainable as they are determined by these perspectives.

Ideological historicism
Both Neel and Herrnstein Smith hold deterministic views of history as it determines ideology. This ideological historicism leads them to predict with absolute certainty the future course of human activities and stalwartly to deny other possibilities. For Neel, historicism refutes the power of the *polis*; the hope of arriving at truth through discussion among citizens of the world is virtually impossible. History demonstrates we have not arrived at truth through argument in the past, and hence we cannot do so in the future. For Herrnstein Smith, historicism supports and refutes her central thesis that people and values are multiply various and ever-changing; in a world historically determined, variety may be sustained, but change is an illusion, as it but marks the return to something prefigured by the past. For both of these
critics, historicism is an ideological prerogative which corroborates their denial of human growth.

Neel’s historicism is disguised by his continuous talk of dismantling what is fixed, of replacing supplements with supplements, old beliefs with new beliefs, argument with counter arguments. Such talk apes the continual movement of narrative and suggests an unpredictable future that overshadows the past. Neel even advocates narrative, the continual unfolding of events ever new, as a credible alternative to the ideology of religious fundamentalism that marked his personal past. As he admits when telling of the personal conflicts experienced by a student from a fundamentalist background who had trouble writing about these beliefs, Neel wanted the student “to dismantle a world view from which I myself had ‘escaped’” (95). But in fact, Neel himself has not escaped from a world view which insists on a prefigured future. Even in attempting to describe how Derrida’s vision of the apocalypse differs from that of his Southern Baptist tradition, Neel holds on to the notion of a prefigured event moving toward a predetermined end. Here is how he describes the apocalypse as explained in the religion of his childhood:

This whole scenario is logocentric because in it Christ constitutes a beginning, an ending, an absolute authority, and an origin of meaning. When Christ speaks, at least in the Southern Baptist theology of my childhood, he speaks absolute meaning. In effect, what he says goes—no equivocation, no ambiguity, no margin for error. In that scenario, the trumpet on the last day needs no interpretation. (102)

In the fundamentalist interpretation of spiritual truth, the meaning was clear in the beginning and remains clear in the end—nothing changes.

In describing how Derrida counters the foundationalist belief in the certainty of meaning, Neel sticks to the same historicist perspective. Instead of the Word which had a meaning at the beginning which will remain the same at the end, there “will always be the play of signification, as signer refers to signer in an endless chain that never leads back to an origin” (103). Neel consciously poses Derrida’s vision of the endless “play of signification” as an “apocalyptic” vision of another sort (103). Instead of fundamentalist belief in an absolute end dispatched by an eternal God, we now have deconstructionist belief in endless ends determined through eternal agon. Being uncomfortable with the ethical paucity of this perspective, he concludes that there is purposefulness within this destiny of eternal contest. It is to express and discern sophistic truth through the practice of strong discourse. The virtue of strong discourse is its distinction as the loudest voice heard “in a cacophonous plurality of other voices, many of which are also strong” (208-09). The messianic vision of the fundamentalist is portrayed as false truth to be overcome in this new vision of the apocalypse. For Neel, the false messiah is the presence of a truth that silences other voices; this “weak discourse . . . always presents itself in the guise of the messiah or the philosopher-king—the
one who claims to offer truth but in fact supplies only the silence that must occur when rhetoric, persuasion, writing, and sophistry, those most human of things, have been precluded” (209). So, the possibility of a truth for Neel shatters the possibility of rhetoric, and the possibility of rhetoric shatters the truth. An apocalypse—historically determined—is at hand in either case.

Herrnstein Smith’s historicism is also conditioned by belief. For her, history of social class, family relationships, religious persuasion, and aesthetic training determine the future, endlessly maintaining diverse and equally valid human perspectives. Her fierce individualism and egalitarianism drive this conclusion. Unwilling to believe that a single, final authority born of human will resides with some one or some group and no one else (individualism), she believes that multiple authorities determine history for everyone (egalitarianism). There is no subject who wills absolutely for Herrnstein Smith, because to recognize a subject who wills absolutely she must recognize a subject to whom she might be subject.

Within the thralldom of history, Herrnstein Smith has no human contender. Though she rigorously argues that in a relativistic state of affairs there is a subject who freely chooses, the facts of history that constrain that choice are not free and are not unique, a condition which effectively negates the possibility of free choice and an individual subjectivity. For Herrnstein Smith, the subject may have a “particular . . . identity/economy/perspective,” but this “individuated” state is “not in all respects unique” (175). For Herrnstein Smith, there can be no transcendental objective reason that justifies one subject’s choices and “no other subject’s choices” (178). Yet, the individual’s choices are underwritten by something and if that something is “not transcendental, then it must be historical, and if the justification is not universal and unconditioned, then it must be restricted, partial, and local” (175). In other words, conditions as they were, have been, and are right now determine the things that will be, and they determine an individual’s choice; there is no choice without the conditioning of history and hence no truth beyond what is already known.

Ideological historicism excludes the possibility of human will. It discounts the originary power of the human subject and hence the hope of the subject attaining truth through lived experience. As Karl Popper maintains in his critique of the role of the polis in an open society, historicism obliterates responsibility for action in society. Plato’s historicism bound him to the view that “social change was degeneration” (Popper 16). In positing the past existence of a perfect form of government, society, law and other social systems manifested on earth of which such systems in the current world are a degenerate copy, Plato ultimately had to conclude that change must halt in order to prevent further degeneration. This belief in a disembodied perfection in an irretrievable past makes human alteration of this ideal a corruption to be stopped at all cost. A similar condemnation of human activity results from the Marxist project, which Popper characterizes as a
social science initiative driven by historicism. Popper holds that the social science perspective fosters a kind of "methodological essentialism" (26). The method by which one determines a social truth is to determine the nature of what is to come based upon how one has named or interpreted events in the past. If revolution in the past is named to have come about because of class struggle, then this identified principle will determine the nature of revolutions to come. Far from viewing truth as open or even shaped by human will, the historicist perspective closes truth and takes it out of the realm of human action.

Both Neel's and Herrnstein Smith's characterizations of truth corroborate the historicist perspective. For Neel, we who always already do not know the truth will never forever find truth. For Herrnstein Smith, we who are preconditioned by history, economy, and social identity cannot discover anything, let alone truth, that goes beyond that conditioning. Both the ever-changing "critical truth" which Neel claims to come about through continual questioning in writing and that ever-changing "relative" truth which Herrnstein Smith claims guides our everyday behavior represent expected fluctuations in a predetermined world of continual replacement ad infinitum of "truths" by other "truths"—all historically determined. If truth has not been manifested in the past or present, as they claim it has not, then it is certainly unattainable.

Essentialist Objectivity
Both Neel and Herrnstein Smith conceive of truth as an object. For Neel, a tendency to objectify truth surfaces most strongly in his argument that sophistic rhetoric ought to replace Plato's favored method of argumentation, dialectic. The italicized words in the passages from Neel's argument shown below, for example, uncover his assumption that truth is an entity, an object which Plato would have us believe cannot be acquired:

In this history [of Western thought rejecting sophistry], the True, the Beautiful, and the Good come under bitter attack by the sophists, who believe, or at least dupe their students into believing, that the True doesn't exist, and if it did no one could know it, and if anyone knew it, what the other person knew would be incommunicable. (205-06; emphasis added)

If permanent (or divine) truth exists, humans by definition cannot know it, nor can any of their systems of communication convey it.... (206; emphasis added)

Strong discourse, in short, encompasses Plato's dialectic by putting all received notions in question and then seeking constantly for a better truth.... (209; emphasis added)

In fact, he strongly opposes the possibility of conceiving of truth as anything else but an object, stating that if truth is not an object, it is but an "opening"; to attempt to find it in writing is indeed hopeless:
By "taking" Phaedrus as the source of the possibility of truth, not the closure of truth,... the writer can open the possibility of dialectic within the writer's own self. Rather than a place or a destination, rather than the shelter of some closed and complete revelation, truth becomes an opening. Any writers who agree to enter Platonic writing will find themselves in just such an opening; thus, most struggle with all their might never to go there. (82)

The only alternative to jumping into the "opening" which Neel projects as Plato's "truth" is to write as a "psophist," Neel's term for those who "present any position [one chooses] as the closure of truth" (81). This unfavorable alternative, which Neel attributes to Plato, is not noticeably distinguishable from the "sophistry" Neel advocates in the practice of strong discourse. The latter is more worthy presumably because it stands the test of public scrutiny, the acumen of which—if we are to believe Barbara Herrnstein Smith—is of relative value.

Neel's belief that Plato's truth lacks the objective presence that Neel longs for it to have is apparent in his analysis of a portion of Phaedrus in which Socrates speaks about truth, beauty and moral value; here's the text with Neel's highlighted phrases:

"Lucidity and finality and serious importance are to be found only in words spoken by way of instruction or, to use a truer phrase, written on the soul of the hearer to enable him to learn about the right, the beautiful, and the good; finally to realize that such spoken truths are to be reckoned a man's legitimate sons, primarily if they originate within himself, but to a secondary degree if what we may call their children and kindred come to birth, as they should, in the minds of others—believe this, I say, and to let all else go is to be the sort of man, Phaedrus, that you and I might well pray that we may both become."
(qtd. in Neel 88-89)

Neel objects to this text because "the whole paragraph presents itself as an emptiness waiting to be filled through the process of dialectic" (89), and, further, the words he italicized—in fact, all nouns, verbs, and modifiers in the passage—hide "an unending series of questions, uncertainties, replacements, deferrals, differences, and supplements" (89). He complains about the uncertain meaning of words in themselves, apart from the context of the narrative they develop. To define those italicized words, Neel says, would open "an unclosable dialectic" (89). This activity somehow seems unnatural and heinous to Neel, as well it should. It is certainly not how we go about interpreting communication in our daily lives.

If we reject Neel's tendency to treat the words of Socrates' speech as separate objects, we see that the story told here is not equivocal, uncertain, or deferential in any way. Truth surely is not presented as an object, but just as surely, it is not presented as an opening or void. Socrates' tale of how truth about the right, the beautiful, and the good gets made is rooted in the very concrete material of human flesh and the factual event of human growth. Truth is born with man, learned by way of instruction, is passed on to others, and grows in them as well in a continuous cycle of birth, growth, and
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regeneration: an endless, yet constructive, narrative. What could be more common to human experience than this familiar progression? What could be more certain than birth, growth, and regeneration? More substantial than the reality of progress through learning? Neel's truth consists of continual replacements and deferrals, whereas the truth Plato reveres is embodied in the process of living and, being so, is as material and vital as the body of man. Neel's truth—which he believes to be Plato's truth—is an abstract and motionless entity, a mathematical place holder waiting to find its real object or substitute. It remains the same, never changes, and never progresses. It is an object never forever to be touched by man, yet always already to be replaced by him.

Herrnstein Smith's objectification of truth is similar to Neel's, yet it is motivated by her attachment to an economic model of value. For her, truth is a good on the open market, subject to free exchange. This analogy forces her to misconstrue the exchange of goods itself as the ultimate function of human existence, obviating activity motivated either by self-conscious will or disinterested altruism. A "good"—such as truth, for example—resists analysis and hence is affirmed only by what other good can be exchanged for it. Herrnstein Smith describes the exchange of goods that establishes what we value as follows:

Goods, either one by one or collectively (as in "the good"), are not reducible to anything else in particular, such as pleasure, the enhancement of survival, or the promotion of communal welfare. . . . The irreducibility is a function not of objective qualities but, rather, of Western (perhaps human) thought and language within which "good" or some counterpart term or set of terms [such as truth, we might surmise] operates conceptually and discursively as a generalized positivity that can be locally specified but not further analyzed: in other words, (one) "good" can only be exchanged for (an)other good, in discourse and otherwise. (146)

Though Herrnstein Smith claims that the exchange of commodity for commodity in the search for value may be necessitated by limitations of language, she also suggests that in some essential way the exchange of good for good simply defines all activity in human experience.

An exchange of good for good even explains altruistic behavior, according to Herrnstein Smith. To prove it, she argues against Bataille's attempt to demonstrate that humans in some circumstances will pursue an "irresistible impulse to reject material or moral goods that it would have been possible to utilize rationally (in conformity with the balancing of accounts)" (Bataille, qtd. in Herrnstein Smith 143). As she interprets Bataille, man's seeming altruism is motivated economically because he willingly suffers loss or degradation in exchange for an "ultimate value" (144) which is "the unlimited exhibition of his irreducibly sovereign free will, his insubordinate subordination of matter to spirit, and thereby his uniquely and definitively human transcendence" (144). In other words, man will suffer loss and degradation to help others in exchange for retaining the belief that humans are superior
beings with the freedom to choose. Confident that altruism too is accounted for in her system of exchange of truth for value, Herrnstein Smith lapses into absolutism, declaring that to conceive of all good in terms of exchange is not only a Western phenomenon, but also “perhaps human” (146).

But her economic model is overly elegant; her singular motivating metaphor of profit and loss assumes an economy that is driven by the arithmetic of balancing accounts, an economic model whose simplicity denies the realities of economic development in present-day society. The words *investment* and *growth* appear nowhere in Herrnstein Smith’s counterattack on critiques of utilitarian theories of value, yet they are central to most modern economic theories. If Herrnstein Smith were to account for investment and growth in her model of value ascription, it would be difficult, if not impossible, for her to limit her discussion to the simple arithmetic of trading tit for tat, apples for oranges, value for truth. She instead would have to examine truth and value not as goods, but rather as dynamic investment processes in an all-embracing system with potential for growth—a system as complex and organic as the human race itself.

In sum, both Neel’s and Herrnstein Smith’s characterization of truth as an object to be continually replaced or exchanged is evidence of their essentialist objectivity. As D.W. Hamlyn has explained this view in *Metaphysics*, a belief in objects or substances is necessary “to sustain our ordinary talk of and belief in change and the identity over time which is the correlate of change” (66). Yet an essentialist vision of truth as object cannot be confirmed by empirical or other evidence. Nor can objective presence be assumed for any other thing that we identify as a substance. As Hamlyn notes, “philosophers who have [considered that] scientific views of the world give plausibility to the belief that the best terms in which to speak and think of the world are not those of substance, identity and change, but, for example, events or processes” (66-67). Neel and Herrnstein Smith limit their discussion of truth to the assumption of truth as an objective presence. To disprove the presence of truth in human evaluation or in writing, they both demonstrate that it is not an object to be found. It could be argued that their essentialist rhetoric does not lead them to conclude objectivity is a metaphysical necessity, that is, an absolute quality of truth or anything else. But it overtly does lead them to rely on objectivity as an “epistemic” or *de dicto* necessity, that is, a necessity for the way they talk about truth (Hamlyn 79). Such apparent essentialist objectivity not only limits their arguments but also is an unethical practice in the public and private experience of truth-seeking as I shall demonstrate in my closing remarks.

*Fundamental Temporalism*

The third way in which Neel and Herrnstein Smith err in their discussion of truth, value, and writing, is in their interpretation of human activity as fundamentally cyclic over time. This belief goes beyond the imperative of
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Historicism which limits the future to events prefigured by a past to suggest that time itself has no forward direction, no aspect that marks events as progressive. Without a conception of human experience as marking progress over time, both theorists must reject the conclusion that events may occur that define human activity as purposefully progressing toward an understanding of truth.

The textual examples I have cited earlier confirm that Neel defines truth-seeking as the historically determined endless task of replacing a supplement with a supplement, never reaching the truth. This view of truth-seeking is similar to Herrnstein Smith’s tale of the endless balancing of accounts. Movement from one account to another is motivated only by what’s better or worse in a given situation; the sands of value shift as needed to maintain her desert ecosystem of exchange. Both theorists have assumed not only that human activity is historically determined, but also that it fundamentally lacks direction over time. Their way of looking at time, truth, and events is consistent with ancient metaphors of time and destiny that have both dominated and constrained scientific explanations of natural events. As Stephen Jay Gould asserts, time traditionally has been conceptualized in terms of two controlling metaphors, the “arrow” and the “cycle”:

At one end of the dichotomy—I shall call it time’s arrow—history is an irreversible sequence of unrepeatable events. Each moment occupies its own distinct position in a temporal series, and all moments, considered in proper sequence, tell a story of linked events moving in a direction.

At the other end—I shall call it time’s cycle—events have no meaning as distinct episodes with causal impact on a contingent history. Fundamental states are immanent in time, always present and never changing. Apparent motions are parts of repeating cycles, and differences of the past, will be realities of the future. Time has no direction.

Employing both the temporal metaphors of the arrow and cycle to describe a single ceaseless dynamic, Gould notes, can help one explain and interpret the world as a system progressing toward an end while maintaining a singular identity. But kept ever separate, these metaphors can prevent one from interpreting change as growth (blind to time’s arrow) and from interpreting pattern as evidence of immanent identity (blind to time’s cycle). Through examining the writings of early geologists, Gould demonstrates how belief in the ancient metaphor of time’s cycle led them to interpret the earth as a machine which regenerates itself, despite the lack of empirical support for this notion; this theory was confirmed empirically at a much later date. However, he shows further that this same belief in the cyclic nature of events over time led scientists to reject the possibility of unexpected catastrophic events changing the direction of earth’s geologic development, a theory confirmed in later investigations.

Neel and Herrnstein Smith make the same error in discounting the complementary conceptions of cyclic and directional time as did the early
geologists cited by Gould. Both interpret events over time as an endless cycle of exchanging supplement for supplement, good for good, truth for value, and writing for truth, without possibility of intervention, catastrophic or otherwise. They deny the possibility of directional change, maintaining that human behavior will continue to reflect the same cycle of searching for truth, yet getting nowhere. At best, men will be able to determine what is better or worse at a given time, which is what they have always been able to do and will do endlessly. The possibility of directional progress is absent in both theorists’ world views; hence, they fail to interpret the cycles they have inscribed as having a purpose. For both, the endless activity they project has no goal, but rather results in infinite diversity and plurality of purpose and value. Consequently, it matters not whether relative truth A prevails over relative truth B because the truth is fundamentally determined by the cyclic event of one argument appearing more persuasive than another in a given circumstance. The possibility of people behaving differently than this pattern suggests is unthinkable because it is unthinkable either that events may occur over time which would move them to behave otherwise, or that they themselves can control directional progress. This interpretation of human existence suggests there is no ultimate purpose to the public and private experience of truth-seeking, a perspective that dismisses human agency as a factor directing and enabling social change for the common good, as I will show in the next section. As Gould concludes his tale of geologists’ struggles to interpret earth’s past, we modern scientists have been “compelled to balance [this] dichotomy—because time’s arrow and time’s cycle both capture important aspects of reality” (178). It is not the limitations of either metaphor for time which prevent us from understanding reality, but rather our failure to use these metaphors interactively to generate a vision of the earth and our life that accounts for human progress. Here is where relativism misses the mark.

The Truth about Writing and Truth
Jasper Neel and Barbara Herrnstein Smith do not find truth in writing because they do not regard truth as integral with human experience. As I have proposed, three rational assumptions deny the relationship. Ideological historicism rejects the malleability of the future and denies the possibility of human agency that both embraces and overcomes the past. Hence, truth which has not yet been found is seen as unattainable in human experience and, thus, in writing. Essentialist objectivity makes of truth an exchangeable, displaceable, replaceable object; it encourages the belief that observable and discrete differences in individuals’ values deny the possibility of a truth held in common. Such a view of truth limits human discourse to continuous position-taking, where belief in something now pre-supposes the replacement of a former belief ad infinitum, with no replacement ever having a claim to truth and no hope of a truth encompassing all human activity. Fundamen-
tal temporalism denies the possibility that human activity is evolutionary, developmental, and progressive. It interprets the pattern of exchange of value for truth as perpetual and purposeless, unable to move in a direction. If human activity is directionless, then seeking the truth through writing is essentially purposeless and merely substitutes change for progress, as one discourse continually replaces another through besting an other. The hope of bettering all through learning from the past and shaping the future is absent in a world where progress has no meaning. To transcend the theoretical limits of the relativist philosophy of truth represented in the arguments of these scholars, we must recognize truth as integral with human experience and hence potentially expressed through all human concourse, and, thus, writing.

If we resist relativism in the process of producing and evaluating written discourse, we can restore the possibility of seeking truth through writing. Resistance to relativism involves rejecting strong discourse, that method of resolving difference through conflict and conquering. This is not an easy task, as the rhetorical tradition of agonism underlies the way we teach writing and the way we have conceived of truth being found. (Indeed, it is so insidious that, at present, discourse in writing often is not heard except through that convention!) It is not possible to outline here a complete program for coming to truth through writing without agonism. But I shall explore briefly some possibilities that are open to us if we resist relativism and its champion agonistic rhetoric.

If we resist relativism, we can revise our notion of the competent author, and consequently, the competent seeker of truth. Rather than viewing neophyte or inept writers as unable to participate in public discourse without disassociating themselves from the social, economic, religious, and familial patterns that limit their written expression, we might view them as participating with us in a common endeavor to seek the truth. In this scenario, we as teachers elect to overcome the limitations of our pasts which urge us to conceive of student writing as a flawed representation of reality instead of a genuine struggle toward truth. Rather than assuming that our responsibility and, in fact, only choice is to teach students to communicate in the discourse genres that have confirmed value in academe and the business professions, we might examine how the ways they speak and write to us might shape the way we write to others in both public and academic forums. And further, rather than believing that only writers who produce a good argument which stands up to scrutiny can articulate the public truth, we might believe that good rhetoricians provide but one service in our collaborative struggle toward truth through a variety of human enterprises. This, interestingly, is the aim Neel wishes to achieve in advocating strong discourse—a "collaborative [classroom atmosphere] where the teacher plays the role of philosopher-king less and less and the role of discourse facilitator more and more" (210). But his vision of a plurality of competing discourses in the classroom
does not go far enough. It surely validates competitive vying for public validation. But absent is recognition of discourse that does not meet this ideal and acknowledgement that such discourse also participates in the ongoing conversation which moves us together toward truth.

But to conceive of all discourse as participating in our mutual growth toward truth, it is necessary to wrest from relativism our conception of truth itself. Neither present as an absolute object nor embodied within a subject, truth—we must find—is born of human interaction, the struggle to know and understand one another and our environment, and the effort to better this world which we make and makes us. Truth made live in human interaction finds no victory in declaring an argument false, or its author a liar. Nor does it deem necessary that we seek the final word, for such a concept is meaningless in the continual process of human discourse. At the same time, to conceive of truth as born of interaction is not to view truth-seeking as the act of floundering in a void without seams or structure. Our lives are not seamless, nor endless; they are shaped by our friends, relatives, schools, churches, homes, and nations, and their meaning is reflected in our decisions and actions. The truth we seek through such interaction with others is subject to memory and learning and opens us to the possibility of a better life.

Interestingly, Herrnstein Smith validates the role of prior experience in determining human activity and even the individual’s role in using that experience to determine a course of action. She interprets societal and individual practices as initiating in “the recurrent inclinations” of individual agents themselves (162). Individuals’ consistent “inclinations” to behave in one way rather than another, she claims, “are the corporeally inscribed traces of the differential consequences of their own prior and ongoing actions and interactions” (162). But she, like Neel, does not confirm that common purpose is engendered through such interaction. She chooses not to interpret action that moves beyond individual experience as evidence of a human desire to achieve common understanding of our collective and personal worth. And what implications has this latter perspective for how we write? To seek truth in the process of interaction is to view writing not only as an act of art or rhetoric, but also as an act of faith that this occasion for authoring, reading, discussing, and evaluating will bring us to a better understanding of who we are, what we want, and where we are going. The poem or novel then becomes not the word that hopes to change us, but the scene for change through us. The business report recommends not the ultimate plan, but the place where we can begin planning. Such a perspective requires us to view rhetoric and hence persuasion in a new way, one that conceives of its aim not to create discourse that stands up to public scrutiny, but rather to create discourse that inspires public action for the common good.

And finally, if we resist relativism, we can become engaged without apology in the act of trusting human enterprise. We can trust that we need not accept the pattern of life as it has been lived as the pattern that determines
our future. We can question whether systems we have in place to ensure competing truths must continue to function to do so. We can claim finally that life itself has some purpose and that it is what we hold in common—our common aspirations—that gives humanity expression. We can decide finally that writing (like all of our discourse) is provisional, marking a path toward the goals of our various enterprises and contributing to our common humanity, rather than bringing conversation to a halt in a final word that becomes a final deed. And we can begin judging the written work of our students as it aspires to be part of that conversation toward truth, rather than as it aspires to win an argument.

Should we resist relativism, can we bring an end to the agonism that characterizes public discourse on issues of importance to us all? Rather than denying that possibility by pointing to the record of our past, we might hope for change through imagining the consequences of denying agonistic rhetoric in the future. We can project a process of involving individuals in a collective public discourse that would avoid, for instance, the sorry display of agonistic speech we witnessed in the televised senate hearings surrounding the nomination of Clarence Thomas to the Supreme Court. Here, instead of a meaningful quest for truth through human interaction, we witnessed a display of competitive rhetoric. Could these proceedings have been different if the truth to be found in human discourse and rhetoric was conceived of as undetermined by historical constraint, unlimited to a single word or phrase, and free to grow in the progress of human interaction? Could they have been different if we did not assume that the truth of any speaker’s words was but relative to those nominal “facts” thought to be more persuasive? Could anyone justifiably have accused either Professor Hill or Judge Thomas of fabrication, thus categorically denying their personal differences through declaring one’s truth the victor? Could anyone justifiably have declared that Professor Hill’s remarks were delusional or hysterical, restricting her freedom to speak and think differently? Could anyone in good conscience have dismissed Judge Thomas’s nomination as social tokenism, thus denying his contribution to the interchange that marks our collective attention to and understanding of societal diversity in these times? What difference would it have made if the Thomas-Hill debate was not a debate, but rather a true hearing, received with full attention in the hope not of declaring a winner or loser, but rather of exercising personal freedom, engaging in conversation about our differences, and determining a direction for a continued quest for truth through ongoing interaction? And how could a change in discourse practices have achieved that end?

The change required, I believe, is to dismiss concern about speaking and writing the truth and to begin speaking and writing in truth. To do so is to assume a responsibility for discourse that goes beyond rhetorical relativism. It is to treat rhetoric not simply as a tool for persuasion and critique, but as the purpose of human enterprise, and, as such, reflective of our moral intent.
To describe writing as it embodies human intent for the common good is the challenge a rhetorical theory must address if it is to explain the truth of discourse to ourselves.

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Works Cited


Kinneavy Award Winners Announced

The James L. Kinneavy Award for the most outstanding essay in volume 11 of JAC was awarded to Patricia A. Sullivan for "Writing in the Graduate Curriculum: Literary Criticism as Composition." Professor Sullivan received a cash award and a framed citation.

Joseph Petraglia received an honorable mention for "Interrupting the Conversation: The Constructionist Dialogue in Composition" and also received a framed citation.

The award is generously endowed by Professor Kinneavy, Blumberg Centennial Professor at the University of Texas, and was presented by him at the meeting of the Association of Teachers of Advanced Composition at the CCCC Convention in Cincinnati.