Toward a Postmodern Pedagogy of Imitation

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After all, our thought itself—philosophical, scientific, and artistic—is born and shaped in the process of interaction and struggle with others' thought, and this cannot but be reflected in the forms that verbally express our thought as well.

Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin

... It is necessary to read and reread those in whose wake I write, the "books" in whose margins and between whose lines I mark out and read a text simultaneously almost identical and entirely other....

Jacques Derrida

In what a strange complication of being and not-being we are involved!

Theaetetus

In one of their recent articles on the problems of marginal students, Glynda Hull and Mike Rose present a case study of Tanya, a student who writes a strange summary of an article because she has internalized admonitions not to plagiarize. At the same time, Tanya wishes to display her knowledge. When asked about one of her choices Tanya explains:

"I have practice from when I try not to copy. When I get a little bit from there, a teacher'll really know what I'm talking about.... Then if some parts from there I change a little bit, they know I'm not really that kind of student that would copy, 'cause another student would copy." (146)

Although Tanya is a basic writer, she has articulated the difficult rhetorical position of many of our undergraduates, whether marginal or advanced, and her choices made from that position put her in a typical dilemma. Like many of our students, she is caught in a reading and writing performance where the authority of the text, as well as the authorities of current teachers and a host of past teachers, conspires with her sense of self to present an almost insurmountable obstacle to free-flowing and equal dialogue. To copy is cheating; to prove that they know, students must ferret out what of significance will please a teacher. Such a rhetorical bind reduces or eliminates the possibility that students might match the rhetorical ethos or dialogic stance of the author, or that they might absorb or imitate any of the syntax or the
rhetorical strategies of the text in question. Much of their conscious
attention is taken up in efforts "to try not to copy." Add to that the many
times they must study the authoritative discourses of disciplines across the
curriculum, and the chances for dialogue, let alone imitation, are slim.

Toward the end of the article Hull and Rose observe that Tanya needs to
suspend her worries about both plagiarism and error. As a conclusion, they
recommend "a free-wheeling pedagogy of imitation, one that allows her to
try on the language of essays . . . " (151). Although Hull and Rose do not
specify how such a pedagogy of imitation might be accomplished, they echo
an insight of David Bartholomae: "A fundamental social and psychological
reality about discourse—oral or written—is that human beings continually
appropriate each other's language to establish group membership, to grow,
and to define themselves in new ways" (151). Unfortunately, even as this
insight itself echoes insights of several contemporary theorists of several
disciplines and persuasions, it rarely informs agendas involving reading and
writing and students. And, particularly germane to our interests in English,
we have appropriated words from postmodern theories such as "pastiche,"
"simulacrum," "intertextuality," "trace," "graft," and "desire" to interpret
our cultural and textual condition. Even as these words suggest that our
cultural and textual production is based on a transformed notion of imitation,
we have as yet to apply our insights and our words to the teaching of academic
writing. We have as yet to forge a postmodern pedagogy of imitation for
undergraduates in school.

In the world, even the world of scholarship, imitation is easy enough to
observe. A recent Critical Inquiry exchange between the literary critics Toril
Moi and Calvin Bedient presents an almost random example. In arguing
about each other's interpretations of Julie Kristeva's Revolution in Poetic
Language, Moi and Bedient have each appropriated the distinctive style of
Kristeva. In the need to come at Kristeva's text over and over again, they show
something that we may extend to our pedagogy with Tanya and other
students. Their appropriation of Kristeva, obviously couched where neces­
sary in citation, may be expressed in metaphors of mimetic violence: they
have quite naturally and free-wheelingly pierced, penetrated, and pillaged
their source text in the fray. In fact, their stylistic flourishes show they have
out-Kristevaed Kristeva in the rhetorical aim to outsmart each other. In a by
now commonplace deconstruction, they have infiltrated Kristeva's text so
that its traces are absorbed in the ensuing discourse around the text. The
violence Moi and Bedient have done in robbing Kristeva might be considered
a witty (postmodern) tribute. Students, for various reasons, are rarely
allowed such licence.

It is the purpose of this essay to reconcile the practices of rhetorically­
involved advanced writers, such as Moi and Bedient, with the passive strat­
egies of many of our undergraduate students. Responding to power relation­
ships involving academic texts in school, many students revere texts as
artifacts to be handled with care, or oracles to be silently visited, or, supposing Paulo Freire's banking metaphor, they receive and store them as "communiqués" or "deposits" (58); and all of these relationships interfere with their ability to engage in dialogue. In this essay I suggest a rhetorical relationship with texts where undergraduate students may also practice imitation, "practice" implying praxis or, as James Britton envisions, students who "practice language in the sense in which a doctor 'practices' medicine" (130). Implied is an anti-foundationalist claim about language and pedagogy. I contend that Moi and Bedient's free-wheeling imitation does not rest on their mastery of the basics of reading comprehension, nor does it rest on their mastery of the art of citation within the genre of critical response, nor does it occur because they have read extensively and understand the tenets of literary criticism. If they have mastered genre-specific conventions in order to interpret what they read insightfully, they have done well, as we would expect, but they are no more inclined to imitate the syntax of Kristeva because of that knowledge. Their appropriation of Kristeva relies on a rough and ready interpretation and translation of her text on many levels into language more properly internal to themselves. Though imitations may differ with schooling, habit, and intention, they do not rest on a particular way of knowing or on a particular interpretive skill beyond a natural ability to absorb language for our own purposes demonstrated by us all. An irony that I will continue to pursue in this essay is that more appropriation and more learning from texts occur in a place that Mary Louise Pratt has provocatively termed a "contact zone," a place of potential conflict and "misunderstanding" where "everyone has a stake in nearly everything we read, but the range and kind of stakes vary widely" (39). Thus, for instance, in Pratt's contact zone, Tanya has potentially equal access along with Moi and Bedient to the text of Kristeva.

It is also the purpose of this essay to integrate theory and practice. Like Lisa Ede, who argues for a view of composition studies where "theory and practice are not only equal but equally essential . . ." and who echoes an insight of Louise Phelps that "theory and practice mutually discipline each other," my own interest in a pedagogy of imitation is particularly influenced by my reading of Mikhail Bakhtin, Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan and those who apply psychoanalysis to pedagogy, along with appropriating schematheoretic views of reading comprehension that suppose a series of hermeneutic strategies (Ede 322, Phelps 238).

At the same time, though, my interest in imitation arises from an expedient solution I developed in response to a dilemma posed by expressivist composition pedagogy. My students, at several institutions over the last ten years, could not "look into their hearts" and write academic prose or genre-specific texts such as literary analyses, nor would their freewriting about ideas necessarily result in academic presentation. They did not progress in a linear and orderly way toward learning the syntactic and rhetorical customs of
academic genres from the oral registers that I and others presumed they knew already. In fact, I could not be sure about what they knew already, nor could I assume a shared starting point in light of their interesting diversity. Attempting to replicate the situation of immersion—whereby we all learn spoken registers and other written genres without the tedious attention to "basics" and linear progress, and within the context of social dialogue where we are expected and encouraged to answer—I developed procedures that ensure that students read and respond in writing, at least a half dozen times, to certain difficult texts in academic and literary genres. In these responses, students interpret their negotiations within the social context of the group, without the usual school bias that these texts should be comprehended, explicated, abstracted, or quarried for the "main idea." To do this, I found it imperative to invent measures to subvert my own authority, an authority that I cannot subvert entirely no matter what measures I am able to invent. One honest way to subvert my own authority was to choose texts for experimental readings—and (often seditious) imitations—that either I had not read, and hence could not valorize, or texts I had read and forgotten. In the process, I could reduce my own stakes in the interpretive performance of my students, and from a more useful position of ignorance, I could suggest new readings depending on what happened and what I could predict might happen next.

My students' responses have deepened my appreciation for the insights of the theorists I mention, and they also have led me to explore the ancient preoccupation with learning to write, at least in some measure, by imitation. For often, especially when students resist the text, "misread" the text, or become emotionally involved with the text in a form of identification or transference, they unconsciously imitate its syntax and its rhetorical structure both during their readings and responses and when they are asked to present formal papers as a continuation of their responses. Their imitations are rarely motivated by a sense of reverence for or valorization of the text. In fact, the imitations produced by my students and myself are often accompanied by a certain amount of insurgency and are always accomplished in a spirit of play to employ an ancient meaning of the word mimèsis. I must add a clear admission of subterfuge and paradox on my part: the more students are encouraged to play, the more they become seduced into using academic prose, and the more they are caught in the academic web. Nonetheless, their linguistic and rhetorical play, as any serious play and exploration that encourages expression of resistance, allows them to adopt the ways of academic prose while keeping and encouraging a modicum of self respect.

Postmodern Theories of Interpretation and Imitation

My experiments in imitation are fluid, and I present them as tangible examples of many promising postmodern imitations we might arrange as we extend contemporary theories of interpretation to the production of text and to the teaching of writing in composition and literature classes. In fact, in a
representational text, or even the "unreadable" text, presupposes continuing iterable interpretations. According to Derrida,

Unreadability does not arrest reading, does not leave it paralyzed in the face of an opaque surface: rather, it starts reading and writing and translation moving again. The unreadable is not the opposite of the readable, but rather the ridge that also gives it momentum, movement, sets it in motion. ("Living" 116)

What Derrida is pointing out, in other words, is that if reading does not result in essential or final meaning, it nonetheless functions as an interventive and interpretive act, as a translation that results in many meanings. The impossibility of "communicating" a finalized meaning does not stop the hermeneutic process of interpretation. Nor does it suspend the ability of the reader-writer to "lift a written syntagma from the interlocking chain in which it is caught." Thus, for instance, Derrida's theory supports Pratt's notion of reading in the contact zone and the appropriative interpretations of Tanya. Although her interpretations and her imitative graftings would differ from ours, Tanya would have equal access along with Moi and Bedient to Kristeva's syntax were she to read Kristeva over and over again.

Derrida's hermeneutic theory, as I will show, can be made heuristic and pragmatic, for a postmodern pedagogy must rest on repetition/ality, specifically on several readings and rereadings, several writings and rewritings, none of them closing off the possibility of further repetitions within a shift or drift of context. These readings displace the usual school readings that rush toward closure, or rush toward an authoritative or task-oriented interpretation. Many of the myriad alternate readings of texts engage students in unconscious desires that lead them to imitation.

Lacan and Unconscious Desires to Imitate

Integral to both Derrida's concept of iterability and Bakhtin's theory of dialogism, and relevant to a postmodern theory of imitation, is translation—a transposition of appropriated language to a particular context, or "transformation," as Derrida sometimes calls it—which posits that even a faithful interlingual translation of an original involves a series of interpretations along with ruptures and gaps (Ear 100). Bakhtin and members of his circle discuss translation in terms of interactive dialogue and understanding. According to Voloshinov, for example, when we comprehend an utterance, we "lay down a set of our own answering words. The greater their number and weight, the deeper and more substantial our understanding will be" (102). He goes on to explain:

Each of the distinguishable significative elements of an utterance and the entire utterance as a whole entity are translated in our minds into another, active and responsive, context. Any true understanding is dialogic in nature. . . . Understanding strives to match the speaker's word with a counter word. (102)
The dialogic nature of translation, including the important gaps and counterwords, in both Derrida's and Bakhtin's theories points to some of what we have learned from Lacan about the active and responsive language of the unconscious. Lacan teaches us that the unconscious, because it is structured like a language, is capable of initiating dialogue on its own. Lacan would agree that "any true understanding is dialogic in nature," and Lacan's insights enable us in some measure to understand the translations between the languages of external others and our unconscious that fix on what in those languages we desire and hence what we might be most inclined to imitate. For it is important to remember in any discussion of imitation that language is not simply poured into listeners and readers as empty vessels, but translated in a process of rhetorical negotiation with an existing internal language, becoming, in Bakhtinian terms, "internally persuasive."

Lacan's contributions to a postmodern pedagogy of imitation in general rest on the linguistic base of his psychoanalytical theory that allows us to delve more deeply into the fundamental social and psychological reality about discourse. Because we appropriate the language of others to grow and define ourselves in new ways, Lacan's concepts of transference and resistance allow us to discuss the ways in which unconscious desires are played out in relationship to the language of others. Although our work with Lacan focuses on applying these concepts to pedagogy and to discourse, a brief and simplified review of Lacan's psychoanalytical process allows us to frame such a discussion. Lacan sees the self continuously developed in dialogue with others who initially provide the impetus for the start of the unconscious. The unconscious Other comes to be divided from and mostly inaccessible to the conscious Subject, who nonetheless seeks reconciliation in a series of desires. Desires for reconciliation, conveyed through the symbolic order of language, are projected outward in interaction with and mediation of therapeutic others—a therapist, a teacher, or any of the myriad cultural artifacts including texts. These others, temporary embodiments of the unconscious Other, are considered the One or ones who are Supposed to Know. In the role of one who is supposed to know, therapists, teachers, or texts may elicit resistances in the Subject, or they may elicit a form of transference or identification. In these active exchanges—heightened by unconscious desires, the ultimate desire of the unconscious Other for recognition—the Subject becomes highly susceptible to nuances of the other's language. Ultimately the process of assimilation is expedited by the Subject's resistance and transference, for the Subject—though he may learn from others in his desire for reconciliation with his unconscious Other—must come to face his divided self.

The process of assimilation is continually being played out in language, with appropriation of others' languages negotiated in both external and internal dialogues involving resistance and transference. If this process is fundamental, it is never simple, nor is it predictable or systematic. As Joseph Smith observes, "In transference and resistance, as in Derrida's différence,
spirit of exploration, I present this essay as part of a dialogue with readers who may invent other imitative practices with students in light of their own readings of current theories. We have learned a great deal in the last several years that supports such a project: information about dialogue, authority, and texts; and about the unconscious motivations of those who desire to learn from texts and who might “try on,” or more hopefully usurp, the “language of essays.” My own extension of postmodern theories of interpretation to imitation follows the insights of Bakhtin, Derrida, and Lacan, whose work I explore below. But before I address how we might extend the work of these postmodern theorists in order to forge a postmodern pedagogy of imitation, I want first to remind us that we might extend and reinterpret the imitation strategies within several ancient and traditional rhetorical pedagogies, pedagogies that integrated speaking, writing, and reading in a holistic series of activities.

**Traditional Rhetorical Pedagogy**

I cannot properly pursue the history of imitation pedagogy in this essay—a history beginning with the Greek sophists of the fifth century B.C. which was interrupted by Romantic concepts of language and the self as original, yet still functions as a pedagogy in Europe (see Kennedy 25 and Murphy 161). However, imitation pedagogy is not a monolithic tradition, and, in fact, some of the insights of practitioners at various times and in various cultures may be said, in an important postmodern reversal of anteriority, to echo some of the insights of Bakhtin, Derrida, and Lacan. For instance, the unconscious holistic imitations advocated by the sophists, following an oral rhapsodic tradition, enabled an integration of ethical, rhetorical, and syntactic imitation, and an integration of sight in reading and sound in oral recitation. Moreover, the psychological insights of Quintilian in the first century A.D. about memory and repetition support additional strategies for the conscious imitation procedures that he advocated in his influential *Institutio oratoria*. Quintilian’s conscious procedures—including memorizations, oral readings, paraphrases, translations between Greek and Latin, transcriptions between prose and verse, retellings and imitative competitions—were deployed for centuries with various pedagogical intentions, and in various imaginative as well as monotonous ways. If, for instance, we wish to discard the advice of neoclassical rhetoricians of the eighteenth century like David Goodwin who apotheosize the anterior texts of the classical period as paragons of “uncorrupted Antiquity,” we might see imitation pedagogy as a workable tradition of intertextual learning adaptable to values and practices within particular cultures (Goodwin 37). A postmodern pedagogy of imitation represents a departure from modernist assumptions about originality and essentialism and from the pedagogies of imitation of the past that worked well (only) in their particular contexts. Yet we may take heart, as well as some pragmatic advice, from that tradition. We may simply need to amend and
extend our notions of typical imitation exercises in order to capture the
diversity of imitation and its sometimes indirect and unconscious direction.
For instance, we might see that imitation can be a by-product of reading
methods that do not necessarily aim at direct and conscious emulation. (For
helpful histories of imitation pedagogy, see Corbett; Kehl; and Sullivan; for
an extended discussion of liberatory imitation practices, framed within the
context of Renaissance poetry, see Greene.)

Bakhtin and Dialogism

We might specifically look to Bakhtin to explain my own “subterfuge” with
students and the paradox that the more democratically a text is approached
in equal dialogue, the more the language of that text is unconsciously usurped
and unconsciously imitated in new texts that continue that very dialogue. We
have learned from Bakhtin to think of language as situated in dialogue. For
instance, most of us accept Bakhtin’s insight that “the unique speech expe-
rience of each individual is shaped and developed in continuous and constant
interaction with others’ individual utterances” (“Problem” 89). And many
of us are ready to consider the evidence of intertextual dialogue that extends
beyond Bakhtin’s analysis of discourse in the novel. According to Bakhtin,
dialogue, or “varying degrees of otherness or varying degrees of ‘our-own-
ness’” (“Problem” 89), permeates writing in all genres to greater or lesser
degrees:

Such variants on the theme of another’s discourse are widespread in all areas of creative
ideological activity, and even in the narrowly scientific disciplines. Of such a sort is any
gifted, creative exposition defining alien [i.e., other] world views: such an exposition is
always a free stylistic variation on another’s discourse; it expounds another’s thought in the
style of that thought even while applying it to new material, to another way of posing the
problem; it conducts experiments and gets solutions in the language of another’s
discourse. (Dialogic 347; emphasis added)

Dialogue, or the incorporation of another’s (or others’) discourse into our
own, and the “free stylistic variation on another’s discourse,” or unconscious
imitation, are cultural inclinations we might exploit in our pedagogical
practice. Although Bakhtin makes a distinction between the conscious
intention to imitate and stylistic variation or “styilization”—he tells us that “a
clear-cut semantic boundary exists between stylization and imitation”—he
goes on to add that “there exists between them extremely subtle and some-
times imperceptible transitions” (Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics 190). He
also speaks to the conventionalization of styles as time progresses (even a
style as distinctive as Kristeva’s). This conventionalization also blurs the line
between stylization and conscious imitation: “As the seriousness of a style is
weakened in the hands of its epigone-imitators, its devices become more
conventional, and imitation becomes semistyilization” (Problems 190). The
relation between dialogue and unconscious imitation is explicit, for, at the
simplest unconscious level, we are motivated to imitate in order to match the
textual features of what we hear and read in order to further dialogue,
dialogue that is always held within a discrete particular context and a context
that itself incorporates a range of almost limitless paratextual features.

The influence of context over any given text informs Bakhtin's theory of
dialogism. In reality—reality reflecting the discrete situations in time and
space in which we engage in dialogue—our language is "heteroglot," taking
its shape from all the elements in any particular context and from many prior
dialogues. Language is not properly owned by anyone, and it "never gravi-
tates toward a single consciousness or a single voice... for the word is not a
material thing but rather the eternally mobile, eternally fickle medium of
dialogic interaction" (Problems 202). Bakhtin's theory of dialogism enables
us to disengage from our usual notions of originality in self-expression to
espouse a more powerful notion of the writer who interacts and intervenes
in dialogues of shared and appropriated language that are nonetheless
original based on their situatedness in context. Hence, we need not view the
writer as a subjective entity set against, or even set within, an objective world.
Consequently, we might then disengage from the implications of our usual
modernist theories of self that discourage our seeing the reality and efficacy
of imitation.

If dialogue and unconscious stylistic imitation represent a human ten-
dency toward interaction and intervention, "authoritative discourse," ac-
cording to Bakhtin, limits the proclivity toward dialogue and appropriation.
In other words, one shies away from answering, repeating, or even uttering,
the words of a "sacred" text. Authoritative discourse distances itself from the
hearer or the reader, and it takes its authority, not from any inherent textual
features, but from its context. According to Bakhtin

\[
\text{It is not a free appropriation and assimilation of the word itself that authoritative
discourse seeks to elicit from us; rather, it demands our unconditional allegiance.}
\]
\[
\text{Therefore authoritative discourse permits no play with the context framing it, no play}
\text{with its borders, no gradual and flexible transitions, no spontaneously creative stylizing}
\text{variants on it. (Dialogic 343).}
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Although we associate authoritative discourse with the invocatory words of
religion, the regulatory prose of law, or the institutional prose of academia
and scholarship, we might also consider that the authority of these discourses
and authoritative signifiers within these discourses are nonetheless only
made authoritative within a complicated web of context. The complicated
context of school, for instance, and its effect on spontaneous imitation from
novices, has already been hinted at by Tanya. Yet, there are no words or
pronouncements that, in themselves, remove themselves or render them-
selves taboo or inaccessible in dialogue or impermeable to creative stylistic
imitation. A radical displacement of the authoritative context, especially the
accumulated authoritative context represented in unchallenged traditional
interceptions of academic texts, enables us to play with textual borders and allows us to engage freely in dialogue encompassing rhetorical and stylistic imitation.

**Derrida and Representation**

Such a radical displacement of the traditional authoritative context of reading and writing is something we have learned from Derrida, and several of Derrida's ideas may be turned toward a postmodern pedagogy of imitation. Let me cite two examples: Derrida's theory of *differance* and his concept of iterability. In brief review, Derrida's *differance* reverses Plato's version of rhetorical imitation in the *Sophist*—that writing represents speech or attempts to recover an essential presence and that "reading means making accessible a meaning that can be transmitted as such . . ." ("Living" 116). Derrida's iterability embraces a more dialogic concept of imitation, based on the absence of presence, essence, or determinacy of meaning, and on a textuality available to all of us who decipher and inscribe the word. Derrida's position on interpretation, like Bakhtin's, also hinges on a situatedness of language in discrete particular contexts. Derrida proclaims that words cannot be controlled by conscious intentions of authors. The effect of this claim is commensurable with Bakhtin's theory of dialogism, for Derrida also sees that language, in its ability to be reproduced, cannot be owned by anyone. Derrida explains:

> By all rights, it belongs to the sign to be legible, even if the moment of its production is irremediably lost, and even if I do not know what its alleged author-ascriptor meant consciously and intentionally at the moment he wrote it, that is abandon it to its essential drifting. (*Margins* 317)

Specifically, Derrida's position on iterability allows us to look at what happens to writing once it is set adrift, or, more properly, once it has always already been set adrift. Derrida tells us:

> Turning now to the semiotic and internal context, there is no less a force of breaking by virtue of its essential iterability; one can always lift a written syntagma from the interlocking chain in which it is caught or given without making it lose every possibility of functioning, if not every possibility of "communicating," precisely. Eventually, one may recognize other such possibilities in it by inscribing or grafting it into other chains. No context can enclose it. Nor can any code, the code being here both the possibility and impossibility of writing, of its essential iterability (repetition/alterity). (*Margins* 317)

The repetition/alterity synthesized in Derrida's concept of iterability, especially freed from the authoritative or logocentric quest for essence, presents us with a concept that we might make liberatory in practice, with clear implications for reading and imitative writing. For Derrida's deconstructions do not simply neutralize authoritative readings, but allow other readings normally marginalized to take their place. Even the difficult or non-
the old resisting the new and the new resisting the old, deferral and difference are condensed and played out” (65). Nor are the ways of assimilating knowledge in context equally liberatory or therapeutic. Where Bakhtin sees authoritative discourse as stifling dialogue and creative stylistic variation, Lacan sees the “discourse of the University” as one where, in the words of Mark Bracher, “the emphasis is on producing more knowledge rather than on further empowering human subjects....” Empowerment, according to Bracher is based on a deeper dialogue with the unconscious, and it “requires attention to fantasy, desire, jouissance, and ideals in addition to knowledge” (57; cf. Lacan, Le Séminaire, Livre XVII).

When we extend Lacan’s theory to pedagogy and to imitation its implications are clear. The implications rest on paradoxes that we might integrate with the paradox of Bakhtin: as teachers, we accelerate the process of understanding, assimilation and imitation when we defer the expectation that we are the ones who know and when we defer the assumption that texts are instruments of consumable knowledge. As I will explore in the remainder of this essay, a studied displacement of our own authority and textual authority encourages students to engage in dialogues with texts, dialogues that are often based on unconscious desires. These properly irrational responses—honored in a temporary suspension of the usual academic business—inspire in students a great attention to texts, a willingness to read and respond to them over and over again, and an unpredictably high incidence of imitation.

Theory, (Dis)Continuity, and Postmodern Common Sense

In the remainder of this essay I attend to pragmatic questions: addressing how we might reinvent a pedagogy of imitation from postmodern theories and ancient practice, and presenting at least one way we might introduce such a pedagogy into existing composition courses.

Repetition/Alterity

With a commitment to enabling our students to direct their own interpretations and imitations, we should not find it too difficult to integrate postmodern theories with our good intuitions and translate that theory into a common sense. We might draw on a stable and relatively simple bit of common sense from traditional rhetorical pedagogy. Any text to be imitated must be repeated. However various cultures have thought of the relationship between anterior texts to be imitated and posterior texts that imitate, they have always held that texts to be imitated must be repeated. Moreover, we can say that each repetition, even an “exact” copy, if it is uttered in even a slightly different context, repeats but also alters. For example, if Quintilian’s conscious procedures sometimes later became trivialized in the service of basic education, they nonetheless provide a list of often useful typical examples of imitation. Memorizations, oral readings, paraphrases, transla-
tions and transliterations insure that texts are repeated and altered, repeated and altered in several different spoken and written ways.

Quintilian in his discussions of imitation also raises an extremely relevant point about the spontaneous unconscious imitation that comes from constant exposure. If he holds a prescriptive approach to grammar in recommending "well-spoken" nurses for infant would-be rhetors or if he connects imitation with a moral agenda—"I would express the wish that lines which are set for... [the young student's] imitation in writing should... convey some moral instruction"—he knows that whatever is constantly repeated is apt to be imitated and can be called back from memory (11-12, 18). Lacan supports Quintilian's observations, suggesting that words have ultimate power to influence the unconscious. According to Lacan, if the subject appears to be a slave of language it is because his place is already inscribed at birth, if only by virtue of his proper name. The structures of culture, according to Lacan, "reveal an ordering of possible exchanges, which, even if unconscious, is inconceivable outside the permutations authorized by language" (Ecrits 148). Quintilian's and Lacan's psychological observations are confirmed in rhetoric by my own practice: the catalyst for my explorations of imitation came from discovering (quite accidentally) that all of my students, from my own "Tanya" to others more advanced, could spontaneously write spot commercials—often with hyperbolic parody suggesting a conscious resistance to commercials' persuasiveness. Although I will not here speculate on the deeper psychological effects on my students of having memorized the genre of "commercial," I do know that none of my students ever claimed they admired or had studied the spot commercial. Their ability to generate the rhetoric and syntax of the genre was based on their unwritten dialogues with particular spot commercials that had been repeated with subtle shifts of context. The discussion and my students' commercials provide an introduction to the irrational power of memory in the unconscious from what, echoing Derrida, is constantly repeated and what, with shifts in the context of reception, is constantly altered.

These examples of unconscious alteration of repeated particular texts, and even Quintilian's alterations designed for consciously-motivated imitation, actually represent a clear departure from our valorized practices with academic texts in school. The hegemony of the modern university insures that individual texts are seldom systematically repeated. What is constantly repeated, and hence has great power to influence, are the sanctioned task-oriented readings of more and more individual texts that amount to an accumulated body of consumed authoritative knowledge, what Michel Foucault terms a "positivity of a discourse" (126). Since our students are not granted what Foucault calls the "privileged or exclusive right to speak of a particular subject," they alter individual texts in limited and prescribed ways (Foucault 216). And often, unless students learn to perform and value their own private readings that function to enable dialogue and resistance, they
accomplish these prescribed readings with a great deal of alienation. They are often alienated from the whole of the written utterance—what Bakhtin defines as the boundary of genre that invites dialogue (see "Problem" 60-79)—and they are often alienated from their own prior experiences—cultural, personal, and textual—that form the basis of their expectations about and interpretations of a text. In addition, they are often alienated from their feelings about academic discourse—their feelings, whether negative or positive, that emanate from translations of language in the unconscious.

Because alienation interferes with the dialogic stance that enables imitation, students tend to highlight the "main ideas" and ignore the syntax of what they read when they only "cover the material." They have little chance or inclination to engage in Bakhtin's "spontaneous creative stylizing variants." When they answer published "study questions," they must participate in violations of their natural proclivities toward dialogue, dialogue involving the whole of the utterance, dialogue involving the aesthetic response that arises in the unconscious, and dialogue that would naturally occur in a discrete particular context. They must hypothesize themselves, for study questions are made for hypothetical students. When students respond to readings we (or a textbook writer) have determined are easy enough or are "on their level," or when they find us prepared to cushion the difficult text by answering all or some of their points of confusion, they need not experience what Derrida calls "unreadability": "the ridge that gives [the text] momentum," and that "starts reading and writing and translation moving again" (Derrida, "Living" 116). Nor do students engage in what Bakhtin sees as a necessary struggle. When students are asked to read as a one-time performance, a mechanism valorized in testing, they succeed by training themselves to read for an essential (logocentric) correct answer. Although I am not suggesting that testing should be banished from the academy, I am suggesting that we base a liberatory pedagogy of imitation on a series of alternate repetitions/alterations, a series of alternate readings and responses, in opposition to these usual readings validated or assumed in school. Such readings, occurring in the contact zone, where difference is validated and encouraged, provide a place where imitators become aware, if even momentarily, that it is they who take charge of words and syntax that have been abandoned to essential drifting.

**Alterity/Repetition**

Repetition presumes alterity; the more a text is repeated and altered, the more it is committed to unconscious memory, and the more the power of its words and syntax is there to be imitated. Sometimes the more radically a text is altered, the more it engages readers in unconscious desire for recognition, and the more tranformative is the dialogue. For students like Tanya, who must continually "invent the university" and discover the university-sanc-
tioned ways of reading (Bartholomae 134), the greatest invitation to imitation may be a kind of serious play.

In this serious play, the insights of Bakhtin, Derrida, or Lacan might function as heuristics for our invention of a series of playful alternate dialogues. We might base a pedagogy of imitation on a deferral, displacement, or subversion of typical authoritative or logocentric readings—readings that result in a distancing of the text from the reader which creates a rush toward determinacy and closure that discourages fantasy, desire, and jouissance, and that makes resistance and transference irrelevant to academic business. In place of this agenda, we might substitute a totally-situated series of dialogues, dialogues that radically slow down the rush toward determinacy to validate what in the heteroglot languages of student responses students (always) already know. These dialogues may be unconventional, offbeat, irreverent, parodic, idiosyncratic, or even actively irrational. For, as these playful alternate repetitions take on their own momentum, they may produce in students and ourselves an altered state of reception to academic texts—a state where words, as well as syntactic and rhetorical structures divested of their authority and abandoned to their essential drifting—are nonetheless able to enthrall. They will be committed to our unconscious memory.

The Rewards of Practice
In order for us to encourage these responses, we are called upon to defer actively our own authority that “knows” the correct reading and that knows (often unconsciously) how to channel discussions toward the rational agendas validated in school. In order to explain how such a series of oppositional readings and responses might lead to imitation, I want to end this essay by briefly pointing to my experience in practice. Although it is not my purpose to hold up an assignment for others to imitate—I am reminded of Ann Berthoff’s wry observation about writing teachers swapping recipes (4)—I would assume that any ideas springing from the following examples will be naturally altered when they are applied in different contexts. And although it also is not my purpose to rhapsodize over the classroom behavior of myself and my students, I must give a little more detail than usual about how I approach imitation, for there is a deliberate ambiguity in my approach.

An Experiment
I want to encourage unconscious imitation in my students as a by-product of conscious struggle; if I were initially to tell my students that a difficult academic text at hand is to be imitated, I would break the spell. The authority of that text might lead to silence. Moreover, if we have passed beyond a modernist concept of self as whole, indivisible and original in theory, we are nonetheless committed in practice to our intentions that are always original in context. Because of our sense that language is whole, original, and
complete, it is difficult consciously to perceive of ourselves as imitators. As Tanya observes, "Another student [and not Tanya] would copy" (emphasis added, Hull and Rose 146). Even Derrida, who has demonstrated his fascination with mimésis over and over again (see Dissemination), admits that he has learned from many writers. He tells us:

I won't say I imitate—that's certainly not true—but I try to match in my own idiom the style or the way of writing of the writers I write on. . . . It's not a mimetic behavior, but I try to produce my own signature in relation to the signature of the other, so I don't learn a model way of writing. It's not learning; it's listening to the other and trying to produce your own style in proportion to the other. ("On Rhetoric" 125)

What Derrida says corresponds closely to Bakhtin's notion of intertextual dialogue. It is only after we have interpreted a text—produced our own signature in relation to the signature of the other and indeed engaged in rhetorical or syntactic imitation (often, I must add again, with very different intentions from the author's)—that we discuss imitation and dialogue and the words that belong to all of us as fair game for appropriation.

When I offer a difficult text for experimental readings, I show my students that I have no hidden agenda regarding the text; there are no rabbits already in my hat. I explain to them that I have only scanned the text (usually a randomly selected text and always duplicated without an author's biography or study questions) and that anything they wish to write or say about it is permitted. I explain to them that the readings and responses are an experiment, and that I am not interested in seeing how well they read. I use my authority and my students' regard for data in "experiments," to insist that they read the text from start to finish each time they respond, and generally I ask that they initially read the text seven times as homework over the course of a week and respond each time for at least a full single-spaced page. I start the experimental readings by asking students to render casual undirected responses twice, making sure they read the essay the second day in a different location at a different time of day. Almost always, this approach, because of its uniqueness generates a great deal of interest, and students are willing to play along.

A(n) (Un)Certain Order

Although I celebrate the students' deepening attention to elements in particular texts and the free-for-all discussions that the first and subsequent readings generate, I must emphasize that this assignment follows a(n) (un)certain order, an order based on Bakhtin's observations about genre or utterance. Bakhtin's observations about genre are similar to some degree to observations made by schema researchers who see "comprehension" or more properly the interpretation of texts as governed by prior cultural and personal expectations, by the situational context of our reading, and by our notion of the schema or genre to which we assign the text (see Anderson, et.
al 371). Thus, more than half of the readings that I suggest attempt to hold students’ attention on their own expectations, the situational context(s) of their reading(s), or on the whole of the written utterance. I may ask students about their prior experiences: “When was the first time you read an essay like this? Does it remind you of anything you’ve read before?” I generally ask questions about an author’s ethos: “What can you tell about the author as a person from reading this essay. What does she value and who is she talking to?” I may ask students to fantasize an embodied author: “What does this author look like? How old is he? Is he alive or dead? What does (or did) he do for a living?” I may ask for directly autobiographical responses: “What does this essay have to do with you and your life?” The prosaic wording of my questions reflects, I hope, their situatedness, for I can only frame the questions in relationship to particular texts in particular situations.

The prosaic wording of my questions also suggests the major paradox of this pedagogy, of postmodern theory, and of postmodern imitation. One sets up a situation where representation, even imitation if you will, cannot be assumed. In the process, much is imitated in a random, unpredictable way. Imitation then emerges as a by-product of methods of reading that do not necessarily or directly aim at imitation.

These first readings attempt to guarantee that our dialogues are also situated in context; subsequent readings may study in a playful, but necessarily unsystematic way, more specific elements of the text. As readings progress, I may ask more properly “deconstructive” questions: “What is the weakest paragraph in the entire essay? Why?” Or I may ask for more specific invitations for dialogue: “Find the best or worst (in your opinion) paragraph or passage and answer the author point for point.” I may ask students to analyze their prior dialogues: “Read the essay all over again with your first two responses in hand. Now, what specifically made you think the essay was boring?” (This question asks for more specific expressions of resistance, and not for students to see the error of their ways.) I may ask students to rhapsodize on even a sentence: “Read the whole essay all over again. Copy a sentence you think is significant and see if you can write about it for an entire page.” If, as occasionally happens, students chafe at the constant repetitions and start to read the text conventionally, I may ask for translations that slow down this kind of closure: “Ok, if you now know exactly what the author is saying, write a letter to [some specified “other” unlikely to understand] telling her in her own language what this author is trying to say.” As the text becomes very familiar to students, myriads of other readings suggest themselves.

Although I also celebrate the surprises this pedagogy offers—discernable patterns of imitation of rhetorical strategies, usually coming at the end of the experiment when students compose formal essays, or lifted vocabulary and syntax, sometimes coming early in the experiment in parodic or ironic loose quotations—I must admit there is an uncertain order to student responses.
The first readings usually generate a great deal of resistance, for which I am entirely grateful: "Boring," "It put me to sleep," "It wasn't much better the second time, but at least I knew what I was in for" are useful responses, especially the response of "boring" since it generates specific expressions of negative emotions and more specific evidence to support these expressions, and, most importantly, expressions of boredom lead to communal bonding when students regroup in class to discover that they are not alone in their feelings.

**Magic**

What happens next is magic in two respects. First, the continuing pattern of responses is transformed by the magical power of the group. If I have chosen an appropriately difficult text, resistance will run very high in our first discussions, starting with cautious student volunteers, followed by less cautious colleagues, who read their first written responses to an amused (and relieved) class. Generally, resistance continues during subsequent responses, but these responses usually lose their sting as they are often expressed in communal language showing the effect of each individual's struggle with a particular text. Often this resistance generates serious discussions—about prior teachers, academic language, other classes, prior experiences with difficult texts. Often the licence to say whatever they want about the text leads some students to exaggerate their resistance, often expressed in parody and playful (and often irreverent) interpretations of texts. As class sessions continue, we generate more private readings and responses, and it is usually in their private written responses, that some students will start a deeper (more loving) engagement with the text. Sooner or later, a few students' responses will move to publicly defend the text, and the ensuing discussions will shift back and forth between resistance, defense, and dialogues that show clear traces of free stylistic variation about the text. Dialogues may show that students possess an incisive ability to interpret the text conventionally; sometimes students will not, and as discussions get heated and as I refrain from supplying the most plausible interpretations, I notice that "offbeat" interpretations show up as traces of syntactic imitation.

The second kind of magic occurs when the text becomes an incantation: a rhapsody known from the genesis of rhetoric and imitation in ancient practice. My general role in the classroom, besides being the one who supplies new questions or answers an occasional call for an explanation of an allusion or two, is one who stands aside and allows students to resist and struggle with a text. But as our discussions deepen, I make another contribution. All of the effective pedagogies of imitation from the past have appealed to the ear as well as the eye in including oral readings. As Gorgias observes, "Sacred incantations sung with words are bearers of pleasure and banishers of pain, for, merging with opinion in the soul, the power of the incantation is wont to beguile it and persuade it and alter it by witchcraft" (52). And so,
as discussions by students get more playful, more serious, and more imitative, I take on the role of rhapsodist, performing spontaneous random readings of paragraphs of the text from time to time. These rhapsodies serve to beguile my students with the sound of syntax they have confronted in their readings.

Resistance and Hierarchies: Toward Change in Academic Texts
One of the greatest rewards of my imitation experiments comes from my discovery and rediscovery of patterns of resistance in students, resistance often initially couched in epithets such as "boring" that often come from real hurt feelings in response to signals of authority within academic texts. If given free reign, resistance may serve to protect the integrity of students who read academic texts in the contact zone. My experience verifies—with different students and with different texts—places where anxiety is apt to arise. Many of the patterns of resistance deal with intertextuality: conscious appeals through quotation and paraphrase to other authorities; unconscious allusions to experiences students do not value or possess; markers of inadmissible ignorance, what Walter Ong refers to as the "things that established fiction holds all readers must know, even though everyone is sure all readers do not know . . ." (77). Although Ong tells us these things are "handled by writing, 'as everyone knows,' and then inserting what it is that not quite everyone really does know," students are nonetheless sensitive to the fiction. The trope of irony, for example, is apt to exclude some students on a local level, and, as Jan Swearingen observes and as my experiences confirm, the pervasive way irony functions on a global level in academic prose is apt to reveal class differences that are assumed to be ironed out in school. Some of the student resistance to these textual features lead to imitation, and some of the resistance leads to conscious recognitions that invite continued resistance, continued resistance that might eventually engender change. I am convinced that the fullest expression of resistance prepares students for other readings that continue a dialogic negotiation with academic texts and that create a sensitivity in their own writing to hierarchies of exclusion.

Epilogue
Following Derrida, my experiments in pedagogy stand opposed to the typical academic classroom that privileges consumption and determinacy. As Derrida observes regarding différence, "the efficacy of the thematic of différence may very well, indeed must, one day be superseded, lending itself if not to its own replacement, at least to enmeshing itself in a chain that in truth it never will have governed" (Margins 7). The opportunity for students to pounce upon, tear up, deconstruct, besmirch, and—in the ultimate irony—imitate a text is a deferral of the usual agenda of meaning making, and in deference to this undertaking and in order not to stop the process, I do not later explain that our interpretive acts simply constituted a game and that the text finally means one thing or another. However, a conventionally literate
estimation of what the text "means" is almost always supplied by students in their formal academic essays, for students do become willing to "return to school" on their own on such formal occasions.

Sometimes the imitation keeps going. The other day I ran into a student whom I had had in a summer class two years ago, and who had participated in one of my reading-writing experiments with Paul Tillich's "Symbols of Faith," a text that I came to appreciate with my students and one that I had not read. My former student stopped me in the hall for a pleasant reminiscence about the class. "Tillich," he said, smiling. "Jesus, I never did figure out what he meant by 'ultimate concern.'" Even this brief exchange shows the iterability in a graft of a graft and displays the unlimited influence of context. My student was actually imitating another (flamboyant) student who had counted, in a derisive way, the many times Tillich used "ultimate concern" (a synonym for God) in his essay and who then outdid Tillich by making a similar, albeit longer-winded and imitative, pronouncement about the concept. I count my student's memory of Tillich's master signifier and his confidence in "lift[ing] a written syntagma from the interlocking chain in which it is caught" (Derrida, Margins 317) to turn it toward a wry bit of appreciation of a colleague as evidence of his ability to deconstruct the university rather than his ability to invent it and as evidence as well of his sense of power and success within the university.

As we continue our commitment to address questions of power within the academy, we might start pragmatically with the texts that our students spend more clock time with than they do with any of us and the texts that represent the single most ubiquitous authority that they will encounter. Texts should be questioned, challenged, deconstructed, situated, and altered. Because in that process, the power of their rhetoric and syntax is free for the taking. In short, texts should be imitated.

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Works Cited


**Kinneavy Award Winners Announced**

"The James L. Kinneavy Award for the most outstanding essay in volume 14 of *JAC* was awarded to George L. Pullman for "Rhetoric and Hermeneutics: Composition, Invention, and Literature."

The award is generously endowed by Professor Kinneavy, Blumberg Centennial Professor at the University of Texas, and was presented by Gary A. Olson at the meeting of the Association of Teachers of Advanced Composition at the CCCC Convention in Washington DC."