Discipline and Pleasure:  
"Magic" and Sound

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Transgression . . . is not related to the limit as black to white, the prohibited to the lawful, the outside to the inside, or as the open area of a building to its enclosed spaces. Rather, their relationship takes the form of a spiral which no simple infraction can exhaust.

[Transgression is the solar inversion of satanic denial. ]

Michel Foucault

Many of us who work in the field of Composition must have, at one time or another, enjoyed the experience of writing enough that we chose to dedicate our intellectual lives to understanding its particular nature—its unique problems, its special powers. Day to day, we hope to share this pleasure somehow with our students, because we believe that if we can bring our students to enjoy writing, then they will devote more time and effort to their texts and will continue to think about writing and cultivate their writing ability long after they've fulfilled their academic requirement. Indeed, the more the students come to enjoy writing, the more we feel we've succeeded with them—for, the more they can overcome alienations from and resistances to writing, the better their chances of developing rhetorical power.

On the other hand, we meet the pleasures of writing with a certain suspicion. This suspicion derives from our sense that, as writing teachers, we must familiarize students not with their own inwardly felt flashes of inspiration but with the public conventions that enable successful communication. For only by submitting to the discursive codes that constitute particular disciplines does a student gain rhetorical power. This "disciplining" of the student proceeds as the suppression of the immediate, particular pleasures of composing, a figurative casting off of the smaller, individual body where such pleasures register, so that one may ascend to the real source of rhetorical power, the larger, communal body of conventional discourse. In short, we understand the pleasures of writing as a paradox: these pleasures are both necessary, and inimical, to the student-writer's development.¹
Clearly, pleasure confuses us somewhat, and so we don’t talk about it much. Almost no research, as Lex Runciman reports, can be found on the nature of positive writing experiences. And Runciman explains why:

One trouble with pleasure (even that resulting from a demanding and rigorous mental activity) is that it’s squishy, it’s difficult to predict, and talking about it seems vaguely unprofessional. It seems frivolous. (159)

Why do we have such a hard time taking pleasure seriously? After all, whenever we’re feeling particularly pleased while writing, we intuitively take these feelings as an important index to the quality of the emerging text. The concept of the “felt sense” that Sondra Perl introduced to composition studies some fifteen years ago offers us a way to attune our pedagogies to this much neglected dimension of the composing process, but, despite Perl’s helpful descriptions of how she uses this concept in her classrooms, very little research has sought to extend and substantiate the concept’s potential.

We seem to understand pleasure only as a hazy antonym for “discipline,” though this latter term, too, has historically remained something of a locked door. What lies on the other side is not, we fear, the sort of certitude one would associate with the Ivory Tower, but rather the cacophony of the Tower of the Babel. In other words, opening the question of “discipline” only opens the way to an infinite succession of questions, like the doors within doors in Kafka’s parable, “Before the Law.” Many of us associate the term discipline with “academic discourse,” but, as Peter Elbow argued in 1991, there really are no clearly delineated conventions that apply across fields or even across the schools-of-thought that compete within each field. In recent years, the questions of what “discipline” means for English Departments and whether or not we have one (or many and what the stakes are) have become central to the profession’s concerns. While only a few decades ago, we presumed simply enough to value “Great Books” and, to a much lesser extent, the teaching of writing, we have increasingly atomized into a considerably more diverse, tenuous assemblage of missions, perhaps none of which enjoy unanimous support. In short, the notion of “discipline,” though it has drawn more attention in recent years, is just as confusing as the concept of pleasure. We ground these terms, if at all, by opposing them, and leave a great many loose ends dangling.

The trouble English Departments have with both concepts of pleasure and concepts of discipline derives from the fact that, as Joseph Harris points out, our primary object of inquiry is language. While most disciplines constitute and control their object of inquiry, English Departments cannot—for ours forever wriggles out from under our control to show us, instead, the ways that it playfully constitutes and controls us (an event, as we’ll see, that has much to do with pleasure). Of course,
any disciplinary object will begin to wriggle when subject to certain sorts of critique, and perhaps this wriggling will itself someday become the English Department’s object of study. But such an English Department presumes an entirely transformed notion of discipline, one not defined in binary opposition to the wriggling pleasures it targets.

To say this another way, in such a changed English Department, professors of literature would necessarily come to function much like today’s teachers of writing. The teaching of writing has always been a site of struggle, a jumble of competing epistemologies, methods, and goals, and, while this may have contributed to our being kept in the cellar for generations, we have thus been free to grow, change, and, perhaps most importantly, make bold claims about our relevance to worlds outside the academy, about our powers to alter the lives of students as rhetorical agents, our power to “turn them on” intellectually—or off. Therefore, we are in a special position to lead our colleagues, as Joseph Harris argues, away from the question of discipline (“what is it that we do”) and into the question of how different pedagogies create different experiences for our students and what these experiences mean. The best writing teachers have always been those most ready to listen to students, most prepared to understand student-experience, and the most aware of how to excite students about improving their writing, and, even though these teachers usually spend their lives at the bottom of the disciplinary machinery of the English Department, perhaps they constitute the model around which the Department should reconceive itself.

As long as such changes are postponed, as long as all we really “know” about pleasure and discipline is that they are somehow opposed, then the collective identity crisis our fields are undergoing may well be working itself out at the register of lived experience in ways that we are unequipped to see—and that are, in fact, rather dire. As Elaine Scarry argues, wherever there are destabilized belief-systems and deeply challenged institutional self-conceptions, whenever the ordering mechanisms of a population come to seem unreal or arbitrary, there arises in the midst of such anxiety and frustration a corresponding will to re-inscribe and re-anchor these structures to make them most immediately real and most deeply felt: in their name, there gets underway the dirty work of inflicting pain (128). Surely everyone knows of a graduate student who became trapped in an inter-faculty crossfire and failed to survive professionally. How much more likely is such a sad situation when our sense of our mission is so completely up in the air? If Scarry’s grim thesis holds true, we are quick to see such casualties not as symptoms of our collective confusion; rather, we acknowledge responsibility for them only the way that obscure terrorist sects might: as proof of the “seriousness” of our own, individual agenda, as a means to advance and bolster our particular claims to authority. In short, if a
concern for pleasure seems, as Runciman asserted, squishy, frivolous, and unprofessional, then what is likely to seem serious and professional and legitimating and thus at a premium during the vertiginous fragmenting of the old disciplinary machinery is the pain we can inflict on each other and on those in least position to fight back—on students.

The hazy binary of pleasure and convention potentially exacts a particularly sad cost among our first-year composition students: a too rigorous suspicion of pleasure in the name of convention-based writing (whatever that might mean) may lead some students to see academic convention as an alien monolith, an infernal machine so intimidating that they succumb to an anxiety that altogether undermines their ability to write. The effects of this acute anxiety about institutional codes have been well-documented in a number of studies. Perl’s work in the late-70s with unskilled writers concludes that what garbles their prose is precisely this anxiety, and Mike Rose argues that an overly rigid understanding of convention is a key source of the unproductive anguish popularly identified as writer’s block.

On the other hand, a classroom too enamored of pleasure (understood as the relinquishing of all regard for convention) creates problems just as grave. One can imagine students so absorbed in their own affective relation to their emerging texts that they glibly forfeit the goal of communicating with an audience. Sometimes such students begin to identify themselves as “creative writers” and some of these, in turn, will join for a season or more the vast, anonymous ranks of those who flood the small literary presses with unpublishable verbal doodles and suffer disappointments that ultimately arrest altogether the process of cultivating rhetorical skill—a fate finally not much different from the student who was silenced by intimidation.

To fend off such possibilities, we need to define the pleasures of composing more precisely; we need to articulate in more precise ways how they relate to “discipline;” we need to situate both concepts before our students in ways that are attuned to the new relationships between kinds of academic work. Intuitively, the task of resolving this binary may seem to be relatively simple, for as Joseph Williams asserts, “Pleasure and the kinds of clarity required by academic audiences are by no means mutually exclusive” (x). However, despite their intuitive compatibility, the weight of much contemporary theory about composing favors the binary of pleasure versus discipline. Both those who are most suspicious of writerly pleasure and those who most ardently advocate it understand pleasurable writing as antagonistic to conventional writing. In other words, figures who agree on little else agree on the ultimate incompatibility of institutional norms and writerly pleasure.
Discipline and Pleasure

For example, when Henry Giroux attacks the sort of pedagogy that “rests, on the premise that there is a causal relation between making students feel good and improving their writing abilities” (218), his central complaint is that such pleasure-centered or “romantic” pedagogies suppress the concept of conventional discourse as “the constituting medium that relates individuals to social practice” (218). Such a pedagogy, he adds, perpetuates a drastically “truncated notion of power and praxis” (219). Much the same point is made by David Bartholomae. Any pedagogy that emphasizes the individual feelings of the students makes them suckers, and, I think, it makes them powerless, at least to the degree that it makes them blind to tradition, power and authority as they are present in language and culture. (218-219)

Prominent advocates of writerly pleasure describe it in ways that are tacitly complicit with those who are skeptical: they agree that it is antagonistic to conventional discourse and thus can have little place in the academic institution. For example, in a well-known work on pleasure, Roland Barthes cryptically equates it with the refusal of logical consistency, with the collapse of formal systems, with a kind of “drifting”: “[it occurs] whenever I do not respect the whole...” (18). A deliberately non-rational “goofing off” or “fooling around,” pleasure is the inverse of academic activity. As if acknowledging its inevitable marginality among academics and closing the subject altogether, Barthes insists that pleasure can have little role in institutional practice because “it is not a science, a method, a research, a pedagogy...” (60). Although Barthes primarily addresses the pleasures of reading, he has helped to entrench the binary opposition of academic writing and pleasurable writing.

Barthes’s thoughts on pleasure find not only application but extension and radicalization in the particular practice of writing called *ecriture feminine*. Writers in this mode seek to disrupt, fracture, and subvert the discursive norms—i.e., rationality, clarity—that they feel privilege the detached, disembodied Cartesian subject who dominates Western culture and marginalizes women and other minorities. A more definitive description of this mode, however, is impossible: as Helene Cixous insists, “[T]his practice will never be able to be theorized, enclosed, coded” (92), much less turned into a discipline. *Ecriture feminine* is perhaps best understood as not so much a theory of writing as “a language ‘event’ that, in its more accessible moments, unleashes a damning critique and denunciation” of the norms of the academy (Worsham 82). What is at once a key metaphor for this kind of writing is also one of its chief practices and goals: laughter (Worsham 89). In short, this rhetoric maximally values the pleasures of writing and, at the
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same time, rigorously opposes all academic norms. Thus, those who advocate writerly pleasure agree with those who distrust it: such pleasure is at odds with the institutional conventions that shape and enable communication. Surely, the work of reconciling this conflict will be difficult.

Many, however, have begun to sound the call for a deeper understanding of these issues. For a number of years now, appeals to extend the phenomenological line of thought by which Sondra Perl introduced the concept of the “felt sense” to Composition Theory have been a commonplace. Last year, Victor Vitanza, working not in phenomenology but in the history of Rhetoric and in contemporary continental theory, published a book-length call to his colleagues to “vomit up” all that we have historically held down, all that we repress, exclude, or negate in the process of founding our discipline, our institutions, even our individuated subjectivities. And what we repress, Vitanza argues, is Desire, which he casts in terms of a certain Blakean “exuberance,” a Nietzschean “energy,” an Ovidian or Dionysian charge of erotic, transformative force that, like a bad penny, forever returns—whether we acknowledge it or not. Similarly, Jane Gallop argues by way of psychoanalysis that acts of reading and writing, at their best, fairly hum with an intensity directly analogous to sexual pleasure; and the pedagogical situation, too, at its most intense and most productive, is flushed with something akin to erotic tension. Working in yet another key, Stephen Katz has recently explored via reader-response theory and composition theory, the affective register in readers and writers in terms of temporality and music-theory.

For my purposes, however, the most interesting treatment of these themes—one that I must summarize in a little more detail—is Lynn Worsham’s 1993 essay, “Emotion and Pedagogic Violence.” Worsham defines emotion as

the tight braid of affect and judgment, socially constructed and lived bodily, through which the symbolic takes hold of and binds the individual, in complex and contradictory ways, to the social order and its structure of meanings. (121)

What shapes emotion, argues Worsham, is violence—both the literal violence that occurs within families and on the street, and the usually more symbolic varieties of the workplace and the classroom. Worsham insists that we see violence as synonymous with pedagogy, both being a sort of ritual scarification by which the dominant discourses “maintain and reinforce the reigning social, economic, [and] political arrangements as legitimate when in fact they are entirely arbitrary” (124). Worsham argues that we must somehow “dissolve the relation between pedagogy and violence” (122) by turning our attention to the nuances of the affective domain. She is, however, most suspicious of those pedagogies
that merely mask their inherent violence by pretending to be “decentered” or “multi-cultural” or “feminist” or “expressive.” Such pedagogies are not only egregiously deceptive, but, worse, they perpetuate the binary of emotion versus rationality, of pleasure versus the authoritative conventions that enable meaning. By disconnecting emotion from meaning this way, they devalue emotion and open the way for still greater violence, when the dominant ideology finally comes to retrieve the affective domain this pedagogy pretends to have permanently freed. In fact, Worsham is most suspicious of the attempt to think about pedagogy in terms of pleasure, desire, and the experience of empowerment: it smacks of the “feel-goodism” and “sensitivity training” by which contemporary industrial settings devalue and disarm the anger and bitterness that might otherwise form the seed-bed for social change; this facile “feel-goodism” smacks too of the general waning-of-affect or birth-of-cool that Jameson associates with the oceanic commodification and consumerist sublime of advanced capital, and thus it panders directly to the pop-culture markets that we should instead challenge and resist.

To condemn, however, a pedagogy rooted in pleasure (and, more broadly, emotion, desire, experience, and empowerment) as distinct from another pedagogy rooted in critique, resistance, and a more authentic recognition of the universality of violence is to neglect, I think, the point that Foucault makes in the epigraph above: critique and resistance, like transgression, are made possible only by the disciplinary regimes they pretend to target; and therefore the affirmation of our experience of these discourse-machines is a necessary and perhaps more trustworthy first-step in transforming them and us, in delivering ourselves from the debilitating, binary logic of “us versus them.” As useful as such binaries and taxonomies are for generating broad and profound generalization, they may conceal as much as they reveal, and I feel that we have much to gain by setting these aside. 5

We can gain, in fact, precisely what Worsham asks us to develop: a much more nuanced understanding of emotion in general and the pleasures of empowerment in particular, one that runs much deeper than the facile “feel-goodism” that Worsham rightly decries. As Worsham argues via Kristeva, subject-formation in general and learning in particular often unfold as a violent repudiation of the maternal, a horrified recoiling at the abject absence of symbols with which to mark our origins. But I think Kristeva, too, would argue that important experiences with language take the form of a radical desubjectification, a jouissance which breaks up the structures that contain the subject and allows them to reconstitute themselves a moment later in slightly different form. Kristeva links this ecstatic process to revolution, and such a process is not wholly different from critique. 6 Given the awe-
some forces of advanced capital and consumer culture, this process may be, at least at this stage, the most we can realistically hope to encourage in our classrooms.

In sum, we can produce the more nuanced understanding of pleasure and empowerment for which Worsham appeals, and we can partially undo the relation between pedagogy and violence, but only if we accept as working premises, first, Foucault's insight in my epigraph above that asks us to surrender convenient binaries like "inside / outside" and "empowerment / resistance" and, second, Kristeva's notion that the lived experience of social change is orgasmic.

What's more, I think we might do well to seek a more precise and nuanced rendering of the particular pleasures of writing by suspending taxonomic models in order to consider how we have understood writerly pleasure historically. If pleasure has been understood recently as the opposite of the institutional norms that govern writing, then I propose that we can find out a great deal more about writerly pleasure by exploring exactly those places where writing imbibes or inscribes that which is presumably its opposite: more specifically, I suggest that we consider not the history of Rhetoric but the history of Rhetoric's Other, which is "Magic"; and that we consider too writing's Other, which is sound.

Magic and Sound

Magic, according to Daniel O'Keefe, is best understood as the manipulation of social reality via agreed-upon symbols (15). As such, magic is an apt analogy for all rhetorical practice, and indeed this analogy figures prominently in well-known texts of Classical antiquity, the Renaissance, and the twentieth century. Both Plato's and Gorgias' understandings of Rhetoric hinge upon it, as does that of the fifteenth-century Italian, Marsilio Ficino. In the twentieth century, Kenneth Burke and, most recently, William Covino have also emphasized this analogy.

This compelling emphasis on the structural analogy between Rhetoric and magic, however, may have diverted our attention from how and why concepts of magic entered discussions of Rhetoric in the first place: magic originally appeared as a metaphor for pleasure. Ironically, some of the earliest Rhetorical theory that we have—that of Gorgias de Leontini—not only centralizes the issue of pleasure but also defines it as compatible with and even dependent upon the powers of convention. But Gorgias, as I'll show, explicitly defined this convention-based pleasure, too, in terms of magic, and this association with the magical has marginalized the discussion of writing-as-pleasure even to this day. For Rhetoric only achieved "disciplinarity," as we'll see, by stripping itself of all links to the magical—which is to say, all links to the convention-based pleasures of Gorgias.
Indeed, in a gesture that is perhaps a vestige of this early renunciation, concepts of magic are evoked in Rhetoric today almost exclusively for derisive purposes. Specifically, we refer to the “magical” view of writing to designate pedagogies that naively assume fully-formed texts to spring forth from writers spontaneously and inexplicably (see Young). The anti-magical notion of writing, according to this logic, rejects the idea of writers pulling texts out of thin air, opting instead for a view of composing as a process—a process informed, even governed by particular social situations and institutions. This line of thought likely derives its notion of magic from Paulo Freire’s idea of “magical consciousness,” a term that designates the mesmerized passivity and abject resignation of illiterate peasants. The opposite of “magical consciousness” is “critical consciousness” (Pedagogy 81), an intellectual awakening that Freire connects to the advent among the oppressed of literacy (Education 43). In this light, a magical approach to writing is seen as doubly contradictory: first, magical ways of thinking characterize a pre-literate or oral milieu, as opposed to literate culture; second, magic denotes the unknowable, the impossibility of any sort of active, thoughtful intervention, a resignation rather than an approach. Magic, in this view, is precisely what writing pedagogy would hope to oppose.

Both at the beginnings of Rhetoric and at certain points throughout its history, however, magic has been invoked as a metaphor for pleasure. For example, Gorgias described the pleasures of language in terms of magic:

> Speech is a powerful lord, which by means of the finest and most invisible body effects the divinest works: it can stop fear and banish grief and create joy and nurture pity. . . . Words are bearers of pleasure and banishers of pain . . . for the power of incantation is wont to beguile [the soul] and persuade it and alter it by witchcraft. (41)

Over the centuries that followed, this figurative link between magic and pleasure sometimes hardened into literal—if somewhat ambiguous—identity. During the Renaissance, Ioan Couliano argues, magic “is simply eroticism applied, directed, and aroused by its performer” (xviii), and eros here means “sensual pleasure” (95). And this magical work, like rhetorical work, proceeded as the manipulation of symbols, especially words (Covino 40-46). In the eighteenth century, according to Anya Taylor, poets in particular became increasingly drawn to magic and witchcraft for an understanding of their own pleasure-centered linguistic craft: both writers and magicians seek to wield words and symbols in conjunction with “ecstatic possessed states of mind” (5). This way of understanding writing answered “a longing for the unpredictable, the distant, the vital, the turbulent, or the powerful” in an age that otherwise sought to reduce all phenomena to the conventions of rationality, science, and observable proof (3). This occult movement
gathered momentum through the nineteenth century as writers increasingly turned to ancient and esoteric knowledge-systems for a kind of education in rhetoric, an education in how to contact the Other. In 1890, Anatole France would declare that

a certain knowledge of the occult sciences became necessary for the understanding of a great number of literary works of this period. Magic occupied a large place in the imagination of our poets and novelists. The vertigo of the invisible seized them, the idea of the unknown haunted them. (quoted in Eliade 51)

What’s most important to note about the long historical evocation of magic as a metaphor for pleasure is that this metaphor casts pleasure not in simple, naive terms as an escape from convention, as “freedom.” Rather, if pleasure is something like magic, an occult science or practice, then pleasure, too, must arise as something like a discipline, an affair entirely conventional.8

Even today, talk of the “muses” and of “inspiration” occurs frequently in popular lore about writing. Working somewhere between the popular and the theoretical, Peter Elbow concludes Writing With Power with a chapter called “Writing and Magic.” In it, he describes the “magic” of words in highly sensual, even erotic terms: “magic” has to do with tapping into the “inner juice” of language, with the “gentle tug” that words can make us feel (357, 358). He notes that when our writing lacks “magic,” it affords no pleasure either: that is, we notice magic’s dissipation by

little tell-tale movements in the body that somehow manifest discomfort. . . [W]e are just the tiniest bit flustered and uncomfortable and even though the reader is not there to notice a slipperiness in our eye movements or a restlessness in our hands, still there are comparable micro-fidgets in our syntax and diction. (366-367)

If the absence of “magic” leads to a flustered, uncomfortable experience of the composing process and a composition that is itself characterized by “micro-fidgets,” then magic must connote the opposite: a pleasurable experience of composing and a composition that is comparatively more pleasurable (less “fidgety”) for the reader. For Elbow, then, the experience of “magic” is the experience of pleasure in composing, but not just the pleasure of the writer alone. Somehow, it is the pleasure of sharing pleasure with the Other, a quasi-erotic contact with that which is beyond the author. And, importantly, it registers in the text as the absence of “micro-fidgets in our syntax and diction”—that is, as the smooth engagement with convention. Indeed, convention is the conduit between self and other, the bed, as it were, in which contact occurs. Thus, we find buried in Elbow’s evocation of magic something akin to what, as we’ll
see, has been there since Gorgias—a potentially complex theory about writerly pleasure as an intersubjective phenomena, perhaps the experience of intersubjectivity itself, that is made possible wholly by convention.

In fact, if we look closely at the earliest manifestation of the magical strand in the history of Rhetoric—that is, at the ideas of Gorgias—and the cultural conditions that gave rise to these ideas, we can detail this point in important ways. Gorgias sought to understand the three way relation between author, text, and reader by drawing on what he knew about how verbal performance worked in pre-literate cultures. He based his theory on what Walter Ong, some twenty-five centuries later, would call the “psychodynamics of orality.”

Oral cultures rely more heavily on sounded signs than written signs, and sound differs from visual stimuli in ways that are, phenomenologically, quite profound. These two orders of sensory input differ most significantly in the way they interact with desire or the will. For example, you can choose to look to the right or you can choose to look to the left or you can choose to close your eyes to stop looking altogether. Sounds, on the other hand, over-ride the will: if a jet passes overhead right now, you will hear it whether you choose to or not. But you’ll only see it if you willfully get up, go to the window, and search the sky. On relatively rare occasions, visual signs can over-run the will the way sounds do—they can become burned into the memory and continue to haunt the imagination, recurring against the subject’s will or desire; but this over-riding of the will is, of course, the stuff of trauma and nervous pathology. On the other hand, when particularly acute aural information over-rides the will this way, we’re much more inclined to mark this rather more familiar event by tapping our feet or dancing or humming along, and, if the remembered sounds later begin to intrude into consciousness against our will, we accept it as the natural, healthy business of all our favorite tunes.

In short, sounds have a dynamic event-like power, a power to undermine the structures that individuate the subject, a power that is manifest much more rarely and much less pleasantly in visual material. Because of this property of sound, “oral peoples commonly ... consider words to have magical potency” (Ong 32). And thus sound is the core of the magic that consumed Gorgias.

I hardly wish, however, to simply re-entrench the binary of pleasure versus convention by transposing it into the binary of sound/orality/primitivism versus sight/literacy/civilization. For the “magical potency” of sound manifests itself in a very different epistemological and social order than the one inhabited by the literate, one in which sound/pleasure is heavily codified, conventionalized, disciplined, and social. In order to tap into the “magical potency” of language, to make words a powerful tool for knowing, for retaining and commanding information, people began, long
before print emerged as an efficient way to store information, to “stylize” or conventionalize language in particular ways. And this extraordinarily conventional language became the springboard for pleasure.

As Ong writes, in oral cultures, to solve effectively the problem of retaining and retrieving your thoughts, you have to

do your thinking in mnemonic patterns, shaped for ready oral recurrence. Your thought must come into being in heavily rhythmic, balanced patterns, in repetitions and antitheses, in alliterations and assonances . . . in proverbs which are constantly heard by everyone so that they come to mind readily and which themselves are patterned for retention and ready recall. (34)

Such a formulaic, incantatory, performative style of speech is characteristic of magic (O’Keefe 62). Indeed, for oral cultures, knowledge and power are functions of magical songs. And, what’s more, given the “intimate linkage between rhythmic oral patterns, the breathing process, gesture, and the bilateral symmetry of the human body” (Ong 34), we should not be far off in thinking of oral knowledge and power also in terms of dance. Thus, in oral cultures the primary seat of discursive power was probably a magician-class of singers and dancers, a sort of “supernatural” circus troop that facilitated the rhapsodic revelry, the euphoria that constituted communal knowledge. These sources of what Kristeva would call poetic language became for Gorgias the prototype of the rhetor.

Though Ong’s position may call to mind Romanticism’s naive celebration of the pleasures of “uninhibited” primitivism, what he offers is not just the same old song and dance. Instead of depicting the epistemology of the pre-literate as one based in bodily pleasures or instincts that are wholly innocent of the shaping force of culture, Ong insists that this pleasure-based epistemology occurs socially: “An interlocutor is virtually essential: it is hard to talk to yourself for hours on end. Sustained thought in oral cultures is tied to communication” (34). Thus, the ecstasies this epistemology centralizes are therefore intrinsically cultural and language-based—in a word, convention-bound. In fact, they are quite rigidly conventional, anchored in specific patterns of sound, which in turn are tools for memorization.

Gorgias pursued this oral style in his texts. That is, he relied on rhythm, alliteration, repetition, assonance, and rhyme to a notorious degree. In their anthology designed to introduce students to the tradition of rhetorical theory, Bizzell and Herzberg write,

How could the Greek audience have valued so highly a style that jingles unpleasantly to modern ears? One possible answer is that the Greek audience was conditioned by its oral culture to respond to such auditory spellbinding. Listening to Gorgias apparently aroused not only intense sensual pleasure but a shared sense of participation in a kind of wisdom available no other way. The power of his words was akin to magic. (38)
The style of Gorgias undoubtedly "jingles" to modern ears, because modern ears have been influenced significantly by writing. Unlike oral exchange, writing presumes the physical absence of interlocutors and similarly distances language itself, turning it into an object available for dissection and generalization. Thus literacy fosters abstractions that disengage the knowledge from the arena where human beings struggle with one another; it participates in the distancing of the knower from the known (Ong 43). In an oral culture, on the other hand, learning or knowing means achieving a close, empathic, communal identification among knowers and between them and the known, a certain "getting with it" or "getting it together" (Ong 45-6), an immersion in the Other.

According to E. R. Dodds, the Greeks explicitly associated the experience of becoming intertwined with and adrift in that which is Other with the supernatural and, in particular, with the god Dionysius (76). This god aimed to take possession of people and lift them away from themselves, loosing them for a cathartic, literally ex-static leap into the experience of the collective (79). Synthesizing Ong and Dodds, we can assert that the experience of intersubjectivity toward which an oral culture constantly precipitates its members could occur occasionally with a particular acuteness—and when it did, the resulting ecstasies were associated with magic.

Dodds describes Plato as distinguishing carefully between two types of magical frenzy: Apollonian mediumship, which aims at knowledge of the future or of the hidden present, and Dionysian experience, which is pursued only for its own sake (sheer pleasure) or as a means to mental healing, the mantic or mediumistic element being absent or quite subordinate. Mediumship is the rare gift of a chosen few individuals; Dionysiac experience, on the other hand is essentially collective or congregational and is so far from being a rare gift that it is on the contrary defined by its wildly infectious nature (69). Indeed, this contagious quality is not just a secondary attribute—rather, the spread of this ecstatic revelry is the definitive function of the revelry. For such revelry is simply a radical experience of intersubjectivity, the quasi-erotic mixing of self and other. And, again, so powerful was this pleasure that the Greeks associated it with sorcery and with the divine.

The pleasures of writing, then, perhaps occur in a vestigial part of ourselves, a place where the individual will dissolves into an experience of the collective or the Other, an ecstatic experience of connection, of belonging in the broadest sense, of knowing in the most concrete, bodily way—even though this collectivist, bodily mode is the reverse of literacy's will to abstraction and individuation. And surely, this vestigial place has some relation to our ears, for sound, as I've argued, is the conduit into an experience of the crowd.
This transport or transformation into the milieu of the crowd Deleuze associates with the ecstasies of the sorcerer and the shaman, and though he calls it "Becoming-animal," he understands "animal" as always plural, for animals move in packs, herds, swarms, or crowds. Following the Greeks as well as Deleuze, Victor Vitanza also associates this transformative pluralization with Dionysius, and he explicitly associates it, too, with sound, with a steady hum, perhaps implying that when Cixous, for example, urges us to "form one body with letters," she is urging us to attune ourselves to the felt sense of how we sound (Vitanza 66, 341).

What emerges from this sound-based immersion in the crowd is not just poetic language and feelings of group harmony or solidarity. As Charles Segal asserts, Gorgias centralized the rhetor's responsibility to create terpsis or aesthetic pleasure, because pleasure makes persuasion possible. As Segal asserts, for Gorgias,

Successful persuasion . . . works through the aesthetic process of terpsis and the emotions connected with it. . . . [M]ere rational demonstration is insufficient. . . . The fully effective impact . . . involves the emotional participation of the audience, which is made possible by and takes place through the aesthetic pleasure of terpsis. (122)

Thus, pleasure is best understood as the ground on which author and audience merge, a sign that persuasion is succeeding and the crowd is changing. Importantly, the pleasure does not belong to the audience alone—nor to the rhetor alone. Rather, the rhetor must exhibit in herself evidence that she is persuaded or under the charm of the material she is delivering. And this charm resonates with latent capacities in the psyche of each audience member—capacities for similar excitement. In other words, the rhetor's aim—persuasion—is a function of the contagiousness of pleasure, its power to move through a crowd. Pleasure in this sense requires a crowd—the same way that lightning presupposes a dark storm-cloud.

Gorgias' theory directly anticipates the theory that Kristeva sets forth in Revolution in Poetic Language. According to Kristeva, rhythm and other sonic components of language can dissolve the individual will (or "thetic ego"), and when the subject reconstitutes itself, it does so in slightly altered form. On a small scale, these are the mechanics of persuasion; on a large scale, revolution. And the hallmark of both events is the release of energy that Kristeva calls jouissance.

Unfortunately, by the fourth century B. C. E., this magical, transformative "jingling" of Gorgias had already begun to fall from favor: "magicians" came under persecution, and the very name of magic came to be used unfavorably and to be applied to anything that was deceptive (de Romilly 27). Magic picked up the connotation of lying and trickery, of base antagonism to Truth and Goodness. The reasons for this were
assuredly political: the “illusions” created by the oral performances of poets generated a close intertwining of the knowers and known, and therefore the audience was often inclined to imitate characters and events from the poet’s performance. And such imitation or acting, such recreation could easily lead to the subversive phenomenon of audience members entertaining political ideals that conflicted with those of the rulers of the state. Consequently, when Plato designed his ideal Republic, no poet/magician could be included in it: their contagious capacity for pleasure (terpsis / jouissance) and persuasion (social change / revolution) was simply too dangerous to those who preferred that the crowds have a less dynamic experience of convention.

This cultural shift, according to Jacqueline de Romilly, appears most clearly in taxonomies of the arts. Whereas Gorgias had equated rhetoric with both pleasure and medicine, Plato insisted that since what is pleasurable is not necessarily beneficial, not the same as Truth and Goodness, Rhetoric is therefore a spurious art, quite unlike medicine. Plato proceeded to develop the following classification of the arts:

for the body, gymnastic and medicine, with their counterfeits, the art of the cosmetician and dressmaker on the one hand, the art of cooking on the other; for the soul, legislation and corrective justice, with their counterfeits, sophistic and rhetoric. (de Romilly 48-49)

And de Romilly adds,

Yes, these twin arts, sophistic and rhetoric, the proud discoveries of Gorgias and his friends, are reduced to the level of cooking and adorning one’s person—lost, unscientific, dangerous, and low. They teach nothing, they aim at nothing good. The new line that has been drawn by Plato has resulted in their being banished . . . more effectually than their friend poetry could ever be banished from the ideal city. (49)

Magic/rhetoric was largely submerged after Plato—indeed, Rhetoric only survived as a field of inquiry at all thanks to Isocrates’ stripping it of all magical themes and recasting it along the lines of a strict moral system, an assemblage of rigid rules, inflexible plans, and absolutized codes (de Romilly 55). Thus, Western thought removed from the discussion of Rhetoric all possibility of exploring that which had been its first major interest: pleasure. However, we did not simply dismiss pleasure, but rather located it in binary opposition to what, in recent years, has become our central concern: discipline.

Our questions about “discipline,” as I argued at the outset, don’t simply make us suspicious of pedagogies that value writerly pleasure. By distancing ourselves from pleasure this way, we considerably handicap our discussion of discipline. For, at the dawn of what we now recognize as our field, Gorgias asks us to see both pleasure and disci-
pline—the way musicians still do—as entirely intertwined. When we binarize them, we places ourselves, like the character in Kafka’s “Before the Law,” permanently outside the door—the door, that is, that leads to a properly understood pedagogic scene.

Conclusion: Pleasure and Discipline in the Writing Classroom and Other Potentially “Primitive” Places

The move to binarize pleasure and discipline, Jean Baudrillard would claim, marks the transition in the history of the human subject from the “primitive” position to the “modern.” In Symbolic Exchange and Death, Baudrillard distinguishes the primitive subject from the modern, first, by saying that pleasure suffuses the former, whereas the latter is fundamentally alienated and anxiety-stricken. The primitives experience pleasure because they have a relationship with a “double,” whereas the anxiety-stricken moderns have internalized an abstract agency or absolutized some dogmatic code that alienates them from their doubles.

Here, in more detail, is Baudrillard’s description of what he calls the “primitive”:

Between the primitive and its double there is neither a mirror relation nor one of abstraction, as there is between the subject and its spiritual principle, the soul, or between the subject and its moral or psychological principle, consciousness. . . . The double . . . is a partner with whom the primitive has a personal and concrete relationship, sometimes happy, sometimes not, a certain type of visible exchange (word, symbol, gesture) with an invisible part of himself. (141)

This relation, though “sometimes happy, sometimes not,” is implicitly pleasurable for Baudrillard, as its failure produces a profound anxiety. This failure and ensuing anxiety happens when one “internalizes an abstract agency . . . to which everything else is subordinated” (142). This is the advent of the “soul” or of “consciousness” (142), and with it the subject undergoes a very real confinement and separation. Baudrillard writes,

[The things closest to us, such as our own bodies, the body itself, our voice and our appearance, are separated from us to the precise extent that we internalize the soul (or any other equivalent agency or abstraction) as the ideal principle (or absolute dogma) of subjectivity. This is what kills off the proliferation of doubles and spirits, consigning them once again to the spectral, embryonic corridors of unconscious folklore, like the ancient gods that Christianity . . . transformed into demons. (142)

Baudrillard argues that our entire culture is haunted by the spectres of these alienated doubles, creating anxiety that wells up around the most familiar things—“our bodies, the body itself, our voices and our appearance”(142). Baudrillard opens rich possibilities for us, however, by
casting pleasure as interaction with the double. But what does it mean to interact with the double? He provides only a scant hint, if any at all, when he asserts that to interact with the double is "to speak to one's body and to speak to language in a duel [sic] mode" (141).

Perhaps Perl's discussion of how she enables students to write in relation with the felt sense offers us a better picture of Baudrillard's idea by contextualizing it in our classrooms. In a closely related article called, "Teaching the Other Self: The Writer's First Reader," Donald Murray describes the composing process this way:

The act of writing might be described as a conversation between two workmen, muttering to each other at the work-bench. The self speaks, the other self listens and responds. The self proposes, the other self evaluates. The two selves collaborate. (140)

We can valuably extend and further combine the ideas of Perl, Murray, and Baudrillard by detailing Mary Douglas's idea of the "two bodies," and these ideas in turn can give us yet more detailed understanding of how to construct a writing pedagogy that makes sense of the relations between pleasure and discipline.

Douglas would suggest that the body to whom we speak, when we speak to the double or the felt sense or the other self, is not the literal flesh-and-blood, experiential envelope in which we live, but rather another sort of "body" that constrains and enables all experience of our literal flesh and blood: this other sort of "body" is the body of the community, and it exists in an interanimating dynamic with our literal flesh-and-blood. Douglas writes,

The social body constrains the way the physical body is perceived. The physical experience of the body, always modified by the social categories through which it is known, sustains a particular view of society. There is a continual exchange of meanings between these two kinds of bodily experience. (93)

To say that "The social body constrains the way the physical body is perceived" (93), is to point out that "every kind of action carries the imprint of learning, from feeding to washing, from repose to movement and, above all, sex" (93). Unsurprisingly, different cultures construct their sense of the body differently; they disagree, for example, on the kinds of care it requires, the amount of sleep it needs, the amount of pain it can withstand, the stages it should go through, etc. (93). In sum, bodies are constructed by cultures, constrained and enabled by a web of convention.

However, the reverse, Douglas asserts, is also true: "The physical experience of the body...sustains a particular view of society" (93). The social order is an "etherealization of the body" (100), a "sublimation"
of the body (112); indeed, the "body is a microcosm of society" (101).
Douglas writes, "The relations of head to feet, of brain and sexual organs, of mouth and anus . . . express the relevant patterns of [social] hierarchy" (99). Similarly, Elaine Scarry describes artifacts of human "culture" as projections of the various parts of the human body: the skin as model for bandages and clothing, the heart and circulatory system for pumps and irrigation systems, the eye for microscopes, telescopes, and cameras, the nervous system for communication systems, and so on (282).

So pervasive are these "projected" versions of bodily parts that, Scarry argues, we ultimately project onto all the artifacts of the "made" world—culture—the central attribute of the human body, its sentience (285). In fact, assumptions about the sentience of made objects, which many might associate with the animism of primitive peoples or with the "pathetic fallacy" of poets, have pervaded Western legal codes at least since Plato in such concepts as object-responsibility and its recent descendent, product liability (Scarry 293). Scarry notes that even today, if one sits in a chair and the chair suddenly breaks, we respond to this failure in the chair's "awareness" by treating it as though it were nonetheless fully aware and sentient: we angrily kick the fragments of the chair and curse their "stupidity," as if the chair could feel the pain of the kick and thus satisfy our appetite for vengeance and our more general need to experience the artifacts of culture as being as animate, sentient, and knowing as our own bodies are (296). Our bodies thus provide the model upon which we know and identify the human creations of the external world.

These then are what Douglas calls the "two bodies": the body of societal convention which mediates all knowledge of and experience of the human body; and the human body which provides a model or frame upon which the social body is identified, organized, and understood. Between these "two bodies," according to Douglas, there is a constant exchange of meanings (93), for they derive from and reinforce each other (97). Indeed, so closely related are these two bodies that they can be said to function, in Baudrillard's sense, as each other's "doubles." When one is deliberately engaged with the continuous exchange of meanings between the two bodies, one speaks to one's double (the felt sense, the other self), and this dynamic interanimating process, this quasi-erotic mixing of self and other, is the experience of pleasure.

In fact, Douglas argues that the more the community's conventions appear to be flexible and negotiable and open to direct address, the more a corresponding laxity or potential for tension-release will manifest itself in the body of the individual to whom it so appears. In extreme cases, the differentiating structures of both bodies are experienced as dissolving altogether, allowing the two bodies to fuse and a lassitude to ensue in the subject that we identify, ultimately, as trance, a wild
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discharge of energy that can also take the shape of rhapsodic frenzy.10
The dissolution of these differentiating structures should not be cast as
a dizzying star-burst of anarchy, however, but an immersion in the
collective, an apotheosis infinitely social and conventional.

How do we create what Baudrillard would call a “primitive”
classroom in which convention appears flexible, negotiable, and open
to address? I think that by foregrounding precisely the sort of conflicts
and questions about disciplinary identity that I discussed at the outset
we can create an environment rich in opportunities for pleasure: Gerald
Graff calls this approach “teaching the conflicts.” In addition to Graff’s
strategy, we might trouble the binary of writing and speech, emphasizing
the way stylistic principles and poetic devices can enable us to play
around with the sound of our texts, immersing ourselves in a dialogic
experience of the material substance of discourse in ways that render it
more flexible and ourselves more prone to pleasure (see Elbow 1985).
We can also precipitate such experience by emphasizing the distinction
Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford adopt from Ong between the “audience
addressed and the audience invoked.” This latter is an internalized
other, perhaps akin to the double or the felt sense, that reads and
monitors our activity from a position “outside” it. This “audience
invoked” is a kind of authority that, as Worsham points out, can become
“disembodied and abstract as a result of bureaucratization;” but, once
the student embodies it, it can form the necessary rallying point for the
subsequent rejection of authority (142).11 In such a model, pleasure is
not flatly dead-locked in a binary opposition with discipline. On the
contrary, both “bodies” move in an inter-animating spiral in which each
continuously opens the other to new territories, to transgression or
becoming as the “solar inversion of satanic denial.”

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Notes

1 Perhaps this conflict is the basis of the well-known Elbow-Bartholomae debate
that unfolded in CCC February 1995.
2 But before such work can begin, we need basic working definitions of both
terms. “Discipline” will stand for a broad range of abstract structures—everything
from methods of research to rules of grammatical correctness, from conventions of
discursive genres to principles of stylistic clarity, from strategies for invention to
boundaries of discourse communities. In short, “discipline” will serve to designate
any and all devices or codes by which we produce, recognize, and circulate meanings
in the academy. I will use the word interchangeably with convention. Yet more far­
ranging senses of the word “Discipline” come to mind for Foucauldians, and I
welcome them here: in Power/Knowledge, Foucault argues that discipline operates
in ways that go beyond the discursive and even beyond the subject’s own mental
representations to engage, mark, and direct the actual physical body itself (186). Foucault thus would likely claim that the ways we carry ourselves physically in the classroom, for instance, are a function of discipline, as is our sorrowful squeamishness in the face of “inspiration” or pleasure. When I use the word “pleasure,” I refer to the positive, bodily feeling of exhilaration that Perl identifies as signalling for the writer that things are going well, a feeling that we traditionally oppose to all disciplinary constraints, social orders, and audiences, even though the etymology of the word “pleasure” derives from a root meaning “mutual understanding.”

As Richard Rorty argues throughout “Science as Solidarity,” the greater the number and the diversity of the people who believe x, the more objectively true x seems to be. In this light, the incompatibility of pleasure and convention seems so entrenched that many consider it a simple fact of “reality.”

Worsham’s model here is the Kristeva of The Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection, in which Kristeva argues that subjectivities are formed only in the repudiation of the maternal, an event of extraordinary violence and horror, the psychic equivalent of the Big Bang.

Worsham’s essay is based closely on the taxonomy that Bourdieu and Passerson present in Reproduction in Education, Society, and Culture.

Deleuze calls it de- and reterritorialization.

When I asked a couple of my friends who are improvisational jazz musicians for their responses to this idea of pleasure as a function of convention and discipline, they found it so obvious as to be mundane. When I tried to explain why the point is so important and new to the contemporary discourse of Rhetoric and Composition, I had to surrender after a while: they couldn’t understand how pleasure could be understood any other way.

But this raises a most interesting question: must the rhetor actually experience the pleasure or can she simply fake it and achieve the same results? Gorgias would seem to imply that as long as the audience believes in the pleasure of the rhetor, the ultimate authenticity of this pleasure is inconsequential. In this sense, the theory of Gorgias is rooted in the signifier, not the signified—which is appropriate, given his emphasis on style and his insistence that there is no knowable, articulable Truth. In such an epistemology, performance supersedes reference and nullifies all questions of authenticity.

Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of the Body Without Organs probably overlaps considerably with what I have just outlined. See also the third chapter of Freud’s Totem and Taboo, in which he discusses magic in general and, most relevantly, an ecstatic condition he calls “omnipotence of thought.”

Editor’s Note: See Worsham’s revision and development of her earlier treatment of these issues in “Going Postal: Pedagogic Violence and the Schooling of Emotion” (JAC 18.2: 213-245).

Works Cited


