On the Discipline and Pleasure of Perilous Acts

Lynn Worsham

Thought is no longer theoretical. As soon as it functions it offends or reconciles, attracts or repels, breaks, dissociates, unites or reunites; it cannot help but liberate and enslave. Even before prescribing, suggesting a future, saying what must be done, even before exhorting or merely sounding an alarm, thought, at the level of its existence, in its very dawning, is in itself an action—a perilous act.

Michel Foucault

Example is the school of mankind, and they will learn at no other.

Edmund Burke

In "Discipline and Pleasure: ‘Magic’ and Sound," T.R. Johnson seeks "a more precise and nuanced rendering of the particular pleasures of writing" and a pedagogy adequate to those pleasures (438). He asserts that those of us who study and teach writing probably chose this profession as a result of some significant experience of the pleasures of writing, pleasures that we seek to share with our students. Grounding his comments thus—in pleasure and experience—Johnson argues that we nonetheless have had difficulty taking pleasure seriously, as a serious subject of theory and pedagogy, because thought has been impeded, if not perilously foreclosed, by what he claims is a rather entrenched binary opposition between pleasure and discipline. This opposition, he observes, pervades thought not only in composition studies but also in critical theory, and it leads, he charges, to the suppression of writerly pleasure through a mistaken and anxious emphasis on teaching the discipline of conventional academic discourse as if it were the singular source of rhetorical power. In his effort to move us toward a "properly understood pedagogic scene," one that truly grasps the "interanimating" relation between pleasure and discipline, which is the overarching goal and direction of his argument, Johnson first seeks to demonstrate the existence and operation of the unfortunate binary opposition between pleasure and discipline (446, 449). Here Johnson offers a number of examples, or cites a number of exemplary texts, that function in his argument as evidence and illustration of the existence of this opposition and its perils. Once he sets forth the problem, framing it as a false binary opposition between pleasure and discipline, he proceeds to the serious work of his argument: a theory of
pleasure, of writerly pleasure, understood as an intersubjective phenomenon that is made possible by what he reveals is the "magic" of discipline (441). In moving from the problem to the alternative conceptualization of the relation between pleasure and discipline, Johnson's argument is unsurprising in its form as well as clear and cogent in its content. His is a model of well-disciplined scholarly argument. His is an exemplary text.

It is the use of example and exemplification in Johnson's argument to which I will draw your attention here. Yet, in doing so, I hope to make a larger, more general point about the use of example in composition scholarship. In other words, in what follows, Johnson's text functions in two ways: as the occasion for my comments and the primary text to which I respond; and, perhaps more importantly, as an example, a telling example, in support of a larger point that I wish to make about exemplification in scholarly argument. Certainly, to make the general point most forcefully, or even in a minimally compelling way, I would need to offer additional examples, beyond what is available in one scholar's single text. But inasmuch as my purpose here is to be suggestive and, indeed, provocative rather than persuasive, I will ask your leave to fully develop and thoroughly support my general argument at another time.

I should say, too (and in the interest of the scholarly ethos I wish to advance, if not exemplify), that one reason I am motivated to write this particular response to Johnson's article is that I find my work serving as an example in his text, as a key witness for the prosecution of his argument—specifically, my essay "Emotion and Pedagogic Violence," published in 1993 in Discourse, a journal of theory and cultural studies. Before I say more about Johnson's reference to my work and his specific deployment of example, I want to outline a small part, necessarily selective, of what might be said about the rhetoric of this important figure of thought.

For Example
The use of example in contemporary scholarly argument—in composition studies and in the humanities, more generally—is so common, so frequent that it typically goes unnoticed and unexamined in our thought about thinking, in our thinking about the conventions that typify disciplinary discourse. We also use example rather freely and effortlessly in our everyday speech and in the same way we use it in scholarly argument: to ground our thinking, to illustrate or dramatize an idea or viewpoint, to supply concrete detail, to educate and aid understanding, to make the given argument more compelling. Like Poe's purloined letter, example is so obvious and unobtrusive that it seems almost invisible, and, yet, it typically announces itself and openly discloses itself in a "for example" (Lyons 5). So routine is exemplification that it seems to need neither definition nor the kind of scrutiny a theory would
offer. Yet, Aristotle would have us think explicitly about example. He identifies it as one of two general modes of persuasion, as one of two general disciplines of thought for matters about which there can be no absolute certainty. (The other, of course, is enthymeme.) For Aristotle, rhetorical example is a primary means of organizing and understanding a novel and indeterminate situation or experience. Reasoning from part to part through exemplification, the rhetor uses example, Scott Consigny explains, as a "lens" or "screen" through which to impose an order on or give structure to a situation, experience, or text, foregrounding some aspects and minimizing or ignoring others, and thereby telling us in what direction to think, while charging our thought with crucial emotional valences (129; see also White 91). “This imputation of structure,” Consigny argues, “is the proof, insofar as we accept it.” To accept the rhetor's example(s), in other words, is to see the given situation or experience or text in a certain way.

In a study of exemplification in early modern European literature, John Lyons underscores the overall function of example: “Example is so central to systems of belief that we occasionally think of it as the direct manifestation of reality when, in fact, example is a way of taking our beliefs about reality and reframing them into something that suits the direction of a text” (ix; emphasis added). Lyons goes on to conclude that for this reason example may qualify as “the most ideological of figures, in the sense of being the figure that is most intimately bound to a representation of the world and that most serves as a veil for the mechanics of that representation.” Although Aristotle, the inveterate taxonomist, divides example into two kinds—historical-factual example, which, he says, tells of things that have happened in the past; and fictive-poetic example, which is invented to support the argument at hand—an example, clearly, does not just happen; it is not found. It is always made, crafted. The selection of an example is at once its creation. A principal conceptual instrument, a cunning mode of advocacy, example is surely a perilous act. To understand the perilous operation of representation one must grasp example as the place where history and fiction come together. We would do well to be wary of example's presence and operation, especially in scholarly discourse, whose raison d'être is to produce knowledge through better, more accurate representations of the world (see Haraway).

Example's ideological operation may hide behind a veil of openness and transparency, but its easy identification is a consequence not only of the fact that example tends to announce itself as such. It is also a consequence of the fact that we typically develop, as a part of linguistic competence, a tacit understanding of its structure, or the structure it gives to thought. Lyons makes explicit that tacit understanding with this helpful definition: “An example is a dependent statement qualifying a
more general and independent statement by naming a member of the
class established by the general statement. An example cannot exist
without (a) a general statement and (b) an indication of this subordinate
status” (Xi; emphasis added). The nature of the qualification—that is to
say, the nature of the relationships between general statement and
subordinate statement—are too various to be included in a general
deinition of example, as Lyons points out. What can be said categori-
cally is that example has no autonomous standing; it does not exist
independently of its relation to a general statement. Whatever is
marked, implicitly or explicitly, as example functions as a vector
pointing to a principle or conclusion for which it serves as support,
illustration, evidence (see Gelley). If an example serves more nearly as
an exemplar, a model or paradigm, the vector points back to a source
(Plato’s Ideal Forms, for example). In pointing to a source from which
it derives or a conclusion toward which it moves, example gives a kind
of vertical dimension or direction to thought or to a text. Furthermore,
if example by definition inscribes dominant and subordinate relations
between statements, one might be tempted to say that there is a discurs-
ive micropolitics operating in the practice of exemplification.

Literary studies, for example—to the extent that it would move
beyond mere paraphrase—makes theoretical statements about literary
texts which thereby function as examples of more general statements.
Critical theory itself can be summed up rather handily (and perilously)
as an approach that moves forward by selecting and deconstructing or
demystifying (these are very different operations) exemplary texts—
texts that have been made exemplary by a dominant interpretive com-
munity as well as texts that are made exemplary by their very selection
as examples to be deconstructed or demystified (see Lyons). The work
of theory in the humanities is, in large part, a labor of exemplification
that makes the object text subordinate to the general principle or
conclusion to be illustrated, proved, dramatized, demystified, or
deconstructed—for example, logocentrism (and its operative principle
of binary opposition), patriarchy, or the political unconscious. Many
scholars find this arrangement untenable and rage against the age of
theory that has made canonical texts (mostly literary and philosophical)
subsidiary to the now privileged work of theory. They make theory yet
another example of the loss of standards—aesthetic, axiological, episte-
mological, and ethical—and yet they remain unaware of, or at least
silent about, their own engagement in the discursive politics of exem-
plification. Composition studies—narrowly conceived here for the
purpose of this discussion as the study and teaching of effective writ-
ing—locates the student text (as example) within larger descriptive,
evaluative, and pedagogical categories. This arrangement is often
complicated by a disciplinary economy in which student writing is
tacitly or explicitly held to the gold standard of the true exemplar: literature. This situation is even further complicated by internal political struggles in composition studies that draw the line of affiliation between scholars/theorists, on one side, and teachers, on the other, and that then make teachers the true exemplars of the field (Johnson 433; Bartholomae). Hardly a minor form, exemplification seems, at times, to be the only game in town.

There is more, then, to be said about the micropolitics of exemplification, more to say about its rhetorical effectivity. Example may also be said to have a horizontal dimension or direction—a vector pointing outward that reaches beyond the text to a reader or audience for whom the example has been selected and prepared (see Gelley). If contact between text and reader/audience is to be established and maintained, if influence or persuasion is to be achieved, the choice of example and the number of examples presented matters as much as placement and the way in which an example is rendered. The choice of an example involves the presentation of one member of a class of which the others are left unmentioned, but in so doing the example promises the reader/audience that there are others waiting offstage whether or not there actually are (see Lyons). And this implied promise, itself part of example's quiet rhetoric, moves the reader/audience further along in the direction of the text. Furthermore, example is a discursive gesture that moves outside the discourse of the writer/speaker toward support in a common textual or material world. Like quotation, example involves isolating an element (the example) from one (con)text and placing it in a new (con)text within which example is visible as example precisely because it stands as a fragment of another (con)text. In other words, example, like quotation, is a “cut” from another (con)text, as Lyons suggests (28). It is a cut made to serve the direction of the new (con)text. And, further, it does its part to cut—to create or demarcate—a possible common ground that may be shared by writer and reader, speaker and audience. Because of its crucial role in establishing contact and common ground with the reader/audience, the absence of an example where it is wanted is itself significant and part of the micropolitics of exemplification. We would do well, then, to pay close attention to the places where exemplification does not happen.

Clearly, there is a logic or discipline of exemplification (even a pleasure)—a way of working with it to maximize its structuring potential as well as its rhetorical effectivity. Reading Burke alongside Foucault, we might say that example is a school for thought. More precisely stated, exemplification does not serve to liberate thought or to proscribe and enslave it; example is an act of thought liberating or enslaving itself. Typically working its discursive magic out in the open, right under our noses, quietly, without calling much attention to itself,
example works in much the same way ideology works. In fact, it is ideology at work in a most familiar, everyday, and pervasive form. Scholarly writing—which, to my way of thinking, should aspire to be an exemplar of the most thoughtful writing—should therefore strive to become the kind of writing that constantly and continually puts ideology in peril. An important part of this project is to question how scholars use examples and what we learn and teach through our use of examples. If there is a logic, or structure, to example as well as a politics, there is also an ethics of exemplification and, more generally, an ethics of scholarship. To use example thoughtfully, mindful of the perils implied and enacted in its use—this is at least one (metacritical) goal for scholarship, and therefore it should be one criterion for judging scholarly writing.

A Telling Example
T.R. Johnson’s "Discipline and Pleasure: ‘Magic’ and Sound" offers what I view as a telling example of the perils of exemplification—an example from which one may begin to formulate a more general statement about the practice of exemplification in composition studies. As I mentioned earlier, to make my discussion of this perilous practice thoroughly compelling, I would need to present many more examples from a range of sources than what I will offer here. Aware of the danger of placing too much of the burden on one article, I will nonetheless discuss two related aspects of the perils of exemplification in Johnson’s article: decontextualization and (mis)representation.

Both decontextualization and (mis)representation refer to built-in hazards in the practice of exemplification. Inasmuch as an example is made by lifting an element (the example) from one (con)text and placing it in a new (con)text, its creation will necessarily involve an almost surgical cut that amputates the example from its original location in one (con)text and that transplants it in a new (con)text—a new (con)text that may move in a quite different direction. In creating/selecting an example, a scholar-writer should always consider these questions regarding the perils of exemplification: If what is always happening in exemplification is the representation of reality (or a state of affairs) through a reframing that suits the direction of one’s text, then to what extent is the scholar-writer responsible for minimizing this distance and this difference of direction through his/her selection of examples? To what extent does the original (con)text limit the selection and deployment of a potential example or call for some qualification of its use? When a scholar-writer isolates an element from its original context, what is lost that complicates or contradicts the general statement for which the example serves as support? Given the constraints imposed by the new (con)text, how much of the former con(text) should be imported into the new (con)text to fairly present the example and represent its
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original (con)text? There are no easy answers to these representative questions, yet attention to the two vectors of exemplification will help the writer to adjudicate between competing interests (the interest of his/her argument, the interests of a scholarly community). Let me briefly illustrate these perils with several examples.

Johnson begins his demonstration of the existence of the binary opposition between pleasure and discipline—that is, he seeks to have his readers see a situation as he does—by referring to a two-page passage in Henry Giroux's *Theory and Resistance in Education*, a book published over two decades ago. Inasmuch as the choice and placement of an example is part of its rhetorical effectivity, Johnson's choice here should concern us: in effect, in 1999 he isolates two pages of what Giroux wrote in 1978 and makes it stand (in) for the whole of Giroux’s thought on the subject of pleasure and its relation to discipline. Yet Giroux, certainly one of our most published scholars, has had much more to say about pleasure in his more recently published scholarship—for example, one might start with *Popular Culture, Schooling, and Everyday Life*. Another telling absence from Johnson’s discussion is Foucault’s most extended analysis of discipline and the rise of what he calls carceral society in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. In defining discipline, Johnson does refer, in a note, to Foucault’s *Power/Knowledge*, which is a collection of interviews and occasional writings. But Foucault’s main study, perhaps the germinal work on discipline that has inspired a whole generation of critical thought, is not even cited. Hardly a minor infraction of the conventions of scholarship, this omission also is quite dumbfounding, since some carefully-placed reference to *Discipline and Punish* would only strengthen Johnson’s argument by trading on the authority of the most comprehensive and authoritative discussion of discipline in Foucault’s oeuvre. My question is whether it is fair, in creating an example, to completely elide reference to other work, especially more recent or comprehensive work, by the same author which might complicate, contradict, or even support the general statement that requires exemplification. My question pertains to where we should locate authority—in the part or in the whole—and thus what gives an example its power to exemplify. Stated more bluntly, my question is whether self-interest—the desire to have one’s way at any cost—is an appropriate warrant for the decisions one necessarily must make in doing scholarly writing.

A second and more serious aspect of decontextualization and (mis)representation occurs in Johnson’s reference to Jane Gallop’s theoretical work on the erotics of reading, writing, and teaching. Johnson drops the Gallop example into his text to support the general point that many scholars are now thinking more deeply about issues of pleasure, beyond the pleasure-discipline binary. Gallop’s work is made, by its
selection, an exemplary instance of this effort. But Johnson strips Gallop’s thought of an important element of its context, making no mention of the fact that the actual practice of her pedagogy has, by her own admission, imperiled her academic career and, we might surmise, had rather deleterious consequences for at least the two students who felt aggrieved enough to charge her with sexual harassment. This element does not merit even a note in Johnson’s text. Moreover, the omission of this element of Gallop’s example—that is, Johnson’s practice of exemplification—points to what I must urge is his unwillingness to seriously confront the dangers of the very pedagogy he advocates. Indeed, when Johnson does very briefly engage the issue of the dangers of an erotic pedagogy, or what he calls a pleasure-centered pedagogy, danger exists only on the side of students who may become so narcissistically enamored of their own writing that they “forfeit the goal of communicating with an audience” (434). The silence in Johnson’s text—about the actual consequences of Gallop’s pedagogy and, more generally, about the potential dangers of an erotic pedagogy—breaks the contact that example can so usefully establish between (this) reader and the text and may seriously damage the possibility of being persuasive. In this way, example works against itself, against its own logic and rhetoric: rather than anchoring the general statement in a particular statement, rather than providing a link to a particular circumstance or context, rather than reaching outward to the/this reader, the example renders thought (about pedagogy, in this case) abstract and abstracted from its context and consequences. My question intends to expose the desire that leads to repression—the repression of this pertinent part of the selected example, the desire to press an argument (for pleasure) at any cost.

A third and somewhat different peril of exemplification occurs in Johnson’s reference to my article “Emotion and Pedagogic Violence,” which comes literally at a pivotal point in his argument. At the apparent end of a discussion of scholarship that exemplifies an effort to better understand pleasure, Johnson turns his attention to my article “Emotion and Pedagogic Violence” and claims to summarize it in some detail. His summary fails to mention, however, that my article is an earlier version of a 1998 JAC article “Going Postal: Pedagogical Violence and the Schooling of Emotion.” Although there are important differences between the two articles, both “Emotion and Pedagogic Violence” and its revision, “Going Postal,” ultimately move in the same direction: toward an extended critique of the rather unprecedented turn to pedagogy in the late 1980s in American literary and cultural studies. Let me quickly give you some of the context offered in the two articles as warrant for this critique.

Although composition studies has long been invested in matters pedagogical, the interest in pedagogy in the humanities has become, in Gerald Graff’s words, something of a “boom subject” in the 1990s. This
has been a matter of some curiosity to me, and I think it should raise a few eyebrows in composition studies, given the fact that the devaluation of composition studies has been secured by our association with the practical and the pedagogical. What should also give us pause, I suggest, is the fact that for some time now a major strand of thought in literary and cultural studies has been focused on detailing forms of pleasure and desire and at a time, the 1990s, when instances of school and workplace violence have grown more frequent and more deadly. Cultural studies especially is a field that has taken pleasure and desire as a serious subject of intellectual inquiry, and it has shown that desire has a history and is always the object of a historically specific regime of discipline. More generally, various psychoanalytic, poststructuralist, and post-Marxist theories have been quite successful in developing a sophisticated critical discourse on pleasure and desire and offer us some of (forgive me) the hardest theory available—try reading Lacan and his cohorts, for example.

Thus, unlike Johnson, I don’t worry that a critical discourse on pleasure and desire has not fully developed, though it will undoubtedly have to be carefully qualified if it is to be of use in writing theory and instruction. What I do worry about is the possibility that, in appropriating this particular strand of theoretical discourse, compositionists may focus attention too exclusively on pleasure as the exemplary goal of experience, as Johnson does, typically assuming (rather than arguing the point) that the compass of human motive is to maximize pleasure and minimize or avoid pain. I worry also that compositionists will thereby fail, like their cultural studies counterparts, to develop an adequate understanding of emotions not directly related to pleasure and desire. In this context—that is, in the absence of a fully developed rhetorical theory of emotion—I worry that the focus on pleasure is more mystifying than it is enlightening.5 And, lastly and most importantly, I worry that compositionists will reproduce what I think is a dangerous disjunction between a theory and pedagogy of pleasure, on the one hand, and on the other, the real-world school where each of us is shaped by, for example, a curriculum of violence. I believe that we do not fully understand the social causes and consequences of violence, not only forms of extreme physical violence (genocide, mass murder, gang rape) but also very subtle forms of symbolic violence of the kind found in, and deployed by, seemingly benign institutions and apparently inconsequential instances of language use. Since we are teachers and theorists of language-in-use, it strikes me that what should be of urgent concern to us especially today is the relation between symbolic and real forms of violence and their relation to our theories and pedagogies understood as perilous acts.6 At the very least, we should seek to better understand, and help our students to analyze, the complex workings of that vast technology that naturalizes and aestheticizes violence, packaging it as
news and entertainment.

None of the foregoing context is present in Johnson’s representation of my thought, nor could most of it appear without overburdening his text and causing it to lose a sense of its own direction. Still, some context and qualification must be given to prepare the reader for this (mis)representation of my thought: “What shapes emotion, argues Worsham, is violence. . . . Worsham insists that we see violence as synonymous with pedagogy . . .” (436; emphasis added). Flattered as I may be to come upon reference to my work, I gasped aloud when I read these words because, with only the context supplied by Johnson’s discussion of the binary opposition of pleasure and discipline, this instance of (mis)representation and decontextualization is dangerously misleading: it actively promotes a misunderstanding of the argument of “Emotion and Pedagogic Violence” (and, for that matter, “Going Postal”). With absolutely no context and no sense of the provenance of my thinking, I imagine Worsham, whose ideas I now barely recognize, to be making the argument that violence is the only thing that shapes emotion, that there is no difference between violence and pedagogy. As a member of a field devoted to the pleasures of teaching, if not the pleasures of writing, I imagine this Worsham must be suffering alone out there on the lunatic fringe if she is making such recklessly categorical and patently inaccurate assertions.

Yet, Johnson apparently feels no need to exercise a rhetorical sensibility—a sense of what the reader may need in terms of background and contextualization—and moves ahead quickly with his summary: “Worsham argues that we must somehow ‘dissolve the relation between pedagogy and violence’ by turning our attention to the nuances of the affective domain” (436). But, as he immediately points out, Worsham is not only suspicious of, she also condemns, any 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” (437). Then, he makes this confounding assertion:

We can produce the more nuanced understanding of pleasure and empowerment for which Worsham appeals, and we can partly undo the relation between pedagogy and violence, but only if we accept as working premises, first, Foucault’s insight . . . 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. (438; emphasis added)

Now, I have no problem with surrendering binary oppositions. I remember signing on to this project years ago, knowing as I do that there is a difference between binary thinking and making distinctions, even
distinctions framed as oppositions. (Not all oppositions are necessarily binary oppositions, and I'd challenge thought to move forward without hazarding a few distinctions between this and that and, for that matter, a third and a fourth thing.) Perhaps you can imagine, then, my alarm when I see my critical commentary on both pedagogies of empowerment and pedagogies of resistance represented as another example of the kind of thinking that ultimately keeps us within "the debilitating binary logic of 'us versus them'" (437). Perhaps you can also imagine my confusion when, in closely following Johnson's chain of reasoning, I find my discussion of the crucial role of emotion in pedagogy diverted to suit the direction of his argument—that is, first, it is represented as a condemnation of any pedagogy rooted in emotion; and, second, it is represented as an appeal for a "more nuanced understanding of pleasure and empowerment." Certainly, alarm and confusion may be the signs, the feel, of thought really happening, of thought moving to a perilous edge, as Foucault would have it. But, in this case, my confusion and alarm are signs that thought has stalled, that exemplification has utterly failed, and that what has happened is a loss of contact between text and (this) reader and thus perhaps even a loss of the kind of intersubjective relation between text and reader that Johnson argues is the condition of possibility for taking pleasure in a text. Inasmuch as Johnson would redirect our attention to pleasure as the only critical idiom that can dissolve the relation between pedagogy and violence, it strikes me that you could not find two lines of thought—Johnson's and mine—more different, more at odds, which is why I find his treatment of my article so troubling (as both a support and a foil for his argument).

More worrisome, then, is a fourth instance of the peril of exemplification that I find in Johnson's article: his choice of an exemplar or representative model on which he bases his recommendations for thought in composition studies—specifically, his model for a theory of persuasion, a writing pedagogy, and a notion of social change. That exemplar is the pleasure (jouissance) most closely associated with sexual orgasm. I refer you to Johnson's article for the details of a full course on these topics; I will not hazard a summary of the substance of his article, which is, quite honestly, a very provocative read. Suffice it to say here that pleasure is ultimately offered as the goal of a pedagogy that renders ourselves and our students "more prone to pleasure" (449). Make no mistake, I am not against pleasure (who could possibly be against pleasure?), but I must say that this choice of exemplar is the most disturbing feature of Johnson's practice of exemplification, for it insists on pleasure as the inner logic and experience of persuasion and of individual and social change ("the lived experience of social change is orgasmic"). In the final analysis, Johnson recommends pleasure as an end in itself and encourages a rather uncritical relation to pleasure and
its politics. Moreover, his practice of exemplification directs attention away from the possibility that our goal should always be to render ourselves and our students more prone to thought, even to thoughts that are not always and entirely pleasant or pleasurable. Such is the discipline, and the perverse pleasure, of being an intellectual, of standing as an example of one who has chosen a thoughtful relation to the world.

Perhaps even more disturbing is the way that Johnson introduces pleasure as his exemplar. He asks us to accept as a working premise “Kristeva’s notion that the lived experience of social change is orgasmic.” He asks us to accept this notion out of hand, without any argument to establish its truth or soundness, without a single example to support its accuracy or descriptive power. He asks us to base our thought about the dynamics of social change on the exemplar of orgasm. Immediately on hearing what amounts to a stipulation for further thought, I want to know for whom, exactly, is the lived experience of social change orgasmic. I want an example. Indeed, before I can conceive of moving forward in the direction that his text wants to take me, I must have any number of examples—from different historical periods and from different cultures—that will testify to the accuracy of this view of social change, and I want the testimony of these examples to be as unambiguous and categorical as Johnson’s stipulation. I want Johnson to leave the heady world of theory and myth and move into the concrete world of example. But there are no examples forthcoming. Frankly, this particular stipulation is nonsense. That Johnson asks us to accept it as a working premise and without any visible support—without thought—makes it dangerous nonsense.

Regrettably, too, the choice of exemplar shows a profound lack of understanding of and respect for those—a vast majority, I’ll wager—for whom the lived experience of social change is not orgasmic (racial, ethnic, and sexual minorities; the economically exploited; women; children). For these many others, the lived experience of social change is perhaps more aptly and more often described in terms associated with violence rather than with pleasure—for example, as quiet tedium, dazed apathy, daily anger, seething silence, (self-)destructive rage, stunned fear, visible humiliation, crushing shame, burning hatred, and too much suffering, even suffering unto death. Johnson’s view also shows little understanding of the fact that the struggle for social change is typically waged over practices and privileges of exemplification—that is, struggle is typically waged for the right and opportunity to represent your own lived experience, to speak for yourself, to have an audience who will reach out in empathy to recognize your lived experience as an example of some larger vision or goal or understanding. I cannot imagine a more reckless or ill-advised direction for thought than the one that Johnson recommends or, more seriously, the one carried out in his practice of exemplification.
I began my comments by saying that Johnson's article is an exemplary text, a "good" example, one that is so typical of common practices of exemplification in composition studies that its typicality warrants the attention I have given it here. I want to close by restoring this exemplary text to the proper context for understanding the foregoing comments, whose function ultimately is to make a plea that, as a discipline, we move toward undertaking the practice of scholarly writing as a specific site for doing the politics and practicing the ethos we explicitly advocate. The practice of theory, the practice of teaching—these are both practices of thought and acts with consequences. What appear to be the smallest and most inconsequential of discursive moves, such as exemplification, are moves in thought that, as publishing scholars and as expert readers and teachers, we endorse and advocate not only for the entire field but also for thoughtful people everywhere. Does the care, or carelessness, with which we represent another's thought exemplify the way we want to be represented? Does our research seek to trace the trajectory of a given mode of thought, guided by the impossible goal of approaching and understanding it, first, on its own terms, in its own time and place, and in terms of its conditions of possibility? Do we read and research selectively—seeking, perhaps subconsciously, only material that readily confirms our own beliefs and preferences? Do we seek to furnish ourselves with comfortable and comforting ideas, with vocabularies that do not require thought to renew its demands on us? What bodies of thought and experience, especially "other" knowledges, do we give ourselves permission to ignore and exclude or distort? How do we (should we) conceive of our relation to exemplary texts and how do we (should we) mark that relationship in our writing? What degrees of decontextualization and misrepresentation are necessary and acceptable in scholarly writing? How do we use figures of thought, such as exemplification, ideologically and how can we use them more (self-)critically? Does our understanding of (if not commitment to) the pure rhetoricity of all knowledge and value incapacitate any appeal to standards for critical practice? What should our guiding values be when we make the rhetorical decisions we necessarily must make in our writing?

Scholarly writing, as an experience of thought, is rarely easy, sometimes pleasurable, and typically more time-consuming than any reward or recognition finally justifies. It is also defined by numerous opportunities to make highly constrained but nonetheless consequential decisions that, at the very least, affect, if only micropolitically, the social relations of academic work—that is, our affective relations with one another and to the world. What do our decisions as scholarly writers tell us about what we stand for and against, what we value, and who we are and hope to be—as individuals and as a collectively consti-
tuted discipline? Surely, composition studies, devoted as it is to the study and teaching of writing as an enterprise of thought, has the energy to explore such questions about its own scholarly ethos.

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Notes

1The critical literature on example suggests that there is much controversy and confusion about Aristotle's definition of example. See Hauser, for example, who discusses example's relationship to enthymeme.

2The contemporary literature on exemplification is fascinating. My discussion has benefited significantly from Consigny, Gelley, Hauser, and Lyons.

3Ebert's "For a Red Pedagogy" is one effort to examine the perils of erotic or pleasure-centered pedagogy.

4Why Johnson does not even mention the existence of the later essay I cannot say. Conventional wisdom suggests that it is always a good idea to cite articles on related topics published in the same journal in which your article appears, especially a later installment by the same author that you cite. Thus, while the omission of any mention of "Going Postal" is perhaps only a minor transgression—at worst, impolite and impolitic, it is also unfortunate because the later article more clearly articulates my views. Significant elements of my argument had to be cut from the earlier essay, "Emotion and Pedagogic Violence," to meet the space restrictions of the journal in which it was published; these were restored and published in "Going Postal." I don't imagine, however, that mention of the later essay would have significantly altered Johnson's treatment of my thought.

5I am certainly not alone in this worry. Ebert's Ludic Feminism is a book-length examination of the dangers of focusing too exclusively on pleasure and desire in the critical analysis of social life.

6Some starting places for thinking about violence: Morrison's Nobel Lecture, which is a tour de force on the subject of violence and language; Kappeler's study of the "will to violence"; Gilligan's moving discussion of the symbolic language and emotional logic of violence; and, in composition studies, Blitz and Hurlbert's effort to examine issues of violence in the lives of college students and to teach composition as an act of peace-making.

Works Cited


On the Pleasures of Misreading: T.R. Johnson Replies to Lynn Worsham

T.R. JOHNSON

I am pleased that my first publication in JAC has provided its incoming editor with an occasion to share her wealth of ideas about the nature of that most routine, almost invisible, figure of thought—the example. As Worsham, echoing the example of no less a figure than Aristotle, points out, we need to “think explicitly about example,” for within this most