

## THE NERVOUS SYSTEM

Richard E. Miller

**F**or his second attempt, my father selected a set of kitchen knives and, when he got to the garage, a hammer from his toolbox. Shortly after my mother found him, the emergency crew rushed him to the hospital and the neighbors and the parish priest arrived to offer what services they could. Then, amidst the frenzied activity in the Intensive Care Unit, my father struggled to explain the presence of the hammer. At a loss for words, he could only say that he had felt at the time that it “might have been of some use.” There is a dark logic to such thoughts, perhaps, one which trades in the various means and mechanisms of self-annihilation, and it is the relative inaccessibility of this logic which interests me here. If the decision to end one’s life is the most important decision of one’s life, then how do we gain access to the line of thinking, the chain of events, the preliminary acts and feelings that lead to such a conclusion? How are we to understand a hermeneutic system that courts its own destruction?

Though shocking, experiences like this are not entirely unfamiliar, partly because of the media’s increased ability to provide us with a glimpse of such personal tragedies as they unfold: we watch enthralled as the Koresh compound burns to the ground; we huddle around our sets as the white Bronco makes its slow drive down the freeway; we wait for updates as Dr. Kevorkian develops new strategies for disposing of the bodies of his patients. That the media feast on the misfortunes of others is a point we in the academy never seem to tire of making. Indeed, I was recently on a panel where one of my fellow presenters successfully entertained the packed room with his exposition of how the popular television show *Rescue 911* satisfies its viewers’ need to witness disasters week after week. Although there was little in the

**Richard E. Miller** is an assistant professor of English at Rutgers University, New Brunswick. His articles have appeared most recently in *Cultural Studies*, *JAC*, *College Composition and Communication*, and *College English*. He is currently at work on a book provisionally entitled *Teaching Others* which reads the absent figure of the student back into the institutional history of English Studies.

speaker's analysis that was meant to surprise, everyone—myself included—enjoyed being treated to the usual pratfalls that intertextuality provides (references to the narrator as “Captain Kirk, er, I mean William Shatner”), the inevitable revelation of a master narrative (the show is not, actually, about rescuing people in danger but about the necessary dependence of average citizens upon a massive bureaucratic system of experts for survival), and the familiar set of tropes about the media's manipulative powers and the consequent need for producing critical viewers who can see beyond the mystifying image of a bureaucratic utopia where the experts always get there . . . just in the nick of time.

The speaker got his biggest laughs by far when he commented on the fact that the show now regularly runs episodes about how it has helped its viewers avert tragedy. Thus, there are stories about a mother who learned CPR by watching the show and who was then able to revive her own son when it was his turn to fall into the pool while playing unattended in the backyard; a schoolgirl who saved a choking classmate by employing the heimlich maneuver which she heard about the previous night on television; a man who fell while hiking but succeeded in fashioning a brace out of fallen branches and strips of his own clothing because . . . etc., etc., etc. The possible permutations are endless, and one way to account for *Rescue 911*'s self-referencing and self-promotion is to assert, as the speaker did, that the producers have simply found a way to make the entire show one long advertisement for itself. Thus, when the survivors turn to the camera, as they inevitably do, and say, as they inevitably must, “[Fill in the blank] wouldn't be here with us today if [fill in the blank] hadn't seen that episode on *Rescue 911* about [fill in the blank],” from a certain perspective all that's *really* going on is a sustained effort by the producers to convince the viewers that remaining glued to their television sets is *literally* a matter of life or death.

Detecting this clever strategy for keeping the audience tuned in enables the very kind of reversal upon which so much academic work hinges, for now we are in a position to see the survivors as, in fact, victims, mere puppets responding to the tugs and twitches of the invisible, but nefariously motivated, television producers. With the world so turned, it becomes clear that what the viewers really need is not this show at all, with its diverting pleasures, its life-saving tips, its pathetic stories about kids without bicycle helmets going through windshields and skydivers plummeting earthward in hopelessly tangled parachutes. No, what they really need is us, the bearers and producers of cultural critique, the ones who can expose the hegemonic function of the show and reveal its drive to convince viewers that their relative sense of powerlessness is inevitable, necessary, even desirable.

On the one hand, then, we have the scene in the garage with the knives and the hammer, the rescue workers on their way, the ultimately inaccessible, illegible event. On the other, the speaker at the podium, the performance of a masterful reading, the laughing crowd, the erasure of lived experience, the claim to possess truly useful knowledge. To stage the debate in this way, however, is both to establish a familiar set

of oppositions and to guarantee an equally familiar outcome. That is, if I'm going to follow the generic conventions which I have been working with and which have been working with me up to this point, I must now argue for a return to "personal" or "non-academic" writing as a way to reclaim a form of expression that really matters—writing that reaches beyond the walls of our conferences, that eschews jargon to make a bigger tent, that dismantles the sense that the writer is the master of her past or of all that she surveys. To head down this road to individualism is, perhaps ironically, to travel an increasingly well-worn path: it is one that has already been covered, in one way or another, by Jane Tompkins, Nancy Sommers, Linda Brodkey, Peter Elbow, Lynn Z. Bloom, and Donald McQuade, to name a few of the most prominent participants on this side of the discussion. And who among us has not felt Tompkins's weary dissatisfaction with the performative aspects of teaching? Sommers's sense of the invasive threat posed by theory? Brodkey's desire to speak without citation, weaving together one's past experiences with one's current academic preoccupations?

This is important work, both in itself and for the discussions it has started. And yet, as moving as are the personal narratives that it has showcased, I must confess that my own reading in this area has of late offered me neither solace about the rift between the personal and the academic, nor guidance about how one might, if not heal the rift, then at least begin to build a bridge across its seemingly expansive divide. Indeed, far from finding such work a resource for hope about the possibilities of re-imagining what it means to write in the academy, I am left with the sense that much of this work ultimately recommends abandoning such a project. Although one could say that my problem with the personal is personal, I think it would be more accurate to say that I can't get the stories of these authors to provide me with "an idea to think with"—to borrow a favorite phrase of Ann Berthoff's. Thus, whether I'm plunged into a vivid, personal account of how the writer has come to read the way she does or regaled with a semiotic decoding of how the act of reading is represented in the paintings of Georges de La Tour, I come away feeling equally disaffected: neither event helps me to think about the interplay between personal experience and academic training, which is—although both sides of the debate give this point wide berth—also part of personal experience. For these reasons, in what follows I want to explore the extent to which it is possible to escape the confines of this debate in order to see if its polarized positions can, perhaps, be reworked to produce an idea with which we can think anew about writing as a place where the personal and the academic, the private and the public, the individual and the institutional, are always inextricably interwoven.

\*

Desire says: 'I should not like to have to enter this risky world of discourse; I should not like to be involved in its peremptoriness and decisiveness; I should like it to be all around me like a calm, deep transparence, infinitely open, where others would fit

in with my expectations, and from which truths would emerge one by one; I should only have to let myself be carried, within it and by it, like a happy wreck.' (Foucault, "The Order of Discourse" 51)

Within the context of this ongoing debate, to begin my discussion with a passage from Foucault may seem a predictable, and therefore foolish, move: far from shifting the terrain of the discussion about writing in the academy, my choice of citation returns us to the work of the central figure in the debate, the writer whose name alone has become the line in the sand that separates academic writers and writers of the personal essay, theorists and practitioners, knowers and doers, company men and caring women. It is Foucault's voice which inaugurates one of the most widely read and cited essays in composition studies, David Bartholomae's "Inventing the University," and whose presence is felt throughout Bartholomae's argument that the problem with basic writers is that they do not so much write as they are written by cultural and discursive commonplaces. In a similar vein, Kurt Spellmeyer has argued that Foucault's "The Order of Discourse" illustrates "with unparalleled clarity the dilemma of many beginning writers" (72) and that Foucault's work is to be valued because it "reminds us that learning is the process through which we deliberately fashion our lives—and that the outcome of this fashioning, this 'assaying' of ourselves, is always an open question" (89). These authors argue that the application of Foucault's ideas to the composition classroom enables a critical re-assessment of what the business of being trained into academic discourse entails, but their opponents tend to describe the rejection of Foucault's ideas as a liberating experience of an entirely different order. The turning point in Nancy Sommers's Braddock Award-winning essay, "Between the Drafts," comes, for example, when she realizes that by relying on the work of Foucault and others, she "was stuck in a way of seeing: reproducing the thoughts of others, using them as my guides, letting the post-structuralist vocabulary give authority to my text" (28). As Sommers goes on to explain, it is only by getting out from under Foucault's influence and, by extension, the demands of academic convention, that she can begin to ground her authority as a writer in her own experiences and her own stories. And at the furthest extreme, Nancy Welch, in her send-up of graduate training at "University B," sees Foucault's influence on the discipline to be even more pernicious: as Welch describes it, University B required its graduate instructors to read Foucault in order to train them "to promote the violence, struggle, and loss assumed to be inherent in any act of writing" (396). Repulsed by this approach, Welch returned to University A, where "freewriting and stargazing" were encouraged, and where it was assumed that "we write and learn in an environment that is safe and supportive" (398).

This admittedly incomplete summary of Foucault's presence in the debate about the nature and purpose of academic writing sufficiently illustrates the way in which his work has served to polarize the two camps. And it is for precisely this reason that

we must return, once again, to the opening moment in “The Order of Discourse” cited above, where Foucault dreams his impossible dream of self-annihilation. Foucault opens this talk with the enunciation of his desire to slip into the lecture hall unnoticed, to have his voice imperceptibly join the unnamed voice of another and thus to be borne along “like a happy wreck” on a sort of discursive sea. While this vision of a disembodied linguistic encounter, where one does not so much speak as one gets spoken by an array of discourses, may be cast as either the utopian promise or the dystopian nightmare of poststructuralism, the fact is, as we learn at the end of the essay, that the voice Foucault wanted to hear speaking as he entered the lecture hall belonged to a specific individual, his dead teacher Jean Hippolyte.<sup>1</sup> “I know now whose voice it was that I would have liked to precede me, to carry me, to invite me to speak, to lodge itself in my own discourse. I know what was so terrifying about beginning to speak, since I was doing so in this place where once I listened to him, and where he is no longer here to hear me” (76). Because Hippolyte is dead and his voice lives on only in the memory of his students, there is no way for Foucault to realize his desire to hear his teacher speak again. For Foucault to dissolve into his teacher’s discourse in the way he describes, he would either have to fall into a silent reverie at the podium or begin to ventriloquize verbatim his teacher’s past lessons—in which case, we would still be stuck with the problem that the words emerged from Foucault’s body, not Hippolyte’s corpse.

I’m being blunt, but the corporeality of the human body is, finally, a blunt matter. The kid face down in the swimming pool, turning blue, is a floating signifier of a kind, deployed for material gain by corporate sponsors as a bit player in a ceaseless drama about the virtues of panopticism. He is also drawing real water into his lungs and thus is moving toward death much more rapidly than most of us would like to ourselves. Although he is not simply discourse yet, he will be if the only intervention that occurs takes place at the level of language. Similarly, the man losing consciousness in the garage is undoubtedly a site of discursive contestation, his plight seeming to reference a wide array of psychological and classical narratives about the confrontation between patriarchal systems and the aging body (*Oedipus the King*, *King Lear*, *Things Fall Apart*, *Absalom, Absalom*) or, for those better positioned to read this particular event, the silent struggle of a creative spirit trapped in a domestic space (*A Room of One’s Own*, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, *The Awakening*). He is also my father, and to see him as being spoken by either of these narratives does not immediately provide us with any clear guidance about how his experience of these narratives might be disrupted. And the same blunt corporeality of the body applies to Foucault’s teacher as well. Although Foucault may dream of hearing his teacher’s voice again, after Hippolyte’s death Foucault can never again be swept away by his teacher’s discourse. Thus, as seductive as it is to say that all the world is a text, the dramatic structure of “The Order of Discourse” illustrates the ultimate barrenness of the simile: no amount of “revising” or “re-reading” will serve

to resurrect Foucault's fallen teacher because "discourse" and "the body," "language" and "lived experience" are neither identical nor interchangeable terms.

And yet, if we grant this, why should Foucault feel anxiety about speaking, since the body of his teacher is forever out of the reach of his words? In a sense, one could say that "The Order of Discourse" is Foucault's own effort to understand his seemingly unreasonable embodied reaction to this occasion, an effort that leads him to consider the ways in which institutions serve to stimulate, regulate, and deny speech simultaneously. Even so, as productive as it has been to explore the interplay between institutions and discourse, power and knowledge, practices and effects, one consequence of the overwhelming success of what one might loosely call "the Foucauldian project" has been the steady transformation of everything into a discursive matter. Indeed, one could say that the discipline's eagerness to textualize the world and thereby turn its members into experts on everything from popular culture to economic theory to political practice is itself an expression of the very "will to truth" that Foucault is everywhere at such pains to criticize. Thus, Foucault's rhetorical question about the ultimate goal of the will to truth suggests the need for a kind of self-reflexivity in pursuing cultural criticism that his followers have not always practiced: "what is at stake in the will to truth," Foucault asks, "in the will to utter this 'true' discourse, if not desire and power?" (56).

\*

I should mention at this time that the man in the garage spent his entire adult life as a writer. The results of his labor include two novels (unpublished) and hundreds of short stories and poems, which have appeared in numerous literary magazines across the country. He also bore principal responsibility for the day-to-day business of raising his four children.

\*

I have felt, of late, an increasing need to escape both the seductive allure of Foucault's interest in discourse and the neutralizing force of his rhetorical question, which forever compels me to recognize that any intellectual endeavor—including, and perhaps especially, this one—is always already contaminated with self-interest and larger academic interests. Pierre Bourdieu's *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* provides a way to reroute our discussion through the materiality of the body, offering an alternative explanation for the nervousness a writer feels at the moment of composing a piece that brings the personal and the academic together, for example, or the anxiety a speaker feels during the approach to the podium. Bourdieu's book, which he terms "a sort of ethnography of France" (xi), sets out to expose the social machinery at work in the production and hierarchization

of the various standards of taste one finds in that country. He wants, in short, to account for that very thing which common sense would have us believe there's no accounting for, by showing that "taste" is not a natural attribute of the self or a sign of one's innate superiority, but a socially constructed set of likes and dislikes.

Without doing any research, most people would argue, as Bourdieu does, that the two most important factors influencing the level of taste an individual acquires are class of origin and level of education. Bourdieu himself refers to these findings as "self-evident" (99). The reason I turn to Bourdieu's work is that he looks beyond this self-evident relationship to what he calls the "series of different *effects*" it has in the lived experience of individuals (22; Bourdieu's emphasis). Thus, while it is fairly obvious that advanced education in English Studies seeks to foster a taste, say, for the works of James Joyce, what Bourdieu is interested in are the other effects of such a system of instruction. What kind of person is produced through this process? What other tastes does he or she develop? What kind of bodily experiences does he or she come to prefer? In order to answer these questions, Bourdieu has to put aside the vaunted musical pieces, the esteemed works of art, and the prized photographs he has asked his subjects to rank and relocate taste not "out there" in the world of culture, but "in here" in the bodies of individual citizens.

It is at this point that Bourdieu's study becomes most provocative and most disturbing, for it is here that he catalogues the interrelationship between "taste" defined as the kind of culture one is drawn to and "taste" as a way of being in the world in general, and a way of being in one's body in particular. The trajectory of his argument, then, moves from the realm of music, which he defines as "the 'pure' art par excellence" (19), to the realm of the senses, specifically the kinds of food (or drugs or body parts or other instruments) one is willing and able to put into one's body. Bourdieu's argument is that, regardless of the amount of cultural capital one inherits as a birthright or acquires through education, the end result is an overwhelming sense that one's tastes are natural, rather than the product of one's social class or one's schooling. And, he concludes, the "naturalness" of one's taste is experienced most immediately as the sense of revulsion one might have at the thought, say, of sitting down to a steaming plate of spaghetti smothered in a sauce of pork parts, of having a nipple pierced, of contemplating the crucifix submerged in a jar of urine, of hearing someone discuss a personal tragedy in an academic forum.

As Bourdieu goes on to explain:

tastes are perhaps first and foremost distastes, disgust provoked by horror or visceral intolerance ('sick-making') of the tastes of others. 'De gustibus non est disputandum': not because 'tous les goûts sont dans la nature', but because each taste feels itself to be natural—and so it is, being a habitus—which amounts to rejecting others as unnatural and therefore vicious. . . . The most intolerable thing for those who regard themselves as the possessors of legitimate culture is the sacrilegious reuniting of tastes which taste dictates shall be separated. (56–57)

With this enhanced definition, it becomes possible to see that the acquisition of “taste” is not restricted to a set of principles governing one’s preference for one kind of book over another; it involves as well a way of feeling that is scored into and emanates out from the body. And this way of feeling is, in turn, experienced as natural and, therefore, inherently superior to other tastes, which one (naturally) finds distasteful. What is most important about this argument for my purpose is what it suggests about the sense of discomfort some feel at the panels and articles they derisively refer to as “the weepies” and the sense of mortification others experience at panels with titles like “Parsifal’s Penis: A History” or articles on “the critique(al) subject-effect in (post)-capitalist systems of disciplinarity”—in both cases, these complementary movements of revulsion provide opportunities to explore how the circulation of cultural capital gets translated into lived experience. To prefer one or the other is a sign neither of one’s innate sophistication nor of one’s essential earthiness, although at times the debate would make it seem that this is what is being fought over. Rather, as Bourdieu notes, in a comment that can be applied fully to the debate about the place of “the personal” in academic work, “At stake in every struggle over art there is also the imposition of an art of living, that is, the transmutation of an arbitrary way of living into a legitimate way of life which casts every other way of living into arbitrariness” (57).

\*

The argument that one’s preference for academic or personal writing is ultimately an arbitrary inclination naturalized by culture isn’t likely to change how one feels or to alter the debate about the place of personal experience in the academy, of course. Nonetheless, by entertaining the idea that such preferences may be linked to and otherwise expressed in bodily responses, as writing instructors we might begin to think again about the various ways in which writing *matters*: specifically, we might consider the force of the written word as it is revealed not only in a reader’s response to texts others have produced, but also in the writer’s experience of the act of composing itself. In other words, we might leaven our ongoing preoccupation with training readers in the arts of textual analysis with a consideration of the kinds of writing that produce visceral reactions in actual readers and the kinds of writing that evoke in a given writer a similarly profound felt response at the moment of production. To pursue such an investigation is to escape the Aristotelian trap of proclaiming how one is *supposed* to feel during a tragedy, for instance, and to attend, instead, to the varying responses people actually have when they observe a given tragedy, read a given book, hear a given paper. In this way, we can move our discussion of how texts work under ideal conditions to an examination of how they actually work in a given context, excavating bodily responses for material evidence of the ways culture is present in the writer’s very

act of experiencing the composing process and in the reader's responses to the writer's text.

Obviously, one could commence such work by turning to the opening of this essay. For the moment, though, I am less interested in investigating the reader's visceral response to one kind of primal scene ("Oh no, he's not really going to talk about suicide and writing is he?" "I can sense a reference to Hemingway or Plath coming any minute now," and so on) than I am in pursuing the possibility that the writer's response, during the process of composing, might be a site at which to explore the relationship between modes of writing legitimated by the academy and the circulation of cultural capital in our society. Pursuing such an investigation, I believe, serves both a lexical and a pedagogical function: it allows us to widen the definition of what it means to write self-reflexively and it provides a way to index those places in the text where a true revision not only of the writer's argument but also of the writer's circumstance can occur.

In order to illustrate this, I must now turn to an experience I had many years ago in a poetry workshop where I produced a piece of writing that mattered in the sense I have in mind here. At a certain point during my efforts to finish my assignment, which was to write a poem about the first house I could recall living in and to use the phrase "I remember" as a kind of incantation, I found myself overwhelmed with grief. Although I was frequently visited by such feelings as I struggled to complete my dissertation, this particular experience was qualitatively different: the unfolding poem and its narrative energy became, to improvise on I. A. Richards's phrase, a machine to feel with. That is, writing the poem provided me with a kind of emotional experience which, in turn, supplied me with new analytical machinery to think about a host of problems related to "composition," broadly construed as the art of putting oneself and one's writing together. Thus, the poem was writing that mattered in two senses: it mattered at the level of experience, in that I physically responded during the process of composing to what I was composing, and it mattered at the cognitive level, because it provided me with the material for a revision of both my professional and my personal circumstances.

\*

#### AROUND THE HOUSE

I remember the way the pink neon filled the sky at sunset.  
 I can't see the words it wrote out into the darkness,  
 I'm not sure if the sign flashed or not.  
 The particulars aren't what's important:  
 the feeling produced by the buzz of the sign,  
 the way the pink held out against the rising stars:  
 these are the things that matter.

The sign promised candy, I think,  
 long slabs of marbled taffy,  
 the labor of peeling the paper off,  
 the long walk back down the hill,  
 a hand reaching up into my father's,  
 my mouth full of taffy and wax.

I remember the yard as immense,  
 miles and miles of grass and my three-year-old butt  
 poised in full focus, filling the frame,  
 landing without hesitation  
 in a patch of thistles.  
 Afraid to cry, afraid to turn towards the house.

I remember that Dad would let the grass grow:  
 we would roam around like lions  
 pounding through the bush  
 pouncing suddenly into their vision.  
 I can hear you. I can see you.

I guess the neighbors would start to talk  
 or the house would disappear or one of the kids would disappear  
 or I don't know what but  
 Dad would mow through the fields  
 winding trails so we could snake behind him  
 run through circles and curlicues  
 collapse in laughter.

By the side of the house  
 I remember Dad built a kind of amphitheater  
 not for people to come and sit  
 not for any kind of performance  
 but for layers and layers of tulips  
 that would rip up the countryside in the Spring,  
 their violent colors banging back and forth in the breeze.

I was probably wearing a sweater that day,  
 a green one with arrowheads on it,  
 sitting on the front stoop  
 with fat cheeks and a shock of blond hair  
 while the Spring billowed and filled my clothes.  
 Sitting and thinking about burning the house down.

I don't remember where I found the matches,  
 the long wooden ones that scratch so against the boxside.  
 The firm feel, the loud pop into flame.  
 Matchstick after matchstick.  
 The whole box spent as I stood against the rafters  
 trying to find just a splinter that would go.

I don't remember if they found  
 the four hundred burnt matches in the attic  
 or the box, which I remember watching fall  
 as the last match failed me,  
 or if they missed me while I was up there  
 trying to start a fire that wouldn't start.

The whole day disappeared with a breeze  
 that whispered across that shock of hair  
 and left that little kid on the porch  
 looking at those tulips  
 banging against each other.

\*

I've been reading through a large stack of submissions for my department's creative writing prize this past week. It hasn't been a pleasant experience, partly because I've been unable to escape the fact that the familiar understanding of poetry as *the* place where the authentic self gets expressed profoundly limits what the students feel they can and cannot do in a poem. As the poems and short stories wander between tales of loss and alienation and evocations of natural beauty and serenity, the authors repeatedly succumb to the pressure to record what "really" occurred. Although "creative writing" tends to attract students in search of a place where truth-telling of this kind is promoted and rewarded, and although I myself have thought about my own work along these lines for many years, what struck me in the experience of writing "Around the House" was the way that poetry can be called upon to imagine alternatives to what the world offers—it can, for instance, allow one to set fire to the past. Under these circumstances, the very vagueness of what comes to mind during the ransacking of memories becomes an ally: the sheer immateriality of the conjured images invites, or even requires, the intervention of an organizing, revivifying principle for an act of composition to occur. In this case, that principle is realized through narrative, which draws together a disparate set of images (culled from memory, fantasy, the mass media, wherever) and places them in the sequence of a story, all of which seemed, at the time, to unfold quite naturally. In place of chaos and

confusion, order and clarity: a perfect universe, where narrative serves to structure lived experience into a coherent, stable event for others to perceive.

Thus, far from being a private record of emotion recalled in tranquility, poetry as it has been put to use here re-presents the private as already organized by publicly held narrative structures: “the boy’s” “private” story becomes, in effect, a familiar tale of loss, loneliness, abandonment—becomes, that is, everyone’s story, at least potentially. While the central concern of literary studies is clearly promoting just such disembodied textual encounters, where readers suddenly discover in the words before them a description of their own experience, what interests me here is the writer’s embodied encounter with the words as they were produced. What, if anything, can we learn from the fact that composing the line “I can hear you. I can see you” caused tears to run down my face? That is, regardless of the poem’s effects on its readers, I want to see if it is possible to use a writer’s reaction to the composing process as the starting point for an investigation into the ways that institutional forces manifest themselves in the realm of personal experience.

“I can hear you. I can see you.” This is the familiar script from an equally familiar game parents and children play: a dual pleasure is evoked in one’s ability to draw attention to oneself both through one’s absence and through the revelation of one’s presence. Indeed, it could be said that the central tension in the poem is between the pleasure of this game and the boy’s felt sense of being invisible, where the matches are used in an effort both to be missed and to be seen. While the inclination is, no doubt, strong at this point to use the poem as a vehicle for analyzing the author’s relationship to the described figures, to follow this inclination is, I would argue, to once again safely re-locate this specific poem, and the production of poetry more generally, in the realm of the private. It is, in other words, to seek to alleviate, through the invocation of a series of psychoanalytic tropes, the discomfort that is the seemingly inevitable and natural result of a social situation where the speaker begins to reveal signs of vulnerability. Once this discomfort has been dissipated by the revelation of the master narrative of psychoanalysis, the affront to one’s dignity assuaged, and bodily composure regained, it then becomes possible to return to the business at hand, namely producing theoretical work which “critically intervenes,” but never stands in danger of being accused of a “therapeutic” intent. The mind touched, the body left unsullied.

What I want to draw attention to, then, is the profound sense of discomfort that can be produced when, in an academic setting, the request is made that one see or hear the actions, events, or details of another’s life as warranting sustained attention. (A similar sense of discomfort could be produced by requesting in a poetry workshop, for example, that the participants attend, with interest, to one’s insights into the power of narrative to structure seemingly disjointed events into a coherent, manageable whole.) We begin, then, by considering these bodily responses—the sense of agitation and impatience, the jumping knee, the unfocused look from

the watch to the phony chandeliers to the ground—over against the bodily response that accompanies the production of the text—the sense of relief and release, a sort of revelatory exhalation of spirit and excitement. And once we’ve done this, we can start to see the effects of the allocation of cultural capital in the academy played out at the level of experience. What is happening in this moment where taste and distaste collide is the performance of a cultural drama that centers on the form and function of academic work. To present a paper, to write an article, to teach a class is to assume, whether one wants to or not, a role where one instructs others in how to see and manipulate the world: how to organize an argument, how to establish a dialogue between texts, how to decode the exploitative ploys of the mass media, and so on. To be present in any of these contexts and to receive, instead of a demonstration of the speaker’s mastery, a request to acknowledge the speaker’s presence, an invitation to focus on the minutiae of the speaker’s life, a petition to witness a personal declaration of independence, is to be asked (some might say forced) to do a different kind of work as an auditor. The bodily discomfort arises, I believe, because it is unclear exactly what is being asked of those who are within reach of the speaker’s words: beyond saying, “I can hear you. I can see you,” beyond authorizing the speaker’s version of events, what can the listeners do? What other role can they play? We come together and express our sorrow that the world is so ruthless, that marriages can be so awful, family systems so destructive, patriarchy so relentlessly degrading. We say what we have to say and leave feeling either that nothing has happened, or that a new sense of community has been established, or perhaps even that some act of violence has occurred at the level of discourse.

\*

After an extended class discussion following Kurt Cobain’s suicide, where the predictable range of angry, heartfelt, and agonized responses to the musician’s final actions were voiced, one of the students raised his hand and said, “It seems to me that all we’ve been doing is trying to cover the mouths of the dead with words.”

\*

Now that I have introduced “the body” into the discussion, the question remains: What can we learn from the conflict between the pleasure that comes in, as the popular phrase puts it, “breaking the silence” and the tangible sense of revulsion that frequently surfaces in response to such ruptures of the academy’s discursive norms? What we can say so far, I believe, is that this conflict is an expression of cultural expectations about what constitutes academic work and what warrants the profession’s attention. The academy, in general, is not concerned with the production of writing that matters in the sense of providing a therapeutic outlet for the author. Writing that

matters in the context of the academy is writing that establishes the author's position within the field of study, that demonstrates the author's analytical and diagnostic powers, that clearly attests to the author's ability to break new ground. If writing that matters in the therapeutic sense expresses the writer's need for the world, writing that matters in the academic sense verifies the world's need for the writer.

When phrased this way, it becomes clear that the rhetorical relationship academics establish with their audiences is remarkably similar to the rhetorical relationship the producers of *Rescue 911* have adopted with their audiences: from a certain perspective, both groups appear to be ceaselessly involved in the business of laying claim to the power to disseminate "really useful knowledge." Far from dismissing the claims of either group, I would recommend that *both* claims be entertained and questioned in order to revitalize the discussion of how best to define these loose, overly familiar terms to which I have repeatedly returned: What is "really useful knowledge"? How do we get students and their teachers to produce "writing that matters"? Thus, I am not insisting ahead of time that the academy's claim to mastery in this area be seen as the claim of charlatans, nor am I arguing that academic writing be seen as the empty, inevitable result of a process whereby the self is evacuated of its content. To go this route is to slip back into a familiar round of accusations and recriminations that serves the important ritualistic function of re-hierarchizing and re-authorizing competing standards of taste and distaste, but that does little to help us imagine alternative ways of defining what "really useful knowledge" might mean, or what other forms "writing that matters" might take, or, finally, what other kinds of content such writing might contain or reference. To resist the immense gravitational pull of this dichotomous, stereotyped world, where the only options available are understood as polarized extremes, it may be helpful to turn to two scenes where the expression of a desire to be seen elicits a response other than revulsion.

\*

At the initial meeting of my graduate seminar for first-time teachers of composition last Fall, one of the instructors asked if I was going to address the issue of "coming out" in the classroom; specifically, as a gay teacher, he wanted to have the opportunity to discuss strategies for coming out and to have an open discussion about the benefits and dangers of pursuing such a project. I agreed that it was an important and appropriate topic for the seminar and arranged to have one of the associate directors of our writing program, a veteran teacher who is gay and has first-hand experience with this issue, participate in the discussion. On the appointed day, which came when the assigned series of readings was on resistance in the classroom, the beginning instructor eloquently detailed the advice he had received from friends about how to negotiate coming out to his class. He then described the

silence that followed his mentioning to his students, during their work on Gloria Anzaldúa's *La frontera*, the fact that, as a gay man, he objected to her characterization of gay men as being more in touch with their femininity than straight men. Although he felt that coming out had ended up being something of a non-event in his class, this instructor spoke compellingly about the importance of gay people making themselves visible to the straight world, in general, and to younger gay people, in particular. Citing the high rate of suicide among gay and lesbian adolescents, the instructor went on to argue that the lives of students could well hang in the balance while their teachers pondered whether to emerge from the closet.

Acknowledging these powerful reasons for coming out and the courage it takes to do so, the associate director nonetheless went on to explain his reasons for not doing so in his own courses: for him, the act of coming out stabilizes the very category he most wants his students to problematize—namely, identity. From the associate director's point of view, while the out instructor runs the risk of having his or her intellectual positions being read off as nothing more than "the way gay people think," the instructor who has not self-identified his or her sexual status to the class is in a position to disturb dominant assumptions about "the way gay people think" and to draw attention to those moments when the students' automatic assumptions about a heterosexual world impact on their reading and writing. In this way, not coming out manifests itself as a local strategy within a larger pedagogical project concerned with establishing a classroom where the relationship between sexual preference and identity might be productively explored over the course of a semester.

Two curious things happened in the animated and engaged discussion that followed this opening exchange of views, as we moved among a series of contrasting observations about the construction of identity, the establishment of authority in institutional settings, the legibility and accessibility of the range of semiotic systems drawn up in the representation of one's sexuality. First, a number of the instructors took the opportunity to deploy the structure of the coming out narrative to tell their own stories: one instructor described first writing a set of hostile responses in the margins of a student essay that referred to "queers" rather than "gays and lesbians," only to have to scratch the comments out when she discovered, on the final pages of the student's essay, the student writer's own coming out story. Alongside this tale of a teacher's reading problem, another instructor added a story of her students' reading problem: once, while team teaching, she and her colleague fell in love. Although they thought their attraction to one another was obvious to the students, they discovered, to their surprise, in the evaluations for the course that the students thought the two women hated each other. And this led, in turn, to a related story about a contextual preference for how one is seen: an instructor described how he prefers to call himself a "fag," even though that phrase isn't, and perhaps never has been, in vogue, and that he allows certain of his friends refer to him this way as well.

Story made way for story, with some instructors, gay and straight alike, drawing on the tropes of the coming out narrative for their own devices and others, gay and straight alike, remaining studiously silent. And then, something happened that pulled the plug on the high-pitched energy of the class, something that halted all the excited talk and opened a sea of confused silence: one of the instructors highjacked the narrative structure and “came out” to the class as a . . . Christian. Speaking about the separation of church and state, this instructor went on to share her fears about the consequences of making this aspect of herself known to her students (her students might complain; she might be accused of proselytizing; she might be dismissed as a kook; she might lose her job . . .). In the moment, no one knew quite what to say, so we took a break, and came back to reflect on what had happened in the discussion and its aftereffects, including the rush some instructors made to meet the final speaker in the hall and thank her for having the courage to make her statement.

What interests me about this concatenation of events is the way it dramatizes the impossibility of maintaining the opposition between “the academic” and “the personal”: although the revelation of one’s spiritual commitments, in this case, may be seen to produce the kind of revulsion and confusion discussed earlier, it also shows that the question of which kind of personal experience produces revulsion and which kind garners cultural capital is always a contextual matter. Of course, what gets seen as merely personal and better left unsaid in the academy has shifted and continues to shift over time and across locations: in this instance, the birth of gay and lesbian criticism has made it possible to place issues of sexuality and marginality on course syllabi, on conference programs, and in class discussions, whereas at one time such a move would have been thought impossible. And, as these issues move towards the center of work in the humanities, other issues, such as spirituality and religion, either recede to the horizon of concern or emerge as undeveloped areas to be exploited.

It goes without saying that what is permissible in one English graduate seminar is generalizable neither to all English departments nor to the culture at large: my point is not that there has been a complete sea change within the academy which has legitimized the discussion of personal experience insofar as that experience is framed in terms of sexual preference. I would argue, rather, that the chain of stories taken from my seminar shows how the solicitation of one kind of personal narrative simultaneously prohibits the production of other kinds of narratives. To have the right kind of personal experience is what matters, for this is what allows one to accrue cultural capital within a given institutional context. This explains why, in this instance, once a certain kind of personal narrative was seen to be institutionally authorized, there was the seemingly natural proliferation of a series of stories which, however ambiguous, served to sanction the right of certain members of the seminar to speak and to withhold that right from others. Thus, in place of revulsion, attraction and reproduction: not, “when is this guy going to stop talking about his life?” but “how can I find a way to show that this guy’s life and my life aren’t so

different?" Here, the sense of community that is established through the telling of similar tales is disrupted when someone brings the wrong kind of experience to the table—the seminar's reaction replicating, in miniature, those regular scenes at our national conferences where invariably someone feels the need to castigate the members of any given panel for going on about ludic postmodernism, the pre-lack lack, critical pedagogy, or whatever, while the streets outside are filled with ever more homeless people. The comment bifurcates the crowd: the smattering of applause, the sneering response to such feeble expressions of vulgar populism, the inevitable argument that the work of the academy has effects in the world that are never easy to determine, and the unvoiced sentiment that what we do really doesn't matter because it doesn't materially address the living or working conditions of the economically oppressed.

\*

Having considered how, in one context, the revelation of personal experience can be met with revulsion and how, in another context, it can attract admiration, provoke discussion, and even invite imitation, I want to turn now to a final example, one that redirects our discussion of what it means to get seen or be heard. In *The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison describes a world where the option of telling one's story and having it heard is not available to the novel's central character, Pecola Breedlove. Living a life of almost unspeakable horror, Pecola is ignored, humiliated, beaten by her mother, taunted by classmates for being ugly, stupid, and poor, and eventually raped and impregnated by her drunken, violent father. Unable to escape her situation or to understand what has been done to her, Pecola dreams of becoming beautiful, of acquiring the physical attributes that the dominant culture most values in its little girls: she is, as her savior/destroyer Soaphead Church describes her, "an ugly little girl asking for beauty. . . . A little black girl who wanted to rise up out of the pit of her blackness and see the world with blue eyes" (174). It is Soaphead who provides Pecola with the ritual she must perform in order to get her wish: she must feed his landlady's dog a piece of meat which he will provide. If the dog acts strangely, she may expect her wish to be granted within two days. Pecola does as she is told, unknowingly poisoning the dog, and watches helplessly as the dog dies at her feet.

In this way, through the machinations of a particularly brutal sort of logic, Pecola gets what she asked for: the novel ends with a dialogue taking place between two voices in her head, arguing over whether or not she has the bluest eyes. As Claudia, the novel's narrator, puts it, a "little black girl yearns for the blue eyes of a little white girl, and the horror at the heart of her yearning is exceeded only by the evil of fulfillment" (204). But what exactly is it that Pecola yearns for? The answer is not as obvious as it may at first seem, though Claudia's explanation and the at times weighty didacticism of the novel might lead one to stop with the answer

provided by the title. Soaphead Church assumes that she “wants to see the world with blue eyes,” but the truth is that Pecola already sees the world with blue eyes when she appears in his doorway asking for his help: she needs him because she already sees herself as ugly by all the standards of beauty that are metonymically invoked in the symbol of “blue eyes.” The horror of Pecola’s desire is not that she wants to see the world the way white people do, but that she wants to be seen by the world that is ruled by this standard of beauty. She thinks that having blue eyes will allow her to surface in other people’s vision, that possession of these eyes will shatter her loneliness and isolation by providing her with the physical material necessary to be a member of the human community. She doesn’t want to change how she sees the world: she wants to change her body so that the world will begin to see her. And the only way for Pecola to realize her desire, given the blunt, inertial resistance of the body to a transformation of this magnitude, is to go mad.

\*

Having set out to focus on the interplay between the personal and the academic, the body and the mind, the private and the public, I have ended up working through a variety of ways of defining the project of rhetoric. I began with the most familiar definition, that of rhetoric as persuasion, as the process of convincing others of their need for us. I then looked at rhetoric as production and re-production, as a discursive process of creating a space, a frame, a narrative structure where others can begin to have our experiences, to see the world the way we do. I have concluded with a view of rhetoric as transformative, as an activity whereby we remake ourselves in the image of those in power. I have also tried to imply throughout that the constitution of the “we” in the previous sentences varies according to context and that both those in power and those on the margins draw on all three definitions of rhetoric in their shared and mutually antagonistic efforts to secure access to the ephemeral, but nonetheless real, effects of possessing cultural capital.

Although being fluent in these various modes of rhetorical work is important, fluency alone does not insure that any of these rhetorical approaches will include the dialogic aspect which I deem to be axiologically necessary if the process of composing is ever to serve the function of generating hope. Thus, I would like to suggest, in closing, that we expand our notion of the rhetorical project to include the ongoing work of learning how to make oneself heard in a variety of contexts. In making this suggestion, I mean, for the moment, to uncouple the pieces of the game I’ve referred to throughout this essay, to separate “I can see you” from “I can hear you.” Out of all the examples I’ve discussed, Pecola perhaps best illustrates the limits of concentrating exclusively on the importance of being seen—which, within the context of our current discussion, can be extended to mean establishing one’s presence in the field, making oneself a visible member of the profession, bolstering

one's vita, publishing just to publish. All of these activities are vital: all of them have their pleasures; all are unmistakably important to maintaining one's employment; and all provide opportunities for reallocating cultural capital. But, granting this, what would happen if we also thought about our work as learning how to speak and write so others could hear us? How might we do this? And how might we learn to teach others how to do this as well?

In his essay "Nihilism in Black America," Cornel West suggests that "cultures are, in part, what human beings create (out of antecedent fragments of other cultures) in order to convince themselves not to commit suicide" (40). This is a remarkable postulate, one that implies that the threat of self-annihilation is ever-present and that the work of culture is to sustain an ongoing battle against this threat. Although I am uncomfortable with the "politics of conversion" that West goes on to advocate as the way to address the nihilistic tendencies in the black community, I know now that this discomfort itself needs to be explored as a site where my own cultural assumptions express themselves as a naturally experienced sense of distaste. Even so, while West by virtue of *his* position can "get away with" saying, "Nihilism is not overcome by arguments or analyses; it is tamed by love and care," by virtue of my own position as a writing instructor I know that "love and care" do not naturally or automatically translate into a pedagogical practice that meaningfully alters the students' experience of reading and writing in the academy, nor does the extension of "love and care" alone significantly improve the likelihood that students will experience success in these endeavors. For my purposes, these goals become imaginable when I conceive of the work of the classroom as an ongoing project where I learn how to hear what my students are saying. Learning to do this helps me to find a way to speak that they can hear. It also makes it possible for them to learn how to hear what I, as a representative of the academy, am saying and how to speak, read, and write in ways that I can hear. This is the only approach I know of for making the classroom a possible resource for hope and it is the only mechanism I've found for transforming recitations and revelations of personal experience into moments for reflection and revision about the complex, conflicted, and contradictory ways that culture makes its presence known in the day-to-day workings of one's life.

To use the classroom in this way is to attend quite closely to the inevitable conflicts that occur between the expectations created by the student's lived experience of the world and the academy's efforts to master that world. This doesn't mean that the teacher is restricted to soliciting either recordings of personal experience or rehearsals of the assigned material. On the contrary, it means that students are persistently required to play the personal against the theoretical, the fictional against the real, facts against interpretations, not to establish the primacy of any one of the terms in these binary oppositions, but rather to forestall for as long as possible slipping into the simple and satisfying binarism that allows anyone the comfort of relaxing into a settled position, such as saying that Michel Foucault is

either evil incarnate or the twentieth century's most luminous genius. What the students are required to do, instead, is to perform the same activities as they read and write in the academy that everyone must perform every day of their lives out in the world—that is, they must test out their theories about what it means to live a good life against their own lived experiences. The inevitable gnarl of contradictions that results when such a project is embarked upon, when the personal and the academic are set loose and allowed to interrogate one another with no predetermined outcome, is evidence, I would argue, that a different kind of “writing that matters” is getting produced, a kind of writing that seeks, as Foucault himself sought in revising his project on the history of sexuality, “to learn to what extent the effort to think one's own history can free thought from what it silently thinks, and so enable it to think differently” (*Use* 9).

\*

The importance of revision, of learning to speak in ways that others can hear, has never before impressed itself on me with the force that it has now, for during the past weeks I have had to ask myself whether or not my professional training in the arts of language use has provided me with anything that I would call, in the current context, “really useful knowledge.” As Adrienne Rich has said in “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision” (an essay I’ve had in the back of my mind throughout this discussion), “For a poem to coalesce, for a character or an action to take shape, there has to be an imaginative transformation of reality which is in no way passive. . . . Moreover, if the imagination is to transcend and transform experience it has to question, to challenge, to conceive of alternatives, perhaps to the very life you are living at that moment” (471). Recalling Cornel West’s definition of culture, we might well say that the means to combat nihilism and to hope for change are contained in this ability to imagine a transformed reality, for it is this ability, as Rich’s own biography amply illustrates, that allows us to construct an alternative to the lives we have been living.

\*

Sitting in my father’s room on the psychiatric ward, holding his shaking hands, paring his fingernails so he won’t cut himself, I see just how difficult such an imaginative transformation of reality is. He is afraid, he tells me, of everything: of being locked away for good this time, of his decaying body, of what his doctor is going to think, of things innumerable and unnameable. It is as if he were physically trapped inside his own fears. As I listen to him struggle to find some way to relax, I sense that he is making his way back from the madness, battling a set of internal and

external systems that had made the decision to live untenable once again. He understands this time that just medicating the body is insufficient; he must also learn a new language, learn how to tell the stories that he has never told in order to escape the terrible power they have over him.

\*

Sustaining a self and sustaining a culture are ceaseless activities. Both projects are always under construction and always under repair, although this endless work may escape our notice until a moment of crisis makes the grinding of the machinery suddenly audible to us. To engage actively in the process of constructing a self is to replace a sense of destiny with the vision of an uncertain future. Similarly, to think of culture as not only present in a series of intellectual debates carried out in the academy but also as the varying registers of taste and distaste physically experienced in the body is to take down the cordon separating the public and the private and to recognize that all intellectual projects are always, inevitably, also autobiographies. Thus, whether one is constructing a self or studying a culture, one must confront the sheer necessity for acquiring a kind of multi-vocal fluency, an ability to hear things previously shut out or ignored, to attend to matters that might otherwise be overlooked or dismissed as irrelevant, to accept, in effect, the fact that learning to speak in such a way that one gets heard is a lifelong project that involves, perhaps paradoxically, first learning how to listen better to others.

With the judicious substitution of a word here, a phrase there, it would be obvious that the lessons outlined above could be said to be basic to any composition classroom that conceives of revision not as the act of tidying up past transgressions, but as the ongoing process of entertaining alternatives. For it is through such revision that change becomes imaginable, escape from the lonely, isolated world of the merely personal becomes possible, and the redemptive power of theory becomes tangible. Believing in revision of this kind is not an intellectual feat of denial—the kind of necessary fiction that gets one to work every day; it is, rather, the very matter of a pedagogical practice that conceives of writing not in terms of apprenticeship, nor as the process whereby the teacher is asexually reproduced in the student, nor as the activity of transmitting and recording a body of truths, but as a place to see and re-see the components and possible trajectories of one's lived experience and to situate and re-situate that experience within a world of other thoughts and other embodied reactions. Writing of this kind can, I believe, generate material for constructing a more humane and hospitable life-world by providing the very thing the academy is currently most in need of: a technology for producing and sustaining the hope that tomorrow will be better than today and that it is worth the effort to see to it that such hopes aren't unfounded.

## NOTE

1. In "Self Fashioning in Discourse: Foucault and the Freshman Writer," Kurt Spellmeyer draws attention to the fact that Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg's *The Rhetorical Tradition* effectively prevents this insight from being made by excluding the final part of Foucault's talk, which reconnects "Foucault's own discourse to motives, memory, intention—to the people (not the texts, but people) from whom he learned the most" (90 n. 11). The same editorial decision was made by Hazard Adams and Leroy Searle in their anthology, *Critical Theory Since 1965*. In this way, we can see evidence of how, at the level of textbook production, the division between the personal and the academic is inscribed and re-inscribed.

## WORKS CITED

- Adams, Hazard, and Leroy Searle, eds. *Critical Theory Since 1965*. Tallahassee: Florida State UP, 1986.
- Bartholomae, David. "Inventing the University." *When a Writer Can't Write*. Ed. Mike Rose. New York: Guilford P, 1985. 134–64.
- Bizzell, Patricia, and Bruce Herzberg. *The Rhetorical Tradition*. Boston: St. Martin's, 1990.
- Bloom, Lynn Z. "What I Did on My Summer Vacation: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Ordinary Life." Presented at CCCC, Washington, DC. March 25, 1995.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Trans. Richard Nice. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1984.
- Brodkey, Linda. "Writing on the Bias." *College English* 56.5 (1994): 527–47.
- Elbow, Peter. "Being a Writer vs. Being an Academic: A Conflict in Goals." *CCC* 46.1 (1995): 72–83.
- Foucault, Michel. "The Order of Discourse." Trans. Ian MacLeod. *Untying the Text*. Ed. Robert Young. New York: Routledge, 1981. 48–78.
- . *The Use of Pleasure*. Trans. Robert Hurley. New York: Vintage, 1985.
- McQuade, Donald. "Living In—and On—the Margins." *CCC* 43.1 (1992): 11–22.
- Morrison, Toni. *The Bluest Eye*. 1970. New York: Penguin, 1994.
- Rich, Adrienne. "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision." Rpt. in *Ways of Reading*. 3d ed. Ed. David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky. Boston: St. Martin's, 1993. 463–81.
- Sommers, Nancy. "Between the Drafts." *CCC* 43.1 (1993): 23–31.
- Spellmeyer, Kurt. "Self-Fashioning in Discourse: Foucault and the Freshman Writer." *Common Ground*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1993. 67–92.
- Tompkins, Jane. "Pedagogy of the Distressed." *College English* 52.6 (1990): 653–60.
- Welch, Nancy. "Resisting the Faith: Conversion, Resistance, and the Training of Teachers." *College English* 55.4 (1993): 387–401.
- West, Cornel. "Nihilism in Black America." *Black Popular Culture*. Ed. Gina Dent. Seattle: Bay P, 1992. 37–47.