

Finding a Voice: Reconciling Discourses in Student Work

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FIRST-YEAR UNIVERSITY STUDENTS do not always know what they are trying to write. The problem certainly is not confined to each student's freshman year—sophomores, seniors, professional writers, and academics all face it. But the struggle to reconcile competing and often contradictory ways of thinking, speaking, and writing are made particularly acute for many first-year students because they are asked to adopt new, sometimes discipline-specific language and methods and use them in internally persuasive ways. They are not just supposed to sound like academics—they are supposed to think like them.

In his seminal article “Inventing the University,” David Bartholomae describes the problem when he writes that students “will need to learn to crudely mimic the ‘distinctive register’ of academic discourse before they are prepared to actually and legitimately do the work of the discourse” (83). Bartholomae treats this necessity with some ambivalence, but his argument goes to the heart of the debate between writing across the disciplines and writing within them, or what Jonathan Hall describes as “bottom up” and “top down” approaches (17). The debate forces us to ask whether students should begin to mimic discipline-specific ways of writing and thinking in an effort to one day fully embody those methods, or if instead they should appropriate a set of practices universal to good writing, regardless of discipline. The trouble with this dichotomy is that it glosses the ways of thinking, speaking, and writing that students already bring to the first day of a first-year writing seminar. It ignores, also, that even successful academic writers do not occupy a space fully divorced from the non-academic discourses acting on them. Successful writers do not just don a particular discourse like a mask, but instead reconcile that discourse with other shaping influences.

Judith Goleman wrote that the internally persuasive voice “lies not in some effort to carve out for oneself an autonomous realm of language ... but rather to become a more knowing participant in the social dialogue that constitutes all discourse” (44). Students entering college are challenged to become “knowing participants” in just this way. They are faced with the challenge of finding their place within the university—not inventing it so much as inscribing themselves upon it. If this is the goal of academic writing—to bring the individual’s discourse into contact with a larger discourse, or to enter the conversation, as Kenneth Burke writes—then our goal should be to understand as fully as possible how this process takes place.

What I offer here is an examination of how one student, Jennie Miller¹, sought to reconcile those discourses in her first-year writing seminar at the University of Connecticut. Like many programs, UConn offers a hybrid between interdisciplinary and disciplinary approaches to writing. Students choose between two kinds of first-year seminars: a discipline-specific literature seminar and an interdisciplinary, rhetorically-based seminar. Both courses, however, involve elements of interdisciplinary work, and although Miller chose the literature seminar, she gravitated toward an interdisciplinary approach. When she tried to appropriate what she thought were specifically academic methods of inquiry, her writing seemed like the mimicry Bartholomae discusses. For Miller, the best approach was also the messiest—by allowing many discourses to enter her work, she produced the most interesting, complex, and ultimately, I would argue, effective papers. When she tried to appropriate what she perceived to be an academic, discipline-specific way of approaching her subject, her efforts came off sounding hollow.

My goal here is not to imply Miller’s experience is universal. Each student brings her or his own sets of competing discourses which must be reconciled with academic methods in unique ways. But by closely examining the ways one student reconciled or failed to reconcile competing voices, we can more deeply understand the process of appropriating and organizing these voices. By understanding how Miller struggled when she attempted to write in a discipline-specific way, we can better understand how flexible writing instructors must be in opening up new areas of inquiry, offering new approaches, and allowing students to discover an academic voice on their own terms.

¹ I have changed the student’s name at her request.

“The Modern Hunger Artist” and Double-Voiced Narration

In the first assignment of the semester, Miller and other students were asked to use Susan Bordo’s essay “Beauty (Re)discovers the Male Body” as a lens through which they might view Franz Kafka’s short story “A Hunger Artist.”² The goal of the assignment was to get students thinking about the ways that different, disconnected texts might interact, and the ways in which ideas from one text might inform or implicate ideas in another. Bordo’s essay is about the use of the male body in contemporary advertising, particularly Calvin Klein ads. Kafka’s short story, on the other hand, is about a man starving himself as a kind of performance art—struggling as an uninterested public ignores him, and by extension his body, by greater and greater degrees. When Miller tackled this paper topic, she struggled to reconcile competing discourses—the language of the literary critic, the language of the pop-psychologist, the language of personal frustration. But the struggle was ultimately a fruitful one. While the paper does little to reconcile these competing ways of speaking, it opens the door to real complexity.

Before examining how various discourses interact in Miller’s paper, “The Modern Hunger Artist,” it will be important to define a “competing discourse.” M.M. Bakhtin’s definition of “double-voiced narration,” which appears in “Discourse in the Novel,” is critical to this. Bakhtin conceives of multiple voices working behind a single utterance. He writes: “Retelling a text in one’s own words is to a certain extent a double-voiced narration of another’s words, for indeed ‘one’s own words’ must not completely dilute the quality that makes another’s words unique” (341). In Bakhtin’s vision, each word is imbued not only with the speaker’s intended meaning, but with a whole history of meanings acting on that word. This concept—of the social, political, and historical implications of words passing through a speaker or writer on their way to a reader or listener—is critical to understanding how different discourses compete within a single utterance. As a writer retells the words of another writer, the words she uses in retelling necessarily contain competing meanings. But discrete utterances compete, as well. Thomas E. Recchio addresses this in his essay “A Bakhtinian Reading of Student Writing.” Recchio argues that the boundaries between different disciplines, from psychology to literary criticism, are not absolute. Despite this, students who are unaware that the boundaries exist at all might struggle to sort out the ways

² The Bordo essay was taken from *Ways of Reading* and the Kafka story came from an anthology compiled specifically for the University of Connecticut Freshman English Program. The assignment came from this instructor.

in which these disciplines compete. Recchio writes: “Our students have a great deal of difficulty recognizing the conflicting, though potentially enriching, claims made on them by the modes of discourse they bring with them into the classroom and by new modes of discourse they encounter there” (446-7). In this, one might hear echoes of Bartholomae’s proposal that each student invent herself as “an historian or an anthropologist or an economist” (61). But Recchio’s argument forces us to move beyond this: realizing historians and anthropologists and economists interanimate one another, not only because their disciplines intersect, but because their personal histories as thinking people, as speakers and listeners caught in various discourses, intersect.³

Miller’s first paper is interesting for this very reason—it demonstrates this interanimation, although it never fully reconciles it. Her paper contains double-voiced narration in the strictly Bakhtinian sense, but it also contains the conflicted, discrete utterances Recchio explores. In arguing a comparison between the women objectified in the advertisements that Bordo describes and the hunger artist in Kafka’s story, Miller writes:

Women love being looked at because it leaves them feeling attractive; it boosts their self-esteem and without the approval of others, especially those of the opposite sex, women feel unwanted and deprived. Men, however, are, or at least have been known to be the opposite. Men are known to avoid ‘the Look’. [Simone de] Beauvoir’s lover and soul mate, Jean-Paul Sartre refers to other people’s stares as “the ‘hell’ that other people represent” (Bordo 134). This idea of women, as opposed to men, wanting to be pursued, further compliments the argument that the hunger artist exhibits feminine qualities.

In many ways, this performance is strikingly good. She has managed to connect the experiences of contemporary women and men with the relationship between Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre with the events Kafka depicts in “A Hunger Artist.” But, of course, the performance has limitations. An instructor might write in

³ Recchio writes: “Experienced writers work quite self-consciously with their assumptions as they read and write, working out the relation between those assumptions and what a text may say or imply about them. Often for our students, however, assumptions emerge unconsciously as they write about what they take to be the ‘subject’ of the reading” (447). This gets to the heart of the challenge with Miller’s writing. Even in the work I would identify as most successful—the papers “The Modern Hunger Artist” and “The Effects of the Mass Media on Women”—Miller did little to question basic assumptions. But she did make attempts to synthesize different, competing ideas in interesting and compelling ways. In what I would identify as her least successful writing, “Commentators on the 2008 Presidential Election,” Miller tried to model strictly academic language and closed off uncomfortable assumptions and ideas that might have complicated her argument.

the margins “Which women love being looked at?” or “How do we know men avoid ‘the Look?’” He might ask whether the hunger artist truly wants to be pursued in the way she’s describing or if, for the artist, the gaze is also a kind of hell. The passage is revelatory, though, because it demonstrates Miller’s competing discourses so clearly. There are three discrete discourses I would like to highlight in this passage, but each of these discourses has a sub-text, or perhaps a meta-text, which changes the way we must interpret it.

Miller begins the passage with a pop-psychological approach: “Women love being looked at because it leaves them feeling attractive; it boosts their self-esteem.” The passage calls upon the vocabulary of the self-help book or the magazine article, with the broad generalities about what “women love” and the use of pseudo-psychological vocabulary like “self-esteem.” But the passage also contains double-voiced narration which we, as readers, do not have complete access to. In one way or another, the phrase “women love being looked at” carries with it Miller’s personal history as a woman—it either rings true to her experience or does not; we have no way of knowing. There is also a certain amount of common knowledge or common wisdom in this early part of the passage. That “feeling attractive” will “boost their self-esteem” seems so obvious it almost goes without saying—except, of course, it is not precisely true. Feeling attractive might produce anxiety for those who associate sex with religious prohibitions, have memories of uncomfortable sexual experiences, or feel shame about their own sexual proclivities. But the truism that “feeling attractive” will “boost their self-esteem” functions as received wisdom, and Miller does little to question it.

Next, Miller makes a transition from the pop-psychological to the philosophical-historical. She takes an idea presented by Sartre—that hell is other people—and transforms it for her purposes: “Jean-Paul Sartre refers to other people’s stares as ‘the hell’ that other people represent.” This is useful for her because Sartre, by extension, can be taken to represent men. “Men are known to avoid ‘the Look,’” she writes. Again, an instructor might raise a number of questions: “Who says men avoid ‘the Look?’” or “What was the context of Sartre’s explanation of hell?” Despite that, Miller is drawing the kinds of connections central to academic writing. She has taken an idea, produced in a particular, historical time and place, and transferred it to explain her own work. And, again, one can find double-voiced narration, from the awkwardly romantic description of Simone de Beauvoir as Sartre’s “lover and soul mate” to the commonplace description of men as “known to avoid” the gaze of other people. It’s interesting that Miller is essentially repeating Bordo’s claim about men and the gaze,

albeit with fewer qualifications. When Miller tries to reproduce Bordo's ideas and move them forward, her description comes off as reductive: "men are known to avoid" that gaze she writes. But the failure here is not entirely conceptual. It is not that Miller has failed to understand essentially what Bordo was saying; it is that she has failed to fully appropriate the academic methods required to deal with Bordo's ideas: to question them, complicate them, and qualify them.

The final transition in the passage brings the reader into contact with an academic-critical voice. Miller writes: "The idea of women, as opposed to men, wanting to be pursued, further compliments the argument that the hunger artist exhibits feminine qualities." One can see her forwarding the earlier ideas, bending them toward her own purpose. Sartre, de Beauvoir, contemporary women and men, and the hunger artist have all been used here with the aim of furthering Miller's argument, of saying that the hunger artist is essentially a feminine figure. She is on the right track, trying to use the ideas of others to create new ideas. But, because the voices Miller uses to convey these ideas are un-reconciled, she cannot carry off her goal. The connections between Sartre and contemporary men, between the gaze and the hunger artist, have not been fully explored. As a result, her conclusion comes off sounding simplistic and unconvincing: women like the gaze and the hunger artist likes the gaze, ergo the hunger artist is a woman. It is important to note, however, that Miller has gathered all the tools she might need for a much more convincing argument. She has drawn disparate voices together, begun exploring how those voices might interanimate one another, and related all of those voices to her argument. The paper has perhaps not gone far enough, but it is going in the right direction.

"Commentators on the 2008 Presidential Election" and the Easily Proven Thesis

Miller's final paper of the semester, entitled "Commentators on the 2008 Presidential Election," put forward the argument that most political writers and pundits rely on logical fallacies, like the ad hominem attack, to make their cases to the public.⁴ Miller wrote that the arguments of those pundits are problematic, at best. Compared

⁴ The assignment in this case began when each student was asked to develop a research question based on any of the readings done in class. The research questions guided inquiry and led to several class discussions. When students wrote their first drafts, they had the option of writing about virtually anything. The only restriction was that students were not allowed to write about a topic they had written about before. At this point, Miller had written two papers about Bordo's work, and had to choose another topic. It's possible she was less interested in writing the "Commentators" paper than she had been in writing earlier papers.

to “The Modern Hunger Artist,” “Commentators” is extremely well-organized and cogent. In the latter paper, Miller makes her argument clearly in the first paragraph, maintains a single voice nearly throughout, and does yeoman’s work adopting a kind of academic language. But her final paper is limiting in ways her first paper is not. Firstly, the thesis in “Commentators” is virtually self-evident. Secondly, and more importantly, much of the paper suppresses interanimating voices in favor of the kind of rote identification and categorization of logical fallacies one might have seen when Max Shulman was an undergraduate.⁵ Miller has adopted a kind of academic discourse, albeit a slightly outdated one, but in doing so has limited the array of voices available to her. If the goal of composition instruction is to get students to adopt an internally consistent, internally persuasive voice that reconciles the competing discourses they bring to their work, then Miller’s final paper is extremely problematic.⁶

“Commentators” begins with what might be identified as a classic composition essay introduction. Miller sets up her discussion in broad terms by explaining that “with the presidential election, commentators have more than enough material to speculate on and opinions to convey to their audiences.” The first sentence gives the reader a sense of what she will discuss: the 2008 election and, more specifically, the commentators analyzing that election. Miller goes on to state her thesis, writing that commentators mislead their audiences “through the use of comparisons and common fallacies, such as ad hominem, confirmation bias and begging the question among others.” Here, she has given herself a task to complete: quote a series of political commentators and demonstrate that their arguments are fallacious. The paper lives up to that expectation. Miller introduces writings by George Packer, William Kristol, *Slate’s* John Dickerson, and *The National Review’s* Byron York. With a balance of pundits from the left and right, she demonstrates with greater or lesser success that each has committed logical fallacies. Her conclusion sums up her argument.

⁵ Shulman, whose short story “Love is a Fallacy” hilariously parodies the tweedy, midcentury academic’s obsession with logical fallacies, graduated from the University of Minnesota in 1942 (Barron A16).

⁶ There might be several, practical reasons for this. Firstly, students often have less time to write at the end of the semester, when they’re writing final papers and studying for final exams in other classes. Miller also showed less interest in this paper. Although students were allowed to pick paper topics from any of the readings they’d done in class, Miller said she wasn’t particularly enthusiastic about the topic she finally settled on. And, finally, the instructor spent much of the semester talking—perhaps reductively—about ways to craft a coherent argument and organize an academic essay.

As she goes about proving her thesis, the shortcomings of her paper become clear. On the third page of “Commentators,” Miller takes apart a William Kristol column. She writes:

[Kristol] goes on to say that Obama’s only great accomplishment was his well-run campaign. Accompanying this backhanded compliment, he compares Obama to presidents Bush and Carter, suggesting they too had well-run campaigns that did not translate into good presidencies, and his most likely will not as well. The journalist here utilizes another common fallacy, begging the question (or assuming the answer).

Miller identifies the fallacy in Kristol’s argument (although there might be several other fallacies at work there, as well), but does little else. There is no sense of why we should care that Kristol is making a problematic argument, nor is there any sense of what motivates Kristol’s fallacious reasoning. More importantly, though, there is no sense that Miller has found a motivating, internally consistent voice. After explaining the fallacies in Kristol’s thinking, she goes on to examine fallacies in George Packer’s *New Yorker* writing. The paper becomes a sort of catalogue of fallacious reasoning, and is largely disconnected from any sense of Miller’s goal as a writer. She does not seem to have a goal.⁷

This is not to say the paper is completely without competing discourses, only that these competing discourses are often subsumed into a larger, authoritative discourse. Miller’s writing is, in some ways, double-voiced. Immediately after the above passage, she writes: “Maybe [Kristol’s] argument that the people of the United States should vote for the Republican Party would have had a bigger impact on his readers if he highlighted McCain’s strengths instead of attempting to deteriorate Obama’s image while making his supporters look incompetent.” One might sense in this passage some anger at Kristol, but I suspect the voice at work here has actually been borrowed from the TV pundits who call for campaigns to be more positive. Instead of “attempting to deteriorate” Obama, Miller seems to be saying that Kristol should extol the virtues of his own favorite candidate and leave the rest to the voters. Regardless of where this voice comes from, though, Miller’s paper has limited itself. Unlike her first paper,

⁷ The instructor may bear some responsibility for this. In a class discussion dealing with two pieces of political commentary, he discussed how both writers were using faulty reasoning—in that particular case, an *ad hominem* attack and an *ad populum* appeal. This likely had something to do with Miller’s decision to write about logical fallacies in this context.

in which many voices clamored for attention, here we have, at most, a reasoned list of logical fallacies and a disconnected, common sense scold.

As a result, Miller is left at the end of her paper with little to say. She has demonstrated that four different writers employ logical fallacies, and she concludes by writing, “Through articles with clear undertones, specific perspectives and heavy ridicule, political journalists demonstrate to their audience which party they are in favor of.” It is not entirely clear what she is trying to say. Is she arguing simply that political commentators try to convince their audiences? Or is she saying that they unfairly characterize their opponents, using “heavy ridicule” and “common fallacies”? Is she trying to say journalists persuade by using historical examples? And, if so, what is so wrong about that? Here, I think, Miller is lost. By tying her paper to what she perceived was an academic mode of writing, she has kept herself from exploring any of her examples in depth. Her conclusions seem convoluted precisely because they do not come from her own analysis—they are borrowed from a kind of university discourse, albeit a somewhat outdated one. Miller has bluffed her way in: look at that dense prose, with phrases like “clear undertones” and “specific perspectives.” But the bluff is precisely that, a bluff. Unlike in her first paper, where she struggled with too much to say, now she struggles with too little.

“The Effects of the Mass Media on Women” and Reconciling Discourses

While Miller never fully reconciled the competing voices in her work during the first-year writing seminar, she perhaps came closest in her second paper of the semester: “The Effects of Mass Media on Women.” Here, Miller took her interest in Bordo’s writing—she read *Unbearable Weight*, about images of women in the media—and extended it into an essay about the pressures young women experience as they confront the world of beauty in magazines, on television, and on the Internet. In a response paper about her own writing, Miller said she enjoyed her work on this project. She explained, “I liked that we got to pick our own topics, so I was actually interested in what I was writing about.” The paper was cogent, straightforward, and made an argument that, while not particularly unique, was certainly persuasive.⁸ The paper is

⁸ The assignment here was to take any of the texts she had read in class, find five other, related texts, and make an argument. Students didn’t have to use all five other texts in their papers, although they did have to create an annotated bibliography showing how they might use the other texts. Miller, who said she didn’t like writing about Kafka’s short story but loved writing about Bordo’s essay, chose to write primarily about *Unbearable Weight* and “Beauty (Re)discovers the Male Body.”

also remarkable for its ability to reconcile the voices of the gender theorist, the social scientist, the feminist critic, and the young woman personally concerned with body image issues. On the fifth page of her paper, Miller slips into the realm of the social scientist, but manages her voice much more confidently than she did in her first paper. She writes:

One of the two more common eating disorders that are developed in females is anorexia nervosa, an emotional disorder characterized by an obsessive desire to lose weight by refusing to eat. The other is bulimia nervosa, which is also an emotional disorder, but one that involves the distortion of body image and an obsessive desire to lose weight, in which bouts of extreme overeating are followed by depression and self-induced vomiting, purging or fasting. Images in the media depicting women as beautiful almost always when they are underweight is very likely a factor that helps the distortion of body image in females. According to some, “the anorexic does not ‘misperceive’ her body; rather, she has learned all too well the dominant cultural standards of how to perceive” (Bordo 57) (citation original)

In some ways, this passage is very similar to passages in her first paper. There are discrete, identifiable voices at work here: the psychologist explaining eating disorders as medical conditions, the cultural theorist explaining them as social phenomena, and the student in the middle trying to reconcile the two approaches. The beginning of the passage, with its formal labeling of “anorexia nervosa” and “bulimia nervosa,” and an explanation of how anorexia is “characterized,” indicates the adoption of a medical voice—a voice that, by implication, considers the disease in light of risk factors, genetics, and upbringing. When Miller invokes Bordo, however, she is employing the voice of a cultural theorist, one who considers anorexia as a question of degree, not of type. In Bordo’s estimation, all women face the anorexic’s dilemma; the anorexic simply acts on it in an extreme way. These two voices are fundamentally at odds, and Miller’s sentence joining them—which begins “Images in the media . . .”—does little to connect the central ideas. But Miller does not stop there. Only a few lines after this passage, she writes: “It would be illogical to conclude that women could be relentlessly subjected to the media, whose focus is largely on attractiveness, without any ramifications.” Here, she has demonstrated an awareness of the contradictions in the earlier passage and reconciled them. She has chosen a side. She has taken, perhaps not surprisingly, a position close to Bordo’s. Rather than claiming anorexia is a kind of mental illness—a label that carries with it an implication that the majority of people maintain some form of

mental health—Miller has come to the conclusion that anorexia and bulimia are not really medical problems so much as cultural problems. One might argue she could have navigated this conflict better by making her argument more explicit and presenting her position in relation to particular medical thinkers. But regardless of whether she should have taken that approach, she has certainly produced a coherent argument in a relatively consistent voice.

I find the unaffectedness of this voice compelling. Unlike in “Commentators,” Miller does not rely on the jargon of academic disciplines here. In fact, she works against that jargon. Sure, she seems to be saying, this disorder is called “anorexia nervosa,” but really it’s more than just a disorder; its roots are buried in our collective psyche. I have the sense Miller has been convinced by her own thinking. And while she might be able to push her thinking further—see that the media isn’t solely responsible for anorexia—the paper seems to belong to Miller as a writer in ways the other papers simply do not.

In “Inventing the University,” Bartholomae writes that “Problems of convention are both problems of finish and problems of substance” (79). In other words, students can be unfamiliar with both the style of academic writing and the substantive ways academic writers approach problems. Miller faced both challenges when trying to write in a college setting, but dealt with them in different ways. In “Commentators,” she adopted a vaguely academic “finish” and allowed it to stand in for substance. The result was unconvincing. But in “Mass Media,” she adopted the rigorous methods of the academic and, although the finish might not have had all the trappings of an elaborate academic argument, the methods of interrogation were distinctly scholarly. Her success, though, was no bluff. She did not write cogent prose by faking the position of a cultural critic. In fact, when she tried to take up that position in “Commentators,” she produced a fairly meaningless argument. Rather, her success came from legitimately doing the work of a scholar: examining texts, checking them against her own sense of the world, and crafting an argument. The academic quality of “Mass Media” is a side effect of Miller’s argument, not the reverse.

This is critical for understanding how best to help students cope with the demands of writing in a university setting. In a short cover letter she turned in with her “Mass Media” paper, Miller wrote: “I liked that we got to pick our own topics, so I was actually interested in what I was writing about.” This is probably the most obvious reason her paper turned out well. But there is a risk in reading this too simplistically. Miller showed that she could turn in serviceable prose and coherent, if simplistic,

arguments even when she was not “interested,” as in the “Commentators” paper. But her interest in Susan Bordo’s writing did translate into a willingness to wrestle complex ideas on her own terms, a willingness to let her paper seem a little messy. And this, I would argue, should be the goal of a writing instructor—to help students reconcile ideas in internally consistent ways and differentiate between problems of finish and problems of substance.

Each student arrives at her introductory writing class with a complex history of interactions with language. It is only by bringing these ideas into conversation with the material at hand that students will be able to embody and take control of an “academic” voice. This might mean allowing students to write about what they are “interested” in, or it might mean spending more time exploring the conflicts between different perspectives and less time worrying about thesis statements and topic sentences. It might mean spending less time trying to help students write in ways that look academic, and more time trying to help them write in ways that are academic.

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