

Writing the Act, Reading the Act: A Response to Thomas Rickert

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In “‘Hands-Up, You’re Free’: Composition in a Post-Oedipal World,” Thomas Rickert works through the many paradoxical implications of progressive pedagogies that call on students to criticize authority under circumstances that make such writing “forms of adherence to authority” (300). Rickert is particularly concerned about approaches that privilege the categories of race, gender, and class, arguing that “composition in a post-oedipal world” must “take on the responsibility that comes with the impossibility of knowing the areas of contention and struggle that will be the most important in our students’ lives” (290–91). Rickert also criticizes approaches that “rely on modernist strategies of critical distance or political agency” because these approaches presuppose a disciplinary society whose institutions can be analyzed and transformed while our postmodern circumstances, he argues, are “no longer organized primarily through institutions to produce compliant, useful, and productive bodies” (290, 289). Already noncompliant, “post-oedipal” students have shown little interest in the promise of empowerment through critique because, in part, this is a “modernist approach” that attempts to “re-oedipalize” them through a “pedagogy of control” (291, 292).

Among the many interesting and hard questions that follow from Rickert’s analysis is one that focuses on how writing can be taught so that students experience the “inventive possibilities already inherent in post-oedipal subjectivities” rather than just cynically going through “their liberatory motions” (291–92, 300). Rickert’s answer to this question revolves around the notion of writing as a risky, transgressive act. Such an act disrupts the prevailing pedagogical fantasy that “if you are critical of power, you will be empowered.” This fantasy, he argues, reinscribes students in a pedagogy of control through a predetermined discursive field and is conducive to cynicism and reaction. In contrast, relinquishing control of a critical agenda designed “for the student’s own good,” an instructor can create the possibility for acts of risky writing that transform “the entire discursive field that determines what is proper and valued” (312). Such acts can teach an instructor to care about the students’ own sites of struggle—their importance and value. Writing the act shares with

punk rock “a surprising reinvention of the ordinary, the trivial, and the marginal” which, as Andrew Ross explains, “is creatively transformed into a volatile micropolitics” (112).

More than anything else Rickert says about a pedagogy for writing the act, more than his emphasis on it as “an exhortation to dare, to invent, to create, to risk,” more than his recognition of it as “unorthodox, unexpected, or troublesome work,” his emphasis on the act as a “volatile micropolitics” distinguishes this writing as a rhetorical event (314). Asserting their presence as historical subjects in a network of discursive practices, active writers demand from their instructors a commensurate response. Student writing thus takes a more genuinely transitive form than is customary and demands that the instructor read as an active historical subject in an actual literate event.

In the process of making a case for writing the act, Rickert raises the example of David Bartholomae who took eighteen years to figure out the “volatile micropolitics” of a paper he received as a novice instructor. In “The Tidy House,” Bartholomae offers a more adequate response to what he calls Quentin Pierce’s “Fuck You” paper than he was prepared to make at the time he received it. “In a sense,” Bartholomae writes, “I did not know how to read it. I could only ignore it” (6). Working with Bartholomae’s response to Quentin’s disturbing, fragmentary text, Rickert wisely begins to question the extent to which writing the act differentiates between papers or constitutes a way of reading all student writing:

There is a sense in which my reading of Quentin’s paper may also be a misreading because it implies that only certain, special works can function as “acts,” events, or transgressions. On the contrary, inventive resistance to control is always happening. Perhaps it is less the necessity of trying to produce its possibility—which in any event harkens back to strategies of control . . . —than trying simply to *recognize* it. We need to see how these *active* moments are already present in student writing in countless different ways, and classroom practices could creatively relinquish control in order to light up the thousand tiny resistances that they produce. (315)

As much as I regret that Rickert’s final metaphor recalls the well-known inaugural address of the senior George Bush, the point he makes represents a crucial self-correction. Without this correction, the binary drift of his key terms (oedipal/post-oedipal; modern/postmodern; subservient/transgressive) threatens to revive that other binary pair, master/student, with the master as judge of which students are authentic risk-

takers and which are not. Unfortunately, Rickert's self-correction is not followed by an examination of how one might "recognize" those "active moments" that "are already present in student writing." This is work that I am interested in and that I have pursued at some length (see *Working Theory*). Rather than reconstructing the theoretical framework I have used for reading the inherent micropolitics in student writing, I have chosen in this response to try to pick up where Rickert leaves off, trying on his terms and seeing where they take me in my own understanding of the student writing I have received.

I am especially interested in this effort because the one student paper cited in Rickert's essay, the one by Quentin Pierce, does not actually emerge from the critical pedagogy that is so much the focus of Rickert's critique. In "The Tidy House: Basic Writing in the American Curriculum," Bartholomae explains that Pierce's paper comes from the first course he ever taught, a course he was arbitrarily assigned after he asked the chair of his department for a chance to teach before finishing graduate school (5). In this sense, Quentin's "act" neither supports nor refutes Rickert's argument that cultural studies pedagogies have failed to stimulate students to write their own act. That Rickert claims that "Quentin refuses to find his writing act empowering" presupposes that empowerment was Bartholomae's goal, which it was not. About that first course, Bartholomae writes, "By some poor luck of the draw, about half of my students were students who we would now call 'basic writers.' I knew from the first week that I was going to fail them" (5). Without examining any student writing that comes from a deliberate critical pedagogy, Rickert can have it both ways, arguing that critical pedagogies need to be changed because they re-oedipalize students but that in the final analysis "inventive resistance to control is always happening" and that we should not design new pedagogies to elicit it; rather, we should learn to read for it. I cannot solve the problems raised by these somewhat different positions; however, I can slide into the gap created by them and look at a paper that I would say emerges from a better version of critical pedagogy than what Rickert imagines in his representation of politically correct composition instruction.

"Father's Shadow" was written by a student I'll call "John White." It was written in response to an assignment asking students to develop a complex portrait of someone they knew or a complex analysis of cause in relation to an event they had questions about. This inquiry assignment followed work on two essays in Bartholomae and Petrosky's *Ways of Reading*: Paul Auster's "Portrait of an Invisible Man" and John Edgar

Wideman's "Our Time." Auster and Wideman grapple, respectively, with the meaning of a father's death and a brother's crime using methods that could be said to enact what Rickert calls "post-oedipal forms of subjectivity" that "circumvent, forestall, or resist the replication of authoritarian or proto-violent modes of control" over their subjects—subjects who were themselves damaged by these modes (307). Students were asked to consider the uses to which they might put these methods in order to reconsider people and events in their own lives.

Upon completion of these complex portraits or complex causalities, the students (using pseudonyms) gathered their work into a class book that they then read and wrote about, choosing sets of papers whose relations to one another they found significant. This approach, I believe, resembles Rickert's recommendation that we "acknowledge that we do not always know best how to rectify social problems for [students], and . . . that we partially relinquish control to, and learn from, students." Such an approach, which Rickert calls "the next step for writing pedagogy," strikes me as already pretty well established, my reference to *Ways of Reading* being the most superficial marker of this acceptance. Still, the course is fraught with the contradictions of critical pedagogy that Rickert describes. On the one hand, as Rickert says, "content and methodology become intermeshed with student knowledges and experiences"; on the other, this knowledge and experience, as the students well know, will be assessed by the instructor for the quality of its questioning practices (291). What is different from the pedagogies that Rickert criticizes is that the essays by Auster and Wideman include passages where they agonize over the contradictory power relations that shape *their* discourse. Neither rising above nor capitulating to authoritative discourse relations, Auster and Wideman just keep working, trying one thing, trying another. In this way, they enact an attitude that could be said to illustrate what Rickert calls "the inventive possibilities . . . of post-oedipal subjectivities" that some students, I think, hear as requiring neither cynical aloofness nor slavish accommodation to the fantasy that this writing is for their own good (291–92). It is then up to the instructor to read, and to teach the students to read for, those passages that probe and challenge discourse relations of inevitability whatever the site of contention. In John White's paper, we have a chance to see what such a passage might look like and what we might learn about pedagogy from a reading of the micropolitics in his work.

Like many students in the class, John chooses to follow Auster's lead and to write about his father, asking himself and others in his family why

his father is so angry. The inquiry he has chosen is both difficult and risky, as he explains in the opening paragraphs:

To analyze my father is like trying to solve one of the hardest calculus problems. The complexity of his attitude and not knowing where to start makes this task nearly impossible yet as my writing proceeds I feel hopeful and optimistic that something will be revealed to me about his complex personality.

Beginning the paper is like placing the first piece of the puzzle on the table. What makes it even harder, is not knowing what the puzzle will reveal. So many pieces, none seem to fit, yet they all have to come together to form one uniform, clear picture.

Not only do I have a hard time composing the paper, but I also feel like I'm going behind my father's back and writing about him. I can't go out and tell him that I am doing an assignment that would revolve around him, because then I would have to restrict myself to write what he wants me to write about him.

In this opening, we learn that John is worried about "going behind his father's back." As if this is not burden enough, he also expresses concern that he must somehow meet the expectations of two conflicting rhetorics: the stated one that teaches that meaning is multiple and situational; the unstated one (which is the real one to him) that teaches that meaning is singular and fixed. This student, it would seem, is positioned where Rickert predicts that critical pedagogies will place him: in the impossible position of having to write a good, unified, college-level paper in a way that demonstrates that he has been liberated from unity's restrictions. However, another way of reading this opening is that John White (same first name and last initial as John Wideman) is mulling over his difficult situation, neither as a demonstration of his liberation nor of his subservience but as a blunt description of his difficult situation in which he may instead see where an active acknowledgment might take him. This stance resembles that of both Auster and Wideman. I am inclined toward this second, more promising reading, not only because it is in my interest, but also because it seems justified by what follows in the next six and one-half pages.

Consider, for instance, a long paragraph about halfway through the paper, one that pursues John's key question about his father: "why he has such a temper." Up to this point, John has revealed that his father, who was raised in "Europe," had a tyrannical father who expected his son to become a veterinarian. (He does not name the country, Poland, in order

to retain anonymity in the class book.) Reacting against his father's control, John's father joined the navy and became an electrical engineer. Away much of the time, he nevertheless maintained fierce expectations that his son excel in school, leading John to fear school because he "had to get good grades." Pursuing this line of thought at some length, John would appear to have explained a great deal about the way angry fathers can reproduce themselves in their sons. Having adequately fulfilled a conflict-producing assignment, one might conclude that if John were responding to this assignment only as a subservient demonstration of current critical methods, he would now be able to stop. But he does not stop. Instead he goes on to write many more pages, including the following paragraph that recalls features of writing "the act" that Rickert describes. Pinpointing his father's favorite expression—"Don't try to make a fool out of me"—John shines a red laser on valued language in his father's discursive field:

Till this day I don't understand why he has such a temper. There is no doubt in my mind that the navy has altered his way of being. I also believe that the way he was brought up influenced his reasoning and his attitude. I think that one of the most important clues that I can use in this paper is something that my mother told me. I don't quite remember when I actually had this conversation with her, but she said that my grandfather told my dad to never let anyone make a fool out of him, no matter what. I think it's evident that my father listened to him, because he once told me that he wouldn't be afraid of standing up to anyone, "even the pope himself." Throughout my life I kept hearing him say, "Don't try to make a fool out of me," even though no one was trying it. I guess the "don't let anyone make a fool out of you" turned him against people and made him be in constant fear that people want to be better than him and put him down. For that reason I think he wants to show that he is better, and if he can't he tries to find things that are wrong. "I could have made this better myself." Those were his words when my sister's furniture was delivered one day. I admit my father is handy, and is capable of making things, but just the way he will look at things and criticize them makes you think. What would make him be that way? Can a father have so much influence on a son? I myself have heard my father say "don't let anyone make a fool out of you," but it never stays in my mind.

In this paragraph, John teaches the reader to hear and to care about the micropolitics of the cliché he grew up with. What persuades me to represent this work as a "reinvention of the ordinary" is the extent to which John's way of telling this story makes it possible for a reader to do

precisely what Rickert says critical pedagogies fail to do—make one “see and care about injustice” (298). In this case, the injustices are multiple, including those inflicted on his father by his grandfather and those inflicted on him and his sister by their father. “Students must sooner or later overcome us,” writes Rickert (291). In succeeding to teach what critical pedagogies cannot teach by virtue of their authority-bound condition, White has disrupted the pedagogical discursive field along with the familial discursive field. It is to the latter that I will now turn.

In the paragraph by White above, there are four repetitions of his father’s key phrase. In the first reference, White reports his mother explaining its origin: “She said that my grandfather told my dad never to let anyone make a fool out of him.” The second time that White uses this phrase he reports his own experience: “Throughout his life I kept hearing him say, ‘don’t let anyone make a fool out of me,’ even though no one was trying it.” In that critical final clause, White begins to construct his work as a risky act, as Rickert says, in that he “disrupts the exchange circuit on which successful communication [from father to son] depends” (310). Disrupting normal communication, White goes on to see his father’s warning in terms of hierarchical power relations, and he sees his father as a subject structured by these relations. In other words, he begins to hear his father’s individual speech ideologically, while at the same time demonstrating great feeling for his father’s situation, as the third iteration of the phrase demonstrates: “I guess the ‘don’t let anyone make a fool out of you’ turned him against people and made him be in constant fear that people want to be better than him and put him down. For that reason I think he wants to show that he is better, and if he can’t he tries to find things that are wrong.” Having disrupted normal reception to the extent that he now hears his father’s speech as a discourse, White is then able to hear other things his father says as part of this discursive field: “‘I could have made this better myself.’ Those were his words when my sister’s furniture was delivered one day.”

In contrast to Quentin Pierce, White’s disruption of normal communication appears to stimulate fluency and extend his thought. Associating his father’s customary warning with the different comment about his sister’s furniture, White, I would argue, risks looking like a fool to his readers. The anecdote about the furniture is banal; the connection could be misunderstood; everyone in the class might laugh at the homely detail. Still, he goes forward with it, and without trying, convinces the reader that he *is* different from his father, as he claims, for the simple fact that he goes further than he needs to in making his point and incurs the risk of looking

foolish. Furthermore, where a simple oppositional stance would reattach him to his father’s authority, White’s conclusion about his relation to his father does something else, something riskier. It takes him farther than his own perception of micropolitics can accommodate; that is, it is inventive enough to elude his complete control. I observe this slippage at the end where he begins to notice that his analysis cannot explain why he is different from his father if his father is not different from his grandfather. The need for macropolitics, for cultural studies, so to speak, slides in nonauthoritatively. Active writing is *acting on the writer*, and thus the paragraph ends not with a “uniform, clear picture” but with a conundrum: “What would make him be that way? Can a father have so much influence on a son? I myself have heard my father say ‘don’t let anyone make a fool out of you,’ but it never stays in my mind.”

Rickert writes that pedagogy should make it possible for students to name their sites of contention. By partially relinquishing control to students, we can learn from them (291). He also argues that transgressive writing acts are already present in our students’ writing as “tiny resistances” that we need to recognize (315). Putting this together, we see that reading the act requires that we must learn from our students what constitutes a risky or troublesome inquiry for them. This is much more difficult than it sounds and constitutes risky reading on our part. For instance, in the process of writing this response, I have come to understand how “John White” succeeded in disrupting my normal reading with his act. Two-thirds of the way through my first draft, I noticed that I had stopped referring to my former student as “John” and had begun calling him by his surname, “White,” extending to him the same stature I had given Rickert and Bartholomae. I have decided not to correct this inconsistency, but to retain it as a marker of the way my authoritative relationship with John White’s work was altered. In this small, unconscious shift, I recognize the micropolitics of reading the act that, in addition to writing the act, is necessary if composition is to “resist projects of re-oedipalization” (292).

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Disrupting Understanding: The Critique of Writing as Process

Debra Jacobs

In two recent *JAC* articles, Candace Spigelman and Thomas Rickert arguably speak to each other in compelling ways about claims that can be made for liberatory writing pedagogies and their goal of empowerment. Both Spigelman and Rickert believe that writing pedagogies should foster possibilities for transvaluation, but they also advise a healthy dose of skepticism when considering writing that ostensibly reflects a student's heightened critical awareness. In their view, such writing may well be, as Spigelman suggests, evidence of capitulation or, in Rickert's words, of a student who is "well aware of the language game" that is played "for the sake of teacher and grade" (338, 296). Their advice foregrounds a vexing relationship between, on the one hand, the role of emancipatory classroom teacher and, on the other, institutional and disciplinary authority. For Spigelman, this problematic raises important questions regarding the responsibility of writing teachers to intervene in the ethical development of students. Ultimately, Spigelman reasserts her allegiance to critical pedagogy, advocating ethical intervention as a moral imperative necessary to counter oppression and injustice. Rickert, however, advances a more radical proposition. More specifically, Spigelman's speculation regarding students' commitment to the ethical implications that their writing discloses—her "wondering whether . . . students continue to view their writing as performance" (338)—takes on greater revolutionary

fervor in what Rickert calls a "post-pedagogy of the 'act,'" a pedagogy that would make possible transformative acts of transgression *and* that would recognize and value them as such. Although a third *JAC* article, Anthony Petruzzi's "Kairotic Rhetoric in Freire's Liberatory Pedagogy," does not address classroom practices per se, it does examine the way in which liberatory pedagogy's transformational possibilities coincide with passivity and accommodation, features that characterize what Petruzzi calls "quotidian consciousness" or the "limit-situation" of the everyday. Because Petruzzi's purpose is to theorize the Freirean notion of "critical consciousness as a *rhetorical* concept," he does not regard passivity and accommodation in quite the same way that Spigelman and Rickert regard them, which is not to say that Petruzzi does not characterize them as limiting (349; emphasis added). Petruzzi understands passivity and accommodation from a phenomenological point of view. That is, they are fundamental aspects of the everyday *doxa* of each individual's existential situation, the "commonplace" knowledge of taken-for-granted opinions, ideas, values, and so on—hence the passive apprehension of *doxa*. Petruzzi also explains that new knowledge becomes embodied in everyday *doxa*, with quotidian consciousness and critical consciousness constituting the same hermeneutic circle. This notion of embodiment has been described as sedimentation by phenomenologists such as Edmund Husserl and Alfred Schutz. Sedimentation is a significant metaphor in that it extends the analogy of "stream" of consciousness, which comports well with the notion that quotidian consciousness does not actively engage in hermeneutical critique. Quotidian consciousness, as stream, nevertheless is not static, though its sedimented knowledge may be described, as Petruzzi does, as a state of "*stasis*," sedimentation, or embodiment occurring to new knowledge once it is accommodated by *doxa*. Petruzzi states, "Once knowledge occurs, its being shifts from an incarnate processual act of cognition to an object that is embodied . . ." (372). Thus, Petruzzi does not devalue quotidian consciousness, although he does consider it limiting. Indeed, it is co-implicated with critical consciousness in processual acts of cognition.

In this response to these three articles, I want to reexamine process theory and pedagogy in light of some of the common characteristics of the kind of liberatory pedagogy that Spigelman, Rickert, and Petruzzi point toward. I recognize that to some readers this effort might be considered reactionary or, at best, redundant. In all honesty, I have sought other ways to respond, since I am not entirely comfortable with the risk I take in advancing an allegiance to what has been so thoroughly critiqued that its