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sorry: wine

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An Essay We're Learning to Read
Responding to Alt.Style

Michael Spooner

I.

How many copyeditors does it take to screw in a light bulb?

Not sure whether you mean "change a light bulb" or "have sex in a light bulb." Consider revising for clarity?

Will have to check house style for the joke balloons. Is there a way you could work these into the body text instead?

When I started on this chapter I had a little vignette at the beginning, about how my office building was marked for demolition by the university's master plan. It made a nice lead into what I wanted to become a theme about master plans, which, if you were with me through the end, became a comment about convention in writing for the academy. I also liked it because it really happened to me. It had personal meaning. I gave a brief but affectionate description of the office, with its view, its

fireplace, its apricot tree and rose bushes, and its general suitability to its setting and to the small needs of my small staff (who were, of course, kept in the dark about the master plan until all the decisions had been made).

That's where I wanted to begin, because it was an important part of my life this past year and because I thought I could make something out of it that would relate to the dilemma we have as writers when we want to break with convention. Then I wanted to bring in Christopher Alexander, the architect who argues that master plans are exactly the wrong way to design campuses. You need to start with the people who work there, he says, privilege the small things, and build your design from the bottom up with a view toward a sort of emergent order instead of the totalitarian approach favored by the current U.S. campus-cum-corporate culture. So this became my allegory for dealing with alt.style in academic writing. The same small values can guide how one responds to alt.writing as a teacher or, in my case, as an editor.

But then, on the listserv that was set up for contributors to this book, Chris Thaiss asked what really is convention, anyway? And Pat Bizzell answered well here are fourteen things that are common as dirt in conventional academic writing, and she identified this as one of them: "personal experience used . . . as a dryly humorous opening anecdote." She just tossed that off on the way to class as something we all *know*. Which is true, I suppose; we do know that. It's not her fault. Still, what chance does that leave me? I thought I was being alt to open with a personal story, but now I see what I should have realized about both the postmodern and the avant garde—the impossibility of *beginning* anything and the hopelessness of trying to build a stance *against* anything. I'm already co-opted before I don't begin.

I notice you're beginning with stream of consciousness. Will the academic reader be okay with this? Won't they expect a more expository approach? You seem to drop this voice later. Will you come back to it? Glancing ahead, not clear to me how you'll segue smoothly into the argument. . . .

In addition to all of this, our volume editors are interested in questions of the legitimacy of academic discourse/s, and they think, more or less reasonably, that as a publisher of discourse that serves the ends of academe, (1) I am invested, by role at least, in institutional convention, and therefore (2) I should have an articulated stance on the tension between tradition and innovation in that discourse. So, in one sense, part of my assignment is to discuss how I can ethically serve my institutional role and at the same time use my role to legitimize (by publishing) discourse that the hermetic institution traditionally resists. The trouble for me, however, is that, from my position, academic discourse looks far leakier than it seems from my volume editors' position. I

didn't want to deal with this; generally, I think it's better to leave theory to theorists and not encourage editors to mess with it.

I'm not complaining. Editing is creative and rewarding, plus I don't have to disrupt my work with those tedious sabbaticals and semesters abroad that professors have, don't have to write for publication, don't have to go to over-stimulating world-class cities for MLA in December. But I do notice one disadvantage in my field that more scholastic vocations don't suffer so much. Professional editors generally spend little time in reflection—on editing. There's a great deal of lore (which is no pejorative), but there isn't a large body of scholarship in this field; consequently, editing knows relatively little about itself theoretically. I don't want to overstate this, since there certainly is work published in editorial theory. Some of it, for my money, attends too much to the metaphors and cultures—one might say the master plan—of American business (with its users, information, skill sets, goals, teams, functionality), but some also draws from the best of allied fields like rhetoric and composition, communication, and graphic design. Still, unlike practitioners in those allied fields, unlike composition teachers especially, *professional editors themselves* tend not to pursue or create scholarship in their own field. It's not a publish-or-perish field, or not in the same sense, heh heh, so the practice of editing too often is guided by rather simple formulations, by conventions that are too seldom interrogated.

This is especially so compared to pedagogy (maybe theory is the difference between profession and discipline), and more especially compared to the field of teaching composition. I think this may be part of why I feel nonplussed when asked to reconcile my service to the traditional structures of academe (say, refereed publishing) with my advocacy for alternate discourses within those structures. Still, perhaps the chapter allows me to explore some of both. I've always liked composition as a field because it is, like editing, an occupation preoccupied with response, with the small things of purpose and balance and fit, and what I'll propose here is that editing scholarly writing can be theorized in terms like those of response to student writing. And then I'd like to try that theoretical approach in a demonstration edit of an article written in alt.style.

Did you consider turning this around? I mean, you're saying here that editors could learn from comp studies. But you're not writing to editors, obviously, because they don't read theory, if you're right. (Which you are.)

But then, given the real audience (comp folks) it seems like what you want to say is that comp teachers could learn a thing or two from editors. They could be better teachers if they knew a thing or two about editing. That's your point, right?

At my university, I have taught and regularly visit editing classes in the tech writing program; I also employ editorial interns and other student workers in

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At my university, I have taught and regularly visit editing classes in the tech writing program; I also employ editorial interns and other student workers in

my office every semester. For me, one of the hardest ideas to convey to students is that editing (I would argue that *any* response to writing) works best when it proceeds from a stance of sympathy or alignment with the writer—not from a stance of Correction or Remediation. Editorial lore, like teaching lore, is full of Correction, and editors complain about their authors like teachers complain about their students. I think this unfortunate persona is encouraged by textbooks and instruction that emphasize the editor's role vis à vis The Reader—or, as in some tech editing books, The User. It seems sometimes that editors believe that there is a particular idiom, a master plan of finite conventions, through which reality prefers to be conveyed. I'm glad to see awareness of audience, some rhetoric-based theory, in teaching editing, but the rhetorical situation I see most often described is a surprisingly flat one, oriented most toward audience and text, strangely erasing the rhetor. They do a Henry Higgins on the writer. They love the language—or is it readability measures?—to a fault. If, as lore, textbooks and teachers often claim, the editor must be the *reader's advocate* , then it's no wonder that editors behave so often as the *writer's adversary.* It's not unlike the argument in composition over the need to teach students to assimilate conventions of academic discourse, where the teacher is positioned not as a responder so much as a gatekeeper. You should hear university press directors talk about what important gatekeepers they are.

Editor

Do you love the English language to a fault? Do you always find yourself editing for correctness in grammar, punctuation, spelling, syntax, etc.? If you possess at least two years' editing/proofreading experience and a degree in English/Journalism, we need your expertise to edit K-12 educational tests.

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Education Researcher
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House style, again. We don't usually allow violations of the margins like this. I'll check. Just in case, wouldn't it be possible to integrate this advertisment with the body of your text? Introduce it, set it up like a standard block quote? Wouldn't this make more sense to the reader?

Brock Dethier's book, *The Composition Instructor's Survival Guide*, got me thinking about the relation between teaching and editing in this regard. Dethier argues for a stance of respect toward college students—a generous attitude that relates to them not as "kids" but as adults whose writing, logic, responses, even excuses, deserve genuine respect and serious consideration. I'd argue that the editorial stance (whether taken by teacher or editor) should be the same: all writers and their texts deserve to be handled with respect by those who respond. This is perhaps obvious to scholars like Dethier and the contributors to this book. It's consistent with the spirit of composition pedagogy since at least the 1970s, when, with position statements like "Students' Right to Their Own Language" and other motions toward critical practice, (many in) the field began to question traditional discourse in teaching and to grant a certain authority to students' own discourse(s).

Do you know Schroeder's book ReInventing the University? *His stance toward students is essentially the same, and, importantly for the transcending argument of this present volume, he's oriented specifically toward alternate literacies.*

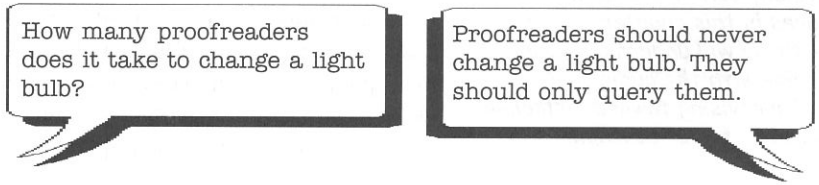
More specifically, research in composition has developed useful language through which to explore issues in response. I'm thinking here of well-known handles like "facilitative" versus "directive" (and shades between: e.g., Straub), along with more general principles of response from the Rogerian to the postmodern; respecting the (student) writer's ownership; deliberately "reflecting" the writer's position/s in text-specific comments; losing "awk," "ww," "frag," and replacing them with fuller, more accessible comments. I won't review the literature here; I'll just assert the uncontroversial notion that feedback in writing instruction was more than a 1970s platitude. It was a serious move away from Correction and toward Response.

And Helen Fox's Listening to the World, *in case you haven't seen it, is equally attuned to the "alternative" discourse of her international students. And one of Bizzell's purposes is to highlight the contingent nature of what is accepted in the U.S. as definitive convention.*

All of these scholars exemplify the stance you're advocating. (Then there's Smitherman, Villanueva, Elbow, and others.) In addition, not to put too fine a point on it, S, F, & B are the volume editors here; it would be politic to give them a plug.

My own perspective is often dual or ambivalent. Or shifty. It's eclectic, surely. It is informed pragmatically by the lore of editorial professionals, so it's attentive to readerly perspectives and to issues of what Phelps (extending Eisner's ideas) calls "connoisseurship" and "criticism" (99 ff). But it is also grounded in academic studies of response like those to which I alluded earlier. In fact, perhaps obviously now, editorial work is to my mind fundamentally a matter of response to *writers*. It *involves* advocacy for the reader, but ultimately, I think the best editing actually privileges—it's the only way I can see not to erase—the writer.

II.



Of course, the professions of editing and teaching are not the same. Still, importantly, teachers who honor their students' own discourse and editors who do not wish to erase the rhetor share an interest in seeing the text develop and succeed on terms of the writer's choosing. That's why I think the first challenge of editorial response to writing, like teacherly response, is not to correct a text toward what the handbooks or readability indices allow, but to understand the writer's ideas and processes. After that, the job is to imagine small ways to help the writer deliver those ideas effectively. I'd argue that such a sympathy for the text is fundamental to the ethics of response (see Spooner 1997 for more on this).

However, I don't want this to be confused with uncritical acceptance of every writerly choice. Novice writers, student writers, even when they may have textual issues (syntax, lexicon, etc.) well in hand, frequently struggle with other dimensions of writing. Experienced writers also miss or exceed the mark. To point out insufficiencies in particular areas can be a thoroughly sympathetic service, then. I'm simply recalling that our commitment to the writer's right to their own language is basic to ethical response.

> From: Christopher Schroeder
> To: Michael Spooner
>
> as for your gatekeeping function, i see you as much more in the middle—encouraging these challenges and, at the same time, constrained by the institutional structures of publishing, such as your review board. as you know much better than i, you can only do so much before you run up against institutionalized structures designed to resist challenges.

This book is supposed to address institutional constraints—on literacies, on discourse, on democracy—but I don't think I *do* know those constraints better than Schroeder does, at least not from publishing. He and I have struggled with this dimension of the chapter, because I am not sure I can speak to the issue. I'm not sure it's my issue. What he implies above that I should see as constraint often looks more like collaboration to me. One might think the system of peer review in academic publishing, for example, is (as in his phrase) a structure designed to resist challenges, but my experience wouldn't support that view. Members of my review board resist *me* from time to time, but that's not the same as resisting change. I know that Schroeder has met institutional resistance to his pedagogy, his writing, and his research. But even as we readied his own manuscript (*ReInventing*) for publication, I found the review process very supportive, or, at worst, no more resistant than usual. This has been my general experience. I do have disputes with my institution, yes, but I don't think I can complain when it comes to publishing books that challenge the status quo.

Just a query on voice: You seem to make many self-deprecating gestures in this chapter. Do you think these will undermine your authority with the audience? Consider revising toward a stronger statement of your position?

What I'd rather do is understand institutional processes in publishing as part of a larger system and larger theory of response to writing. I think we should see each remark by an editor, each peer review, each vote and comment from an editorial board member, as situated and invested in a sort of ecology of response, instead of, from the inside, as a defensive gatekeeping system or, from the outside, as a set of constraints or obstacles to surmount.

Let me play this out in some detail for a minute. Viewed, say, from above, reviews and votes and editorial comments are obviously response documents: they can't be comprehended beyond their interaction with the text to which they respond. Further, in performing their response, editorial comments take, as teacher comments do toward student texts, a complex of stances that response theory is currently addressing: (1) they're *composed and invented* texts, in that they replay to the author the narrative of a reading experience; (2) they're *hermeneutic*, in that they represent a systematic interpretation of the text; (3) *rhetorical*, in that they often advocate a course of action for the author to pursue; (4) *transactional*, in terms of reader-response theory, since they actually respond to the virtual text that is conjured by their own reading; (5) *critical*, since they unfold the intellectual complexities of the text; (6) *contextual*, because of their interdependencies with the larger process of manuscript development and the publishing decision: "other readers may disagree"; (7) *aesthetic* or *appreciative*, and so on. You can see that I'm trying to think about this in the way Phelps recommends in "Cyrano's Nose." Phelps is focused on response to student texts, and it's tempting to see (8) a *pedagogical* dimension in editorial response, too, but ultimately it's not a step I'm comfortable taking. As didactic as peer reviewers and working editors can be, and though one can argue they're responding to "texts in transition" as student texts are, I choose not to see the context of editorial response as a pedagogical one, because I feel the roles of writer and editor are not more than superfically comparable to the roles of learner and teacher. Strange as it may seem, I don't see intervention—at least not as that term is used in education theory—as part of the editorial process.

Oh, I see where you're going—feedback. Situate editorial work within response theory. That's a good move. Can you pull it off?

So I'm not in tune about institutional constraint on discourse as it applies to academic publishing. I don't deny that the system of refereed publishing is always exclusive. I'm only suggesting the exclusivity has little to do with conventions of discourse. I offer the following list as evidence: *Bootstraps; Listening to the World; Home of the Wildcats; Passions, Pedagogies and 21st Century Technologies; ReInventing the University.* That's a sample of successful alt-oriented books that came through referee processes with which I was personally connected over the past fifteen years. You have your own list of favorite alt.books in academe; I'm saying some(institutional)body approved those books. (In fact, I'm usually and self-destructively inclined to believe there are *too few* rejections in academic publishing, not *too many*. We would improve the academy faster if *teaching* were rewarded more seriously and if publishing ever more books for the audience of scholars were granted less weight. But that's another matter.)

Part of this may have to do with a yet larger context, the culture of publishing, which is decidedly different from the culture of the disciplines in a university. While in the academic department there may sometimes be pressure to conform, in publishing—even academic publishing—novelty works. The pressure is to Innovate, or at least to catch the trend wave. And if you can get Celebrity in there too, that works even better. Why was Heinemann interested in this book you're holding? Start with a marketable subject (say academic discourse). Give it a provocative spin (say critical practice). Now add the Big Names you see in the table of contents, and hey, alt discourse, challenging the status quo, is not a problem. If there are constraints, they come from an institution called the Market, not from the referee process.

Did you want to point out that academe is not consistent? That is, while you're expected to obvserve the discourse conventions, you won't get your dissertation approved or your article published, unless you can show that it is "unique, original, and significant."

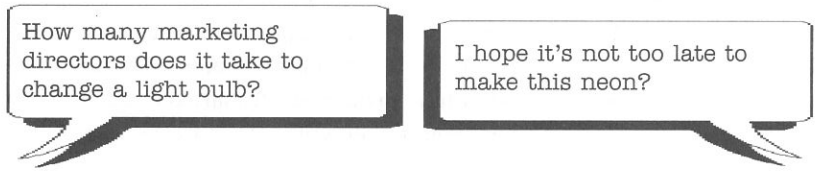
"Originality" is a cultural issue that Fox explores. Again, you might give more attention to the work of your volume editors. Just a thought.

To step toward a different sort of context, I think I don't identify with Schroeder's stance on academic/alternative discourse for philosophical or maybe temperamental reasons. Don't get me wrong: I think the politics of inclusion and exclusion is a deeply important and interesting subject. I'm sympathetic to the perspectives of Schroeder, Fox, Bizzell, and others writing here. (I think it's fair to note that most of the folks here advocating alternative discourses don't normally write in any other than the prestige dialect of American English. But does that make them phonies, Holden Caulfield?) Further, I do understand that given my role in the institutional structure, I am implicated in

READERS NEED TO KNOW MAIN POINTS BEFORE DETAILS; THEY NEED TO UNDERSTAND THE STRUCTURE OF THE ARGUMENT BEFORE THE ELABORATION OF SUPPORTING ARGUMENTS. BUT MANY WRITERS, CAUGHT IN THE TECHNICAL LOOP OF THEIR EXPERTISE, BEGIN THE DISCUSSION AT EVER TOO DETAILED A LEVEL FOR ANY BUT THE MOST EXPERT. (EISENBERG, 3)

the politics of academic discourse, and trust me, I'm happy to encourage such iconoclasms as come my way. My point is simply that the politics of discourse in the American university is not my issue in the way it is my volume editors' issue. "Transformation," even in the post-Freirean era, is still too theological for me. I'm very skeptical of utopian projects, even though I'll gladly sponsor them through my publishing program. Accordingly, what I attend to most, and what I think is the most ethical editorial interest, is not the politics of alternative discourses but their poetics and the epistemologies they embody. The interface of design and critique, in Kress's terms; of connoisseurship and criticism, in Eisner's (per Phelps).

III.



My thought here is to work out some of the implications of this approach as it applies in response to writing that is composed in "alternate" or "radical" or "alt" style, something that both editors and teachers increasingly face (cf. Bishop). (I'm referencing only print writings here, but, of course, much writing appears in digital spaces; I'd advocate the same editorial stance in either case.)

Will we need to get permission to use these jokes? And again, on voice. I understand your purpose here, but don't you think your audience will take you less seriously for including these light (bulb) touches? Why take the chance?

First, a fairly mainstream example. Here's an excerpt from a letter by May Swenson to Elizabeth Bishop. In a previous letter, Bishop has chided Swenson for using no punctuation in a recent poem. "Are you trying to be like the French?" she snorts. Swenson replies this way.

> It doesn't make things easier, certainly. An extra discipline is imposed in the manipulation of language . . . the whole burden being on the *words* and how they are combined. The reader is induced to concentrate a little harder, too . . . Doesn't it . . . force him to follow more subtle clues to understanding? (September 1953)

"An extra discipline." It's not uncommon for teachers and editors to respond to alt.style as if it were easy, casual, un-serious—not unlike the way

Elizabeth Bishop must have reacted to Swenson. It may be play (of language) on the serious page that they interpret that way, but I'm convinced with Swenson that to manage play toward an important effect in the reading experience absolutely requires an extra discipline from the writer. It can be done frivolously, yes, or badly, or unsuccessfully; but to make it work *well* is anything but easy.

"The reader is induced to concentrate." Alt.style inevitably draws attention to itself, inevitably makes the reader give up some ideas for a moment and accommodate some new ones. A reader has to concentrate, as Swenson suggests, to discover the rules by which the writing works. Editors and writing teachers are used to knowing what the rules are, and we're used to enforcing them; but when you encounter alt.styles, your first task is to figure out a new set of rules in each piece of writing. No wonder some of us resist or feel unprepared. Alt.style draws from what has been called Grammar B (Weathers, of course, Bishop, and others), combines genres and/or media, mixes conventions from various disciplines, messes with typography like a visual poem does. If Myka Vielstimmig is right, even "standard" forms are moving toward more experiment and visuality than they have in the past: "It's an essay the academy is learning to write" (2001). So if you edit alt.writing from Correction, you're going to be very busy, indeed. And even if you edit from Sympathy, you can find yourself at sea.

PREFER THE STANDARD TO THE OFFBEAT. . . . ERR ON THE SIDE OF CONSERVATISM, ON THE SIDE OF ESTABLISHED USAGE. (STRUNK AND WHITE 84)

I think the fluidity of alt.writing recommends that we respond to it from a slightly longer distance. We need to divine the world in which the text imagines itself. What is permissible in this world? What is effective? What's the grammar of this world? From this long view, we see that the editorial task with alt.writing or Grammar B is actually not much different from the task with Grammar A. At least, a fundamental part of the job is to envision the rhetorical situation of the text. Until we know that—audience, subject, occasion, author, and the relations among them—we really can't begin to know what the text needs from an editor.

Not to interrupt the flow of your argument here, but why are you layering these block quotes behind the text? I'm afraid your readers (especially the "senior" ones) will not be able to read them well.

In addition, they seem to contradict rather than support your general positions. What's the point of giving dissenters equal time?

When faced with unfamiliar discourse, many student editors, or even experienced ones, feel the impulse to paraphrase, to recast the text into a style as (putatively) transparent, say, as a newspaper—as if conventions do not change from context to context, as if the primary readers for all texts are readers *like themselves*. This raises an interesting point of difference between teacher and editor, viz., the editor *is never* the audience, to which I would append a corollary:

the editor must always *imagine* the audience. Students often don't have experience with the kind of audience they need to imagine, so they default to an audience they knew very well—themselves.

It becomes a question of repertoire, then—how many audiences can you impersonate—or, from another angle, it's a question of context. How many nested writerly contexts can you perceive? Straub gets into this in his "The Student, the Text, and the Classroom Context"; his idea is that there are principles a teacher can practice that are flexible and useful enough to address a variety of elements in the context of the writer's work—beyond the assignment, that is. McComiskey gives us another handle with his taxonomy of layers (textual, rhetorical, discoursal) and his attention to each layer as he responds to student work. All must be noticed.

This gets us from conventional writing to work that negates convention. When combined with a fundamentally sympathetic stance—instead of a fundamentally corrective one—our repertoire is in a position to help an alt.text become more effective in reaching its own purposes, whatever they might be. But this requires the responder to imagine the text as the writer, not the reader, sees it. With alt.writing, the purposes of the text quite often involve getting the reader to loosen their pants, to accept degrees of variation in language and style that they might normally resist. The editor's or teacher's role, then, is not to bring a radical style back toward convention, but to allow variation to flourish, maybe even to push it farther in the direction of the alt, perhaps even to imagine an alt.style application for a writer whose text doesn't use it.

This is William Gass's phrase, isn't it: "Getting prose to loosen its pants"? Do you need to cite him?

He's a writer who comes to minc throughout this piece. He derides convention but doesn't believe in ti avant garde, either—it's already cc opted, as you point out on page twc

And Gass wants the structure o a text to emerge from the structures of language itself. Do you ne to this tie back to Phelps? Alexander?

(A confession here, not for catharsis but because it's relevant to pushing the alt. I was Villanueva's aquiring editor for *Bootstraps*, and when I look at that book now, I can see—even more than I did ten years ago—how rad his concept was. And I'm having this attack of regret. See, Victor, if computers had been where they are now, or if I'd known more about visual composition, or if I'd had more imagination, I could have cajoled people at NCTE to *format* the book in radical ways, to liberate that alt.text from the conventional page. I

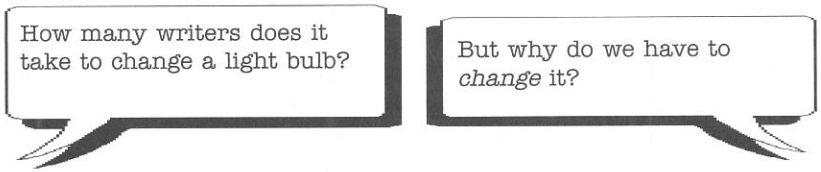
Not sure why you're including this personal message. Delete? Add a last name, so the reader will know who you mean: Victor Who?

If you keep it, do you want to s it in a different font, so the general reader will know to skip it Other format suggestions, or leav as is?

mean, as long as I was reassuring them it was okay to "allow" multivocality. *Now*, too late, I can see that those shifting selves need to emerge *visually* on the page as well as rhetorically. Damn. . . . You think I can get the reprint rights on that book?)

So with all this facilitative sympathy and alignment and warm fuzziness, does a responder dare to offer a criticism, suggest an edit? Yes, of course. All the time. All the way through. What the writer needs from a response is, as always, a friendly critique—but it must be one that proceeds from a valid understanding of the text, its purposes, its audience, its traditions, and both *acceptable and questionable* conventions within those parameters. Textual, rhetorical, and discoursal issues vary from text to text, and the responder needs to be broad enough in repertoire to recognize those issues, or honest enough to ask the writer about them. That means, however, that the teacherly or editorial or tutorial queries are in the vein of "how can we help the reader get this?" instead of "sorry, MLA style doesn't accommodate this." Or, as I've seen one editor write, "I never allow my authors to. . . ."

IV.



Alt.writer or conventional?

So it's an essay we're learning to read, too. Academic readers, for all their sophistication with critique of content, are more used to looking *through* style than *at* it. Alt comes close enough to invite participation, but after that, as in Swenson's phrase, "the reader is induced," by the unfamiliarity of the alt, "to concentrate" on the process of reading. In departing from the predictable, alt.style depends on the reader to engage and complete it and bring it fully to form. Theoretically, at least since Rosenblatt, we can say that *all* reading is *participative*, inventive. (In fact, we know experientially—from being *mis*-read—how inventive readers can be.) However, alt.writing raises participation to a new level by deliberately disorienting the reader. Alt.style will not be taken for granted, even if that means risking rejection or misunderstanding by its readers.

Still, an alt.essay wants to be read, and this means it must give the reader some purchase, a handle, a perceptible structure or procedure through which to enter. All is not random. (Alt is not random.) But if this purchase on the text doesn't come from convention (and if Bakhtin is right that no utterance is possible without genre), then it must come from within the text itself, where clues to how it combines or re-forms genre can be found. The writer might invent a structure and impose it on the text. But a more successful approach, in my view, is to allow the form to emerge as an organic and coherent feature of the text.

I want to suggest provisionally that these two principles—the *participative* and the *organic*—are features of alternate style at its best, and that we should be guided by them as we respond to writers of alt.style.

I'm appropriating the concepts of the organic and the participative from Christopher Alexander, whose ideas have challenged many accepted conventions in architecture and community planning (see, for example, *The Oregon Experiment*, in which he explores and applies his philosophy to the building program at the University of Oregon). I am tempted to use a word like "emergent" or "implicit" or "systemic" because I know that "organicism" is a concept discredited by postmodern theory, along with the autonomous self and the designated hitter. I should admit that in my view postmodern theory, with its kneejerk aversion to metaphors like this, has abandoned some useful recognition of how systems (conceptual ones and physical ones, too) actually function. However, this is not my fight, so let me try to sidestep it this way. If we can agree that a subject position is a *position*, then I think we've already acknowledged the idea of at least a provisionally coherent subject. And if we can see a genre or rhetorical situation as an ecosystem, with all its tendencies to socialize a text toward conventions, then I think we're already in the realm of the organic. All I want from the word "organic" is this ecological/rhetorical image. I don't think postmodern thought has any quarrel with the plant kingdom. So what I mean by "organic" in relation to structure in writing is the embodiment of context in a manner that is congruent *with* that context. I'm not suggesting that a single structural essence resides by nature or magic within a set of thoughts on a page. Neither would I suggest that the scum in my fishbowl will produce one essential algae. But I *am* saying that those fishbowl nutrients, no matter how decentered, fractal, or intertextual, will not sustain a hippo.

Don't you need to rationalize the "organic" here? It's a devil-word among postmoderns, you know. Alexander himself has been criticized as a modernist.

To Alexander, the principle of organic order requires that "planning and construction be guided by a process which allows the whole to emerge gradu-

different fonts for different voices; one voice is flush right, one is flush left, one is full justified. And so on. I like the approach: using a visual effect to reinforce a rhetorical choice. It works. In fact, I like many things about this article, so you'll have to forgive me if it looks like I can only find fault in what follows. (Paley and Jipson, wherever you are, I think it's a dandy essay; I'm just illustrating how sympathetic response to alt.writing isn't *non*-response.)

1. If you could read the entire article, you would see that, though they interrupt each other, the voices here do not interact with each other on the page. The main sections—in the wide body-text—are written in a joint authorial voice ("We began working together in 1974" etc.), and if you read only those sections from the first page to the last, you would have read essentially a short, linear, conventional essay. Let's call this Voice A. In this voice, we hear a report of two professional careers and of how two people came to reconsider their approaches to the literature education curriculum, ultimately choosing to involve more of the personal, the aesthetic, the narrative, the collaborative, and the political. Here is a sample of Voice A:

> that, had taught in elementary and secondary schools in this country and abroad. Our undergraduate preparation included coursework in literature, language study, the humanities, and the arts. Surprised—but also delighted—by many of the parallels in our backgrounds, we worked together in the college's teacher education program, taking (59)

I want to be clear that this excerpt is set off as a "paragraph" in the printed text. It begins in just this way with a broken sentence, the first part of which had been left several lines above: "We both had previously earned our Masters degrees . . . and, before" break. See how this works? Then, similarly, this partial paragraph ends where I've broken it (". . . taking"), and it will complete its thought on the following page, after a long interruption by the other voices.

2. Then there are sections in first person singular, signed with the initials of the author who (it seems) wrote them—"N" or "J." These are short pieces, and they intrude into the main body as brief sidebar quotations from various sources (from researchers, poets, others). They're usually flush with the right margin, and they're always in parentheses. Occasionally, the voices here talk to each other: N asks a question; J answers. However this is not often. Instead, normally, these sections involve quoted material, not original material, as their main substance. I'm not objecting to this, just pointing it out. Here's an example (61).

> (N: Are academic researchers,
> as Donnmeyer (1996) suggests, "permitted to advance
> all sorts of nontraditional ideas, [but] expected to do this in relatively
> traditional ways, that is, in a way we have come to recognize as academic
> as opposed to some other form of discourse" (p. 20)?)

Good question. On the same page, J offers this quotation from another writer.

> (J: Madeline Grumet (1992) writes that
> "our stories are masks through which
> we can be seen, and with every telling
> we stop the flood and swirl of thought
> so someone can get a glimpse of us,
> and maybe catch us if they can" (p. 69).)

We'll call this Voice B. Again, as with Voice A, you could skip the other sections, and you would find reading these N and J parts relatively smooth going. It's a fairly conventional dialogue, though depending heavily on quoted excerpts. We hear primarily the words of other scholars—theorists, poets, teachers—who also advocate the stance that Voice A takes regarding the literature curriculum.

Just a note here about length. The requested word-length for chapters in this volume was 5,000 words. Did the volume editors convey that to you? I think you're probably over 6,000 at this point, and wonder if you can trim. We could simply delete a section—your choice, but I'd suggest either the first or last. Or perhaps this little demonstration section. That would get you closer to the limit, and your readers would likely not miss a "practice" section as much as a theory one.

3. The third voice—shall we call it C?—offers a more literary, occasionally poetic text, but written once again in first person plural. Like the others, sections in this voice could be read linearly independent of the other sections without loss of meaning or interest. This voice is disrupted on the page frequently by random non-English characters like the @ sign, and primes / ' /, and periods out of place, broken words, broken type, broken lines, and lots of *non-signifying* italic and boldface type. An endnote explains that this effect was introduced by an OCR scanner, and the authors decided to leave it: "The variant form of this essay was produced by chance through the processing of a text scanner intruding its own force" (67). I *think* they mean only Voice C here; the whole essay is in a variant form, but I don't believe a scanner would by chance produce anything but the stuff in Voice C. Here's what it looks like:

> When we work *now, we*
>
> don't know where we're
> ,go;ing tn @@@ @^, @v@
> @ "I,'@ and
>
> *up wi th something very* ***different*** We begin with **an** idea that
> **interests us**, but **very** quickly **it becomes** ***many ideas. It***
> ***splits*** apart i . **nto** pieces. We split ***a part*** into **pie ces.** (59–60)

This is the quasi-poetic voice—or it becomes so in certain sections—and I like the disruptive noise of the textual junk in it. Well, I like it for the most part. I think it works in the bit I'm quoting above, because it acts out the distraction and fragmentation they're describing; I have my doubts about this textual noise in other sections. In any case, to summarize, we hear through Voice C another treatment of the same ideas treated in A and B, but this time we hear them in a highly personal, often poetic style; we hear about dreams, internal logics, inner and outer space; about friendship that grows with collaboration into love and commitment; we hear the refrain "when we work now," which accumulates, as it repeats, into a center of gravity around which the whole essay begins to rotate.

Okay. If you read all the Voice A paragraphs, then all the Voice B paragraphs, then all the Voice C, you can see that these writers composed the texts separately and *afterward* broke them into short units which they then laid out

A
B
C
A
B
C

A query on content here. If, with alt.style, all bets are off re structure, then on what ground can you say that Paley's and Jipson's arrangement here invokes a "flow" from one section to the next, or even a dialogic reading?

This organization leads a reader to think there is a flow from one voice to the next, or from one "speech" to the next, as there is in a dialogue or as there is when one voice comments on what was just written in another. If you try to read them this way, however, you'll be frustrated. The voices do address related issues, but they do not acknowledge each other, comment on each other, dispute, confirm, etc.; it's as if they're simply broken arbitrarily, or cut and shuffled like cards. Unfortunately, I'd argue that broken-ness, disruption, or fragmentation is not an issue under discussion within the article. (You'll have to trust me on this, unless you have a copy of the *EE* journal on hand.) Thus, to me at least, the breaks between voices don't seem either organic or substantive. They look arbitrary. This disappoints me.

Therefore, my first alt.editorial question is: why break the Voice A text in mid-sentence, as these authors often do, just to insert the second and third voices? *Why are we alternating paragraphs*—even interrupting mid-paragraph—*if the voices are going to ignore the alternations* and the interruptions and each other? They're not aiming for dialogue among the voices. But they're

not using crots or a list technique, either, as we can see because the discussion carries on from each paragraph in one voice to the next paragraph in the same voice. What are Paley and Jipson after?

One possible answer is that the authors may be more interested in juxtaposition than interaction; maybe they want us to read this essay as three different versions of the same text/argument/narrative, versions that are dove-tailed together physically but are not intended to interact with each other specifically at the places where they juxtapose.

This leads me to a stylistic thought. I wonder if the juxtaposition wouldn't be enhanced by setting Voice B and Voice C in text boxes and pushing them into the flow of Voice A, letting it wrap around them. This would accomplish the interruptive effect and the juxtaposition, but without suggesting a flow from one voice to the next, as a break in the text does. I wonder if that would help. A possible problem with that suggestion is that if we're supposed to read not just Voice A as one long flow, but also Voice B as one, and then Voice C as another long flow, we can't do that very well. (Besides, Voice C has some lengthy sections that won't fit too neatly into boxes that way.)

See, one option would be for Voice B and Voice C to shove in like this, instead of chopping Voice A in mid-sentence, to pick it up later as if nothing had just happened.

Here's another option: columns. We could set this essay like a "harmony" of ancient texts. Do you know what I mean? Sometimes, where variants of the same antique narrative exist—e.g., written by different witnesses—scholars will publish them in parallel columns, aligning the similar sections side by side. We could try the same thing here, comme ça:

Donnmeyer argues that "our first option sets up Voice B to read like a mere gloss" to Voice A.

Isn't the @@! trou .ble with the first *suggestion that it still bre . aks up* the flow from Voice C to Voice C? What can we do to *preserve* ***the sense*** **that all** of C needs to be read in sequence, just like **&@@# A does?

Neither of these ideas might work, but, in consultation with the writers, I'd suggest that either one would serve their purposes better than the original formatting.

Second, I notice that the Voice B "dialogue" between N and J doesn't seem quite authentic. Because these bits primarily function to convey the words of other scholars, to get some useful block quotations into the piece, they don't seem like much more than a gesture at dialogue. N and J do sometimes address

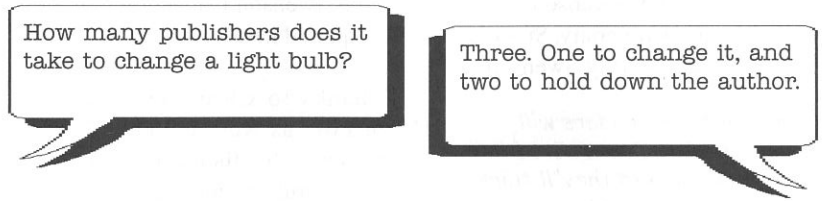
the same topics; they are aware of each other; they do sometimes refer to each other and to this article. But they don't seriously interact. You see what I mean in the excerpt above? To me, the format of the page and the signatures "N" and "J" say this is a dialogue, but the voices within the text are never truly *in dialogue*.

In that sense, one could argue that the alternative style here is a bit of a sham. To the authors, I would have said, let's either (1) rework this stuff so that the voices are truly communicating, instead of merely packaging block quotes—that is, let's put these ideas in your own words and have N and J discuss them, or (2) let's drop the artifice of dialogue and simply juxtapose these quoted voices on their own. The essay likes juxtaposition, so maybe I'd recommend option #2 here. Again, we could do it with text boxes pushing in from one side or the other, or I think this would work nicely in columns, too. They're already using a distinct typeface (or font), which enhances the effect of changing voices. But either way, my instinct is that the Voice B sections aren't yet functioning the way these authors want them to function.

Finally, I would want to question these authors on the need for the textual noise they've retained from the scanning process in Voice C. Here again is what they say in their endnote. "The variant form of this essay was produced by chance through the processing of a text scanner intruding its own force" (67). Fine, and I think they're using this to enhance the participative dimension in the essay—or they're trying to use it that way; unfortunately, it lacks a sense of procedure that readers look for. Still, is it organic? Does the "variant form" embodied emerge from the conceptual mix in this essay? My sense is that No, the essay makes very little point of either chance or technology intruding its own force. In brief, Voice A recounts a history, Voice B contributes scholarly support, and Voice C turns and turns on the pivot of reflection and change—"when we work now." But it's *change*, not *chance*. There is, in each of these voices, a passing reference to chance, or to fragmentation, or to postmodern theory, or to experimental art, but these references do not aggregate to form a major strand of thought here. There is no reference to the technological, or to its intrusion.

So I don't know. I'd say that what's organic is the poetic or lyrical, and that Voice C is being held back from reaching its full potential by the static and white noise of the scanner. On the other hand, this "variant form" is the hippest, most "alt" effect in the essay, and clearly these authors love the effect. I don't like to cold-water that commitment, but there it is. As a sympathetic reader who wants to see this essay succeed, this is something I would have to mention to the authors. I don't think it kills anything, so I would never say "lose it or we don't publish," but my editorial advice would be to choose between either developing the strand of chance in the other voices or letting it disappear in Voice C.

V.



Writing across the grain of convention does require an extra discipline from the writer, and I'd argue it takes another discipline from the one whose role it is to respond. While composition studies has come far enough now through the academic-discourse tunnel to appreciate the diverse lights beginning to show in certain scholarly journals and books, still, to be of any real use to students or other writers exploring alternate discourse and styles, we who respond need to expand our repertoire. Even sympathy to alt.work, though necessary, isn't sufficient; writers still need a friendly and informed resistance from their readers. They need an Elizabeth Bishop to say "are you just trying to be French, or what?" Writers and responders will continue to test each other as we invent new grammars of style, as we explore the new essays that the academy is learning to read.

In my new office building, the pipes are still working, though it's been near zero every night for months. The wiring is up to code, and I didn't need to drill through the wooden floor to jerry-rig a phone line for the fax machine. There's no ghost to chill the back of my neck when I'm working late. But the UPS driver hates the stairs into our shipping room. Students come by every day asking where the parking office has moved. City buses charge by our south windows, churning the snow into gray velour, and on the north side, seven satellite dishes from

Though my personal belief is that academic audiences are still not ready for either visual poetry or magazine layouts in scholarly worl seems odd that you chose a basic conventional, linear approach here

I know that the jokes and the special formatting in places are contributing to a sort of alternat style. Even the occasional (what seem to me) lapses into the confe sional and expostulatory could be seen as a departure from convent Still, I'm wondering at the end of this piece, why you didn't try something more radical. Did you consider even just going multivoc

In any case, alt.style of some s seems an option, if there's time t reconceive the paper.

You decide.

the campus radio station search our building curiously. Don't ask me, I tell them. You'll find the answers in the master plan.

Notes

The letter by May Swenson is available in the Swenson Collection, archived at Washington University, St. Louis. Excerpt quoted here by permission of the Literary Estate of May Swenson.

Do you really think readers will understand that you've created me? I'm a little afraid they'll think I'm a real person, like, at the publisher. I'm trusting you on this you know.

Thanks to Chris Schroeder and Helen Fox, as well as the following other friends for their encouragement and thoughtful readings of drafts of this chapter: FHE research/writing group, Katherine Fischer, Louise Phelps, Ona Siporin, and Kathleen Yancey.

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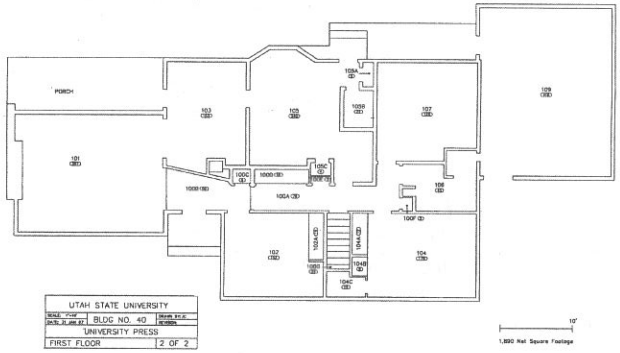
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