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ABSTRACT

One way to "reinitiate" possible productive responses to the question of the subject for composition theory and pedagogy is to defuse the terror of the "impossible," to "negotiate" with the impossible, and to ask impossible questions. Although there are dangers associated with any critical theorizing about the subject positions of students and/or pedagogues, a new conception of writing, textuality, and ethics could reveal different means for reformulating subjective relations in the writing classroom. Writing, ethics, and radical alterity are impossible subjects; as in "Alice in Wonderland," they are like Cheshire cats smiling down upon an impossible croquet game. It may be that to teach writing it is first necessary to make the impossible writable. When writers try to play the game, the language is like Alice's flamingo, constantly turning around to look at them, and the truths that writers seek are like the hedgehogs on the field who uncurl themselves and scurry away. Whether rescuing or discerning the subject, it is important to remember that the impossible subject, like the Cheshire Cat, is merely a suspended apparition revealing and concealing the abyss below; but, it holds the possibility of the impossible in its very smile. (PRA)

Impossible Subjects: Writing, Ethics, and Radical Alterity

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"Alice began to feel very uneasy... 'They're dreadfully fond of beheading people here; the great wonder is, that there's any one left alive.'...She was looking about for some way of escape, and wondering whether she could get away without being seen, when she noticed a curious appearance in the air... 'It's the Cheshire cat: now I shall have somebody to talk to.'... 'Who are you talking to?' said the King, coming up to Alice, and looking at the Cat's head with great curiosity.... 'It's a friend of mine - a Cheshire Cat,' said Alice: 'allow me to introduce it.'... 'I don't like the look of it at all,' said the King: 'however, it may kiss my hand if it likes.' ... 'I'd rather not,' the Cat remarked.... 'Well, it must be removed,' said the King very decidedly, and he called to the Queen, who was passing at the moment, 'My dear! I wish you would have this cat removed!'...The Queen had only one way of settling all difficulties... 'Off with his head!' she said, without even looking around.... 'I'll fetch the executioner myself,' said the King eagerly, and he hurried off....[But] The executioner's argument was, that you couldn't cut off a head unless there was a body to cut it off from....The King's argument was, that anything that had a head could be beheaded...The Queen's argument was, that if something wasn't done about it in less than no time she'd have everybody executed, all round" (Carroll 113-116). This is a story of impossible subjects playing an impossible game.

I begin with Alice's dilemma in order to bring a lesson in impossibility to bear on the problem of the ethical subject. Since the challenge before this panel is to *reinitiate* possible productive responses to the question of the subject for composition theory and pedagogy, I will argue that one way to respond is to defuse the terror of the *impossible*, to "negotiate" (cf. Spivak) with the impossible, and to ask impossible questions.

In his recent book, Discerning the Subject, Paul Smith addresses the question of the subject and the "multifarious theoretical jobs" it holds in various discourses of the human sciences (xxvii). Similarly, Paul Ricoeur writes that "*The* philosophy of the subject has never existed; rather, there have been a series of reflective styles, arising out of the work of redefinition which the challenge itself has imposed" (236). Ricoeur and Smith remind us that each successive redefinition of Descarte's *cogito,* each Hegelian conflation of Other and Same, is faced with the challenge of, in Ricoeur's words, "[taking] support from its adversary, to ally itself with that which most challenges it" (237). In Ricoeur's case, he examines the two challenges of pschyoanalysis and semiology; whereas, Smith investigates the subject as constructed by such discourses as Marxism, deconstruction, social theory, psychoanalysis, and feminism. New alliances, however, rarely sustain common grounds.

In fact, Smith and Ricoeur are part of a dying tradition, the modernist logic of foundations. Although modernism became overtly problematized by Nietzsche, it has recently undergone its most radical deconstruction with the advent of postmodern theory. Smith and Ricoeur are part of the modernist search for a grounding of the subject in the "*arche* and the *telos*, of the origin and the end" (Ricoeur 244-245). Ricoeur grounds his theory in hermeneutics; Smith grounds his dis/cerning of the subject in human agency and resistance politics. Though Ricoeur admits that since Hegel, "new abysses have been hollowed out beneath our feet" (245), still neither seem willing to join a postmodern alliance against the totalizing force of such modernist ideals as Rationality, Truth, and Knowledge. Stanley Aronowitz and Henry Giroux explain in their recent book, Postmodern Pedagogy, that "the Enlightenment and Western philosophic tradition [relies] on master narratives, 'which set out to address a transcendental Subject, to define an essential human nature, to prescribe a global human destiny, or to proscribe collective human goals'" (68). Aronowitz and Giroux contend that postmodern discourses should be used as "theoretical weapon[s] to articulate...the tyranny implicit in the totalizing narratives

characteristic of modernity" (62).

Not wanting to take on the chain of Enlightenment search for foundations from Kant to Heidegger, I will be working from the polarity of the possible/impossible as a way of defusing the terror of the abyss revealed by postmodern critique. My approach is to take impossible approaches so that, rather than resist the ungroundedness of our enterprise, we enter what Heidegger calls a turn into the pure draft of the Open, converting it into an affirmation of our unshieldedness (125).

To begin with, I admit that there are immediate problems with the very logic of the polarity. As Stephen H. Watson points out, "it is not a question of alternatives, of oppositions: the logic itself has become overdetermined" (246). In other words, one no longer buys the Hegelian package that the "negative is implicitly the positive" (231) as a way to cover over the abyss. Watson argues that the turn began when Nietzsche entered into the abyss "neither to despair nor simply to nihilate..., but to affirm infinitely its groundlessness, its heterogeneity..." (232). According to Watson, "Nietzsche ... refuses to reduce the Other to the Same. It is, rather, the affirmation of difference, of chance, of the irrational that must be faced....It is a chasm of infinite alterity, the infinite return of this Other without a Same" (233).

Not surprisingly, the chasms revealed by postmodernism pose special problems for composition theory and pedagogy. However, a postmodern pedagogy offers a way to reconceive the teaching of writing across the notion that the truth or ground of subjectivity is merely a play of alterity, a radical inscription of the impossible upon the space occupied by difference. Although recent work by theorists who utilize Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Lacan to question the logic of foundationalism is slowly having an affect upon composition pedagogy (cf. Victor Vitanza, Gregory Jay, Lynn Worsham, and Luanne Frank, to name a few), only recently has a fully theorized redefinition of a new "theoretical job" for the subject been published by a compositionist, Susan Miller's Rescuing the Subject.

At first glance, her work promises a weaving together of postmodern critique and composition theory. For example, Miller introduces the possibility for reconceiving the object of composition (writing) and the subject of composition (student writers) across a redefined textual rhetoric. On the surface, Miller's claims about the subject are substantial and sufficiently different than other composition theorists in that she supports poststructuralist rejections of "'unitary' authorship"(3) and the "primacy of speech" (7). In addition, against the expressionistic rhetoric image of writers writing in isolation, Miller argues that student writers write in the midst of complicated historical and social contexts. But, Miller's theory of the subject modelled upon the student writer contains some troubling elements that suggest her reliance upon modernist ideals.

First, she claims that student writers are different from other kinds of writers by distinguishing between their writing and writing that is "authored" or writing that is "spoken." Miller places student writing in a unique position between the two, claiming it achieves a fictionalized stability of meaning, unlike the purely indeterminate meaning of "authored" writing, or the overdetermined meaning of oral discourse. Yet, such limited categories deny the heterogeneity of language.

Second, Miller clearly seeks to ground her history of rhetoric in "a historical and distinctly written 'presence'" (8), a now thoroughly deconstructed metaphysical concept. Her introduction announces a goal of "rescuing the fast-declining speaking subject" (10), and she concludes with images of "the strong presence of the basic writer" (170).

Finally, Miller claims that since "our pedagogical province grounds theories of 'textuality'" (7), her book is an attempt to extend theorizations of the "currently universal 'student writer' to "all the problematics of the speaking-versus-writing subject" (6) and "to all writing" (7). From Miller's perspective, we "explain reading to understand writing...writing is not explained to understand reading" (18). Furthermore, "once this priority is accepted, we...benefit from the model of a writer...whose texts may or may not

become 'authored' and significantly 'read'" (18). This statement prompts several questions. Does it mean that as writing instructors we do not read our students' texts significantly, or that they are not significant enough to read? What are the boundaries of "our pedagogical province"?

One way to respond to these questions is to recall Gayatri Spivak's definition of "text." Spivak introduced a recent essay by saying that "since we are questioning the human being's control over the production of language, the figure that will serve us better is writing, for there the absence of the producer and receiver is taken for granted" ("Feminism" 78). More specifically, the text serves us better because it is a "safe figure, seemingly outside of the language-(speech)-writing opposition" (78). In other words, text is more than the product of writing. For example, according to Spivak, "theoreticians of textuality read Marx as a theorist of the world,...as a text of the forces of labor and production-circulation-distribution, and Freud as a theorist of the self, as a text of consciousness and the unconscious" (78). By reconceiving text in its most radical forms, world and self, Spivak offers valuable lessons about writing and teaching. Given all that, we might ask, then, what is at stake in Miller's focus on the subjectivity of *only* the student writer? (Miller does address the subjectivity of the teacher in her next book, Textual Carnivals, but only by comparing composition teachers to Freud's maid, and students to children in her care.) One answer may be that there are risks involved in including the pedagogue in our theorizations of the subject, risks that evoke a different ethic of composition pedagogy, an impossible ethic.

I am speaking of an ethic not synonymous with reason, but desire. That is the nature of its impossibility. According to Mark Taylor, in his recent book Altarity, a "reasonable ethicist believes that to become an integral subject, desire must be mastered and inclination yield to obligation" (334). Similarly, Judith Butler claims that when Lacan severs desire from "the fundamental structure of human rationality," it "comes to signify the impossibility of a coherent subject, where the 'subject' is understood to be a conscious and

self-determining agency" (186). Thus, to reconceive ethics based upon desire opens up qualitatively different ways of teaching and understanding the "textuality" of subjects writing. If the student and/or pedagogical subject no longer produces her own language, in the sense of reasonable utterances, but in the pure excess of what always remains left over, what the unconscious spills forth only sparingly, then it is necessary to question many of the privileged practices of composition pedagogues, not the least of which would be current standards of evaluation and response to student writing.

So far, I have argued that writing, textuality, and ethics reconceived could reveal different means for reformulating our subjective relations in the writing classroom. There are, however, dangers associated with any critical theorizing about the subject positions of students and/or pedagogues, and I count my own claims among them. Spivak warns that many theorists of the subject are often not conscious of their own subjective investment in the narratives they produce ("Post-modern Condition" 29). Today, I have asked you to consider a reading of Miller's book that supports her critique of various productions of the subject, at the same time it marks her model of the student writer as a refusal to question her own subjective investment in the narrative she is producing. While Miller's book is a significant attempt to reformulate the subject for composition theory, in my view the problems associated with her theorization of the subject are symptomatic of the continued investment by compositionists in the totalizing "foundationalism" of the Enlightenment and modernity.

I suspect, however, that for most students and teachers the impossible is nonetheless terrifying. Heidegger understood the significance of terror and the impossible, but it still did not prevent him from being haunted by the Nietzschean question, "Is seeing itself - not seeing abysses?" (qtd in Watson 245). Heidegger claimed that the most terrifying thing of all is actually the closest thing to us, and the farthest away at the same time; "It is the nearness of things" (166). Heidegger's provocative meditation on nearness prompts

Taylor to situate writing in this space. Taylor writes that "To heed the summons of the outside, to yield to its lure is to approach the approach of the Impossible. In writing, the proximate draws near by forever withdrawing" (248). The subject is not redefined here, but part of a perpetual drawing near and withdrawing, like the appearance of the smiling Cheshire Cat, fading in and out. Taylor invites us to expect the impossible, claiming that if we have faith in the absurd paradox, it is no longer terrifying. For Taylor, faith is "an impossible gift: [it is] the gift of the Impossible" (349).

Writing, ethics, and radical alterity are impossible subjects; they are like Cheshire Cats smiling down upon an impossible croquet game. It may be that to teach writing it is first necessary to make the impossible writable. It may be that Alice's dilemma is our own. When we try to play the game, our language is like her flamingo, constantly turning around and looking at us; and the truths we seek are like the hedgehogs on the field who uncurl themselves and scurry away. Whether we are beheading or reheading or rescuing or discerning the subject, let us remember that the impossible subject is merely a suspended apparition revealing and concealing the abyss below; but, it holds the possibility of the impossible in its very smile.

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