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Imitate Me; Don't Imitate Me: Mimeticism in David Bartholomae's "Inventing the University"

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The issue of the instructor's role in the composition classroom is nowhere more critical than with those who make exposure to academic discourse the centerpiece of the writing teacher's pedagogical mission. According to their paradigm, teachers are invested with the responsibility of introducing students to a set of codes and conventions that will permit novice writers to enter into a new, and purportedly empowering, discourse community. These ideas are certainly well known, and no one has done more to explain and promote them than David Bartholomae. Particularly in his widely cited and much admired essay, "Inventing the University," Bartholomae has defined the essential ground upon which rests the justification for making the acquisition of academic discourse the primary ingredient of any first-year writing class. And because of the persuasiveness of his arguments, many of us working today in composition would agree with Patricia Bizzell's assertion that "initiation into academic discourse is the college writing course's goal ("College" 197).

If I would then single out "Inventing the University" for a careful and ultimately critical reading of its portrait of the composition teacher, it is done in recognition of the respect the essay has garnered and the influence it has exerted over the field. Furthermore, I believe Bartholomae's essay can serve as something of a paradigmatic text, for its images of the writing instructor are echoed in the work of a number of other composition theorists, including many who claim no special allegiance to the academic discourse camp. My hope is that a close reading of this essay will reveal some important misconceptions and weaknesses not only in Bartholomae's argument but throughout much of the discipline. I also hope to suggest how an approach informed by the literary and anthropological theories of René Girard might contribute to a new understanding of the political and social stakes involved in the debate over academic discourse and to a reimagining of our roles as instructors in the composition classroom.

Imitate Me: The Teacher as Model

The first steps of such a critical questioning of Bartholomae's project are already in place. Peter Elbow ("Academic") and Sheryl Fontaine have on separate occasions pointed to an underlying element of coercion within Bartholomae's call for students to take on the language

of *our* community and his insistence that the power and authority to determine the correctness (or at least the properly "academic" qualities) of a student's writing reside solely with the instructor. But I want to extend this critique to include an issue that until now has remained unexamined, even though it lies at the heart of Bartholomae's effort to have the student writer be "appropriated by" the academic discourse community (135). Behind Bartholomae's summons for students to enter into a new discourse community with all its codes and conventions is a simple demand made of student writers by the teacher: "Imitate me!" The student must learn "to speak our language, to speak as we do," and this is best accomplished when he or she "mimics the language and interpretive systems of the privileged community" (134, 157).

Images of the student as imitator abound in "Inventing the University," and the essay concludes with a rather blunt bit of prescriptive wisdom: "It may very well be that some students will need to learn to crudely mimic the 'distinctive register' of academic discourse before they are prepared to actually and legitimately do the work of the discourse . . ." (162). For Bartholomae, a fundamental task of the writing instructor is to "pry loose" the student from the discourse community to which he or she had belonged prior to entering the university (162). He characterizes these communities as structured by the "'naive' codes of 'everyday' life," and he insists that we must replace them with "the peculiar ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing that define the discourse of our community" (157, 134).

The demand that students abandon their old discourse communities and join a new one based exclusively in the language of the academy constitutes the key element in Bartholomae's program to bring students to a place where they "can both imagine and write from a position of privilege" (139). He argues that students can, through their imitation of the academy's language, acquire the ability to see themselves as "within a privileged discourse" and thus gain a new power that will "transform the political and social relationships between students and teachers" (139-40).

While I would agree that the structure of power is indeed transformed in Bartholomae's classroom, I must differ with his evaluation of the final consequences of such a change. The acquisition of an "academic" voice and language by student writers is not in itself an unassailable pedagogical goal. Even if academic discourse is truly the language of "power and wisdom" --a conclusion that seems rather dubious in a capitalist U.S. where academics, and particularly those in the humanities, find themselves increasingly marginalized--one must question Bartholomae's promotion of it as worthy of the student's unreserved emulation. Critics like Michel Serres have shown that the style of orderly argumentation and the claim to a systematic rationality that are so central to academic discourse are in fact based in strategies of power and domination that have corollaries in the larger sociopolitical realities of war and national conquest (276). In a similar vein, John Clifford has argued that the traditional academic essay is itself "ideologically committed" and its form "is not geared to please those who stand on the margins" and who "often feel alienated and displaced by the academy's 'normal' discourse" (35-36). These would seem to be strong reasons for pause before issuing any direct call for an unreserved adoption of academic discourse. But my concern in this essay is with the problems engendered by Bartholomae's endorsement of a mimetic

relationship between student and teacher. And it is with his prototype of a classroom dynamics where the model teacher is "crudely mimic[ked]" by the neophyte student that the hint of coerciveness uncovered by Elbow and Fontaine begins to seem rather more like an unavoidable element in his pedagogical project.

I would begin by questioning Bartholomae's assumption that students come to the university seeking admission into our discourse community. As Geoffrey Chase has shown, college students can and do resist their initiation into the world represented by the academy (14).¹ Certainly in my own experience, the students I have encountered over the past eight years of teaching come generally for one reason: to acquire an academic degree that will translate directly into better, which for most means higher paying, jobs. They see their writing instructors as charged with the responsibility of furnishing them with a skill that can make their future economic success a little more likely. When students complain, "We did not know what you wanted on that essay," we are not hearing expressions of their annoyance that an inadequate presentation of the codes and conventions of academic discourse has interfered with their full assimilation into the university community. Instead, I think we are being challenged with the protest that what students see as a quasi-contractual business relationship between themselves and the teacher has been subverted by a writing instructor who has not fulfilled his or her obligation to provide students with enough information to earn their desired grades. While this mercenary approach toward writing and college in general may not be one we wish to encourage, the fact remains that Bartholomae refuses even to acknowledge the possibility that a student might come to our classroom with a goal other than that of entering into our discourse community. In Bartholomae's university, students must mimic us because they "must be *our* students" (162; emphasis added). Students are not to be consulted on the all-important question of which language they will speak; they are simply "appropriated" into a foreign discourse community where we as instructors hold all the power.

The source of this power lies wholly within the teacher's role as model, and in this regard I believe "Inventing the University" reflects a more generalized misunderstanding within the greater composition community that hampers much of today's research and pedagogical theory. A significant number of our most respected and influential composition theorists have embraced quite enthusiastically--and, I would argue, rather uncritically--a philosophy of teaching writing that has as its focal point the model instructor who presents himself or herself as worthy of imitation by his or her students. For example, Muriel Harris recently published an essay in *College English* in which she vigorously defends modeling as a particularly effective "process method of teaching." Harris bases her advocacy of mimeticism upon the research of such behavior modification psychologists as Albert Bandura, and she speculates that the method's only foreseeable drawback would be that some teachers might feel nervous when placed "in the glaring spotlight of student attention" (80).

But this definition of the ideal teacher/student relationship as essentially one of model/subject goes beyond just the proponents of academic discourse or behavior modification and can even be found in staunch advocates of authenticity, dialogue, and equity in the classroom. In a chapter of *Embracing Contraries*, Peter Elbow, while declaring his support for pedagogical strategies which foster student autonomy, also defends something he calls the "emulation or

participation model of teaching and learning," in which the student falls in "love" with the teacher, and "the more you [the student] are with him [the teacher], the more you want to be like him" (96). The student even mimics the teacher's mannerisms, for he wants "to be inside or actually *be* this person" (96). Likewise, Robert Brooke makes the case for a teaching strategy grounded in imitation and the effort to have students admire their teacher enough to want to be like him or her: "When a student (or any writer) successfully learns something about writing by imitation, it is by imitating another *person*, and not a text or a process" (23). Brooke's "alternative" pedagogy requires that students come to respect and admire their teacher enough to want to "take on" their instructor's very identity and thus become better writers through the act of incorporating another's identity into their own self-concepts (24).² One can even find among feminist scholars who declare their desire to develop pedagogical theories that will lead to a more equitable distribution of power in the classroom an endorsement of the beneficent results which are said to accrue when the teacher assumes the role of model to be imitated by the student writer. Alice Horning, for example, has written that the "learner must view the teacher either consciously or unconsciously as a person to be emulated." She argues that composition instructors must model an attitude toward writing that will inspire students to imitate the former's confidence and resolve that any and all writing problems can be successfully managed (71, 72).

Girard and Mimetic Desire

Few of these advocates of mimeticism really question critically the pedagogical structure they establish in the classroom. My misgivings about the call for students to mimic our language derive from my sense that Bartholomae and those like him who espouse a pedagogy of mimeticism have based the structure of their prototypical classrooms on an inadequate notion of that same mimeticism, of what really happens when writing instructors set themselves up as models to be emulated by their students. And this is where the coercion present in Bartholomae's concept of the student as mimic is especially instructive, for it compels us to interject a cautionary note into all those scenarios which depend upon an exemplary writing instructor. To establish the teacher as a model is not a politically neutral act; rather, it is, as Girard suggests and Bartholomae unintentionally demonstrates, always an inherently authoritarian act. The usurpation of all power by the teacher in such a situation arises not out of sinister motives or bad faith, but from the very nature of mimetic desire. Girard's pioneering work in this area makes clear that the desire to imitate a model is also the desire to surrender one's old self and desires and replace them with those believed to be possessed by the model: "Imitative desire is always a desire to be Another" (*Deceit* 87). Entrapped within mimetic desire, the neophyte subject sees the world wholly through the eyes of a mesmerizing other who directs all the desires and opinions of the subject. Girard characterizes the scene of mimicry as akin to a master/slave relationship, with the enthralled imitator blindly following the lead of the model (*Deceit* 170).³ Simultaneously, the subject is also learning to disdain his or her old self in the hope that this emulation of the model will bring the successful attainment of what at present only the model seems to possess.

Girard's elucidation of the workings of mimetic desire allows us to understand more fully the dynamic of power that unavoidably takes shape in the classroom organized around the model-teacher. Bartholomae is thus quite correct when he declares that the central problem

for students trying to speak in the language of the academy is that of "audience awareness," which is ultimately reducible to "a problem of power and finesse" (140). But it is difficult to understand how the establishment of the teacher as one to be "crudely mimicked" can give birth to the feeling in a student writer that she is "either equal to or more powerful than those [her teachers] she would address" (140). The insights of Girard would suggest that precisely the opposite is likely to occur if students are encouraged to enter into a relationship with their teacher that is founded in a mimetic desire that is always authoritarian in nature. Bartholomae himself admits that the translation of private history into public language can result in feelings of "loss, violence, and compromise"; yet, he fails to recognize how the kind of mimicry he advocates inherently promotes just such acts of surrender on the part of novice student writers (142).

And it is with the way that the mimetic situation necessarily entails the message that the subject must put off and ultimately despise the "naive, outsider" language he or she brings to the university that the emulation theory of teaching becomes especially problematic, especially if it occurs in the culturally diverse classroom. If we establish the teacher as the model member of a discourse community who must be mimicked by all students, are we not setting up a situation that specifically encourages students to reject whatever cultural past and distinctiveness they may have that makes them "outsiders" to our world? In this movement from "outside" to "inside," are students not pushed, as Elaine Lees suggests, to surrender "the power of [their] difference" and "betray" their former communal identities (156)? And if academic discourse really is the language of "power and wisdom" that its advocates claim it to be, then how can its adoption be truly empowering for those students who have been victimized by the political and economic structures that the language of the academy so directly supports? As Paulo Freire reminds us, "Alienated men, they cannot overcome their dependency by 'incorporation' into the very structure responsible for the dependency" (162). In the spirit of Freire, I would ask, "What happens to the critical perspective of these students, to their capacity to reflect on the world from the ground of their own historical and cultural situation and then take responsible action, when they are told merely to 'crudely mimic' the 'peculiar ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing' that the teacher as model embodies for them?"

Interestingly, Patricia Bizzell, while urging that students be brought into our discourse community, acknowledges that through acquiring the language-practices of the academy the student takes on "a whole new world view" that "makes a strong bid to control all of a student's experience" ("What Happens" 297, 299). Yet, she maintains her advocacy of this project by arguing that students who successfully adopt the academic world view will work to preserve their ties to their original and less privileged discourse communities because the very act of acquiring the outlook of the academy inhibits one from acting selfishly or against the interests of one's former community (300). While these may be comforting words to hear for those of us charged with promulgating the academic world view, I think of much greater significance is the way Bizzell's argument exposes a rather uncritical perspective on what happens in the mimetic relationship, a relationship that so many in composition are glad to embrace, yet so few seem to comprehend fully.

A Double Bind

The usefulness of Girard's explanation of mimetic behavior extends beyond its ability to clarify the structure of coerciveness present within a classroom organized around the model-teacher. Girard also demonstrates that mimeticism is inherently conflictive in nature because it traps the novice subject within a sort of "double bind" (*Things Hidden* 292). For those of us in composition, this means that the message of the model-teacher to the student is contradictory (and thus agonistic): "imitate me; don't imitate me." The teacher does not ultimately wish for a perfect act of emulation by the student because the end result would be the absolute interchangeability of model and subject and thus the loss of the former's original position of superiority. The summons to imitation always carries with it the caveat, "Don't imitate me so well that you can seize my prestige and power." The teacher both demands and forbids imitation since he or she can never allow the student to become a perfect mirror image and thus the perfect equal of the teacher.

In "Inventing the University" this double bind appears within the context of Bartholomae's demand of students "to know what I know" and "learn to write what I would write," which is always accompanied by his contradictory message that the student can never successfully accomplish this and join the teacher as a fully assimilated double (140). Bartholomae tells us that even as a graduate student, even after he had experienced a degree of appropriation into the academic discourse community much more extensive than what the large majority of our first-year writers ever will, he "would begin papers by sitting down to write literally in the voice--with the syntax and the key words--of the strongest teacher I had met" (145). In other words, Bartholomae was still the neophyte slavishly imitating the model-teacher in the effort to capture the latter's authority and prestige. Indeed, the power relationship implicit in Bartholomae's choice of adjective to describe his exemplary teacher aptly suggests the impossibility of his ever, while still a student, entering "legitimately" into the discourse community as an equal. This memory also hints at the ultimately conflictive struggle at the heart of the mimetic classroom for those students who take seriously the invitation to mimic the instructor in order to speak to us on our own terms as persons of "status or privilege" (138). If these students are perceptive enough to recognize that we are also saying that they cannot and should not ever perfectly emulate us because we must always remain their superiors, qualitatively different by virtue of our superior power and prestige, then the result can only be frustration and finally struggle and conflict as they seek to possess what the model holds out with one hand but takes away with the other.

Evidence that students do indeed sense this double bind is certainly plentiful within composition research. Thom Hawkins reports that his peer writing tutors at the University of California at Berkeley felt a sense of frustration and futility as they attempted to mimic successfully the language of their academic models:

Tutors refer frequently [in their journals] to something they call "the system." To them the system is not just the academic establishment and its regulations, it is the set of intellectual standards used to measure student performance and, most important, it is the manipulation of language to enforce these standards. Knowledge is dispensed through the academy's language, and the academy protects its language from outsiders. A favorite word used to

characterize this system is "impersonal." It is big, teachers are inaccessible, and the competition for grades is so fierce that students are atomized, cut off from each other, relating only to the center of power at the head of the classroom, just as they did in high school. (65)

Sarah Freedman's study of teachers' responses to expository essays produced by professional writers likewise suggests the reality of the double bind and the extent to which those of us in the academy guard our prestige and refuse to let students approach us as equals. Freedman had both professional and student writers perform the same writing task and then asked experienced composition instructors to evaluate the essays, which they believed had all been written by students. To Freedman's surprise, the work of the professionals was not uniformly judged as superior. Teachers tended to react negatively to the professionals' familiar tone and authoritative approach to the writing assignment. In essence, the professionals did not write like students should, as "subordinates" who "must use linguistic forms that show respect, deference, and the proper degree of formality," and for this they were penalized by a number of teachers (341). Freedman concludes, "Teachers may have biased responses to prose, especially where we feel that our role as an authority has been threatened" (345).

Recognizing Mimeticism

Despite the dangers of authoritarianism and conflict inherent in mimeticism, imitation is certainly a vital element in the learning process of every human being, a fact even Girard readily acknowledges (*Things Hidden* 290). So, one might argue that these accounts of the model-teacher classroom merely represent an unintentional confirmation of a state of affairs described by Richard Ohmann when he observes that the acquisition of academic literacy necessarily involves the "activity of social groups" and as such it "embeds social relations within it. And these relations always include *conflict* as well as cooperation" (685). But I believe Girard's perspective on mimetic desire allows us to recognize within the typical composition classroom an element in the teacher-student dynamic that distinguishes in a very important way Bartholomae's paradigm of the student-as-mimic relegated to a perpetually subordinate role from Freire's "pedagogy of knowing," where teacher and student are joined together as equals in a "loving, humble, hopeful, trusting, critical" educational endeavor aimed at liberating all parties from the structures that oppress them, including the dominant discourses (Shor 95). And if we take seriously what Girard can teach us about mimeticism, about the classroom relationships we so often establish between ourselves and our students, then I think we can find a way to move closer to the paradigm outlined by Freire.

Andrea Lunsford has defined as central to our task as composition instructors the goal of "enabling others, our student colleagues, to compose themselves, to write themselves into being and hence to write a new and different narrative, one populated by many different and differing voices" (76). I believe that fundamental to this end of empowering students is the effort to provide an instructional context that facilitates their understanding of the workings of mimeticism in the educational process. Students who are aware of the nature of imitative desire are the ones best equipped to preserve the social and political pasts that they bring to the university and that must serve as the starting points for any critical enterprise that they would undertake.⁴ Girard believes that the very act of recognizing the workings of

mimeticism is an ethically and intellectually liberating experience with profound implications for future behavior (*Things Hidden* 127). But, further, we as composition instructors can also begin to help students develop for themselves a "distance" and "base of judgment which would permit [them] to challenge the authority of [their] models" (Girard, qtd. in Seibel 292; my translation). This would not only mean a heightened awareness on their part of the double bind which we so often impose on them, but perhaps also their radical questioning of our authority over their texts and the multiplicity of their voices.⁵

This new classroom would be quite a distance from the prevailing paradigm of "outsider" students brought to a homogeneous mastery of academic language by the "insider" instructor, and it would surely demand a thorough reimagining on our part of the role we play in the institution of postsecondary education. But neither of these changes can occur until we as teachers better understand the workings of mimeticism and the dynamic structure it fosters in the composition classroom.

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NOTES

¹In a similar vein, John Schilb has set forth some interesting ideas on the relationship between politics and a student's resistance to a new discourse community. Although Schilb's investigation of this complex issue is admittedly preliminary, his conclusion that "resistance in any discursive context might very well have symptomatic value for the analysis of politics" seems germane to my own argument with Bartholomae and the proponents of mimeticism in the composition classroom (25).

²Brooke goes on to argue that this learning by emulation is not mere indoctrination of students by their instructor, since teachers actually lack any meaningful control over the new identities students construct out of their classroom experiences: "The teacher, no matter how exciting a model she presents, just isn't in control of the identity the student will develop. Students are not as tractable as that--the identities they negotiate in any class are the result, to a large extent, of the identities they already have" (38). I believe a Girardian analysis of the teacher-as-model classroom will prove the case to be somewhat different from what Brooke here suggests.

³Interestingly, this Girardian-based description of the teacher/student relationship parallels an account of the typical composition class recently offered by Nina Schwartz. Employing analytic tools provided by Barthes and Lacan, Schwartz concludes, "Most classrooms . . . repeat the structure of the master/slave relation . . . and in the process encourage students' belief in their own responsibility to achieve an authority similar to the teacher's" (69).

⁴This point is similar to one made by Nicholas Coles and Susan V. Wall, who urge that when we invite students to join our discourse community we must "focus also on those motives and abilities that grow from our students' histories and that may be sustained and extended, transformed perhaps, but not therefore abandoned in the process of accommodation" (299).

⁵James Slevin, using a notion of critical thinking developed by Terry Eagleton, comes to

a similar conclusion about our task as writing instructors: "If students are to understand and control their writing, and not just *adapt* it to the signifying system we call 'academic discourse,' they will need to do more than successfully imitate its surface form or receive instruction in its conventions. . . . Rather, they need to engage fully in its production, to question it, perhaps even to challenge its purposes" (14).

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