

2-1-2010

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Recommended Citation

Barnard, Ian. "The Ruse of Clarity." *College Composition and Communication* 61.3 (Feb. 2010): 434-51. Print.

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This article was originally published in *College Composition and Communication*, volume 61, issue 3, in 2010.

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National Council of Teachers of English

Ian Barnard

The Ruse of Clarity

This essay interrogates the concept of “clarity” that has become an imperative of effective student writing. I show that clarity is neither axiomatic nor transparent, and that the clear/unclear binary that informs the identification of clarity as a goal of effective student writing is itself unstable precisely because of the ideological baggage that undergirds its construction. I make this argument by finding the traces of composition’s insistence on student writers’ clarity in the attacks on the writing of critical theorists.

I

My goal in this essay is to interrogate the concept of “clarity” that has become a discursive *sine qua non* of effective student writing. The virtues of clarity are routinely expounded or assumed in composition handbooks, rubrics used to evaluate student writing, the everyday informal interactions of writing instructors with their students and with each other, the stated philosophies of many college composition programs in the United States, and the course descriptions and expectations of other college faculty (including faculty who work with graduate students). I take issue with the reigning taken-for-grantedness of clarity’s virtues by analyzing the ways in which assumptions about clarity’s obviousness, objectivity, and innocuousness in fact conceal the ideological work that is done in the name of clarity, and by examining the ramifications for composition studies of the values embedded in this insistence on clarity.

I have no doubt that various kinds of writing have their place, and that each has drawbacks and advantages. In what follows, then, my primary intent is not to defend or excoriate writing that is constructed as “clear” or writing that is demonized as “unclear,”

but rather to unpack the values that “clarity” implicitly champions and abjures. I hope to show that “clarity” is neither axiomatic nor transparent, and that the clear/unclear binary that informs the positing of clarity as a goal of effective student writing is itself unstable precisely because of the ideological baggage that undergirds its construction. I make this argument by finding the traces of composition’s insistence on student writers’ clarity in the attacks on the writing styles of critical theorists—attacks that present a resistance to the politics of critical theory as a critique of purple prose.

I take issue with the reigning taken-for-grantedness of clarity’s virtues by analyzing the ways in which assumptions about clarity’s obviousness, objectivity, and innocuousness in fact conceal the ideological work that is done in the name of clarity, and by examining the ramifications for composition studies of the values embedded in this insistence on clarity.

II

The description of the first-year composition course at my own institution explains that students will develop skill in “expressing ideas clearly,” and clarity rears its enigmatic head again in the rubric that all instructors of the course are required to use to score student portfolios, defining a strong thesis as “clear, insightful, and thought-provoking.” Rhetoric and composition graduate students in our M.A. program are reminded that the point of their thesis project must be “clearly articulated and supported” in the thesis proposal, and that the project must be “clearly situated within literary or theoretical traditions” (English). Unsurprisingly, a quick Google search shows that my institution is not unique in this regard: sample online rubrics for writing assignments at Winthrop University, Florida State University, the University of Texas at Austin, and Case Western Reserve University, for instance, all demand that successful student essays exhibit clarity in some form, whether by embodying “a *clear* thesis and organizational strategy” (my emphasis), “*clear* organization and focus” (my emphasis), or a “*clear* controlling idea (my emphasis), or by “clearly” indicating the “direction” of the paper, or developing a “clear” introduction and conclusion (“Building”; Franks; Koster; “Sample”). An “unclear” one of any of these is penalized. Student writing outside the academy seems to be equally under the spell of clarity: a website sponsored by the Home Educators Association of Virginia provides a “rubric for written composition” whose first criterion

under the “main idea/topic sentence” scoring category hinges on whether a student paper’s main idea or topic sentence is “unclear” (Munday). It should be noted that many of these rubrics, and others like them, derive from rubrics published in composition textbooks and scholarship, including books used to train composition instructors (e.g., Lippman).

Injunctions for clarity are reiterated self-righteously in writing handbooks, composition textbooks, rubrics, syllabi, classroom talk, and faculty conversations on campuses all over the United States. As Lester Faigley points out, in 1950 the first edition of James M. McCrimmon’s popular and repeatedly reissued writing textbook, *Writing with a Purpose*, included a section on “clarity” (Faigley 151). In 2008, the companion website for Michael Harvey’s 2003 handbook *The Nuts and Bolts of College Writing* established its continuity with this tradition by proclaiming matter-of-factly,

If there’s one writing quality that *Nuts and Bolts* emphasizes more than any other, it’s clarity. Being clear in your thoughts and your words—saying what you actually intend to say, and doing it in such a way that your reader understands you—is your highest duty as an expository writer, more important than beauty or elegance or even originality. Without clarity you’re not really communicating, just going through the motions. (Harvey)

In all of this deferral to clarity, however, there is no discussion of what clarity means or how one knows if something is clear or not. When invoked, clarity’s desirability is almost always taken for granted, and clarity is almost always spoken of as if its meaning were obvious (as if we all know if something is clear, as if what I find to be clear will always also be what you find to be clear). So what does “clarity” mean? In the next section, I want to begin to answer this question by highlighting the telling slippages that occur around discourses of clarity. I do this by examining how the clarity mandate functions in the arena of published expository writing, especially in attacks on critical theory, and then return to the question of student writing in section IV.

III

We can construct various interlocking histories of, antecedents for, and trajectories for the current hegemony of clarity as a criterion of effective student writing. In a 1969 *College English* article indicting the composition textbooks that he saw as undergirding the teaching of “mechanical,” “sterile,” and “meaningless” student writing, William E. Coles Jr. found a paradigm shift from a nineteenth-century belief in “the moral fusion of writing as an action with the

standards by which that action is measured” to an obsession with clarity and correctness in textbooks of the 1960s. Another such history might follow Anis S. Bawarshi’s discussion of Locke’s claim that the only beneficial province of rhetoric is “order and clearness,” and of how Locke’s 1690 reduction of rhetoric influenced eighteenth- and nineteenth-century conceptualizations of rhetorical invention as a regulative skill rather than a generative art (177).¹ Richard Lanham also looks to the history of rhetoric, tracing the origins of clarity as “the dominant prose virtue” to Book III of Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* (Lanham, *Analyzing* 199) and later arguing that the triumph of clarity signals the rejection of rhetoric, which was always associated with obfuscation and deception (Lanham, *Economics* 137–40). In this narrative, then, we might say that contemporary composition’s concern with clarity is a part of the discipline’s continuing attempts to legitimate itself, here by distancing itself from its history, attempting to overcome the stigma of rhetoric, to mark itself as science rather than as artifice.² A different history of clarity might look to Lanham himself, Joseph M. Williams, and others who popularized the merits of “the plain style” beginning in the 1970s.³ Lanham’s *Revising Prose* was concerned with, as Lanham put it, “translating the Official Style into plain English” (v), though in his 2006 *The Economics of Attention* Lanham to some extent complicated this earlier work, conceding that the “C-B-S” (clarity-brevity-sincerity) theory of communication “doesn’t always work” (141). He still insisted, however: “Of course we should always get the lard out of our prose. I have written two textbooks and two videos that show how to do this” (142). In each of these cases, the instantiation or recuperation of clarity has political motives and implications beyond the literal desire to enjoy “clear” writing. But clarity’s imbrication in larger social and political discourses is best illustrated in the trajectory that most interests me, the one where calls for clarity in student writing intersect with complaints of obfuscation in scholarly writing in the humanities.

With the ascendancy of critical theory in the second half of the twentieth century, charges of willful obscurantism were hurled at theory from anti-intellectuals, from readers who found theory difficult and frustrating, from critics on the Right who felt threatened by the ideologies of postmodernism and poststructuralism, from critics on the Left who believed that theory’s density diminished its political efficacy, and from those inhabiting any combination of these positions. Daniel Smith points out that charges of using inflated language to attempt to elevate empty or inadequately explicated ideas are nothing new to the humanities, but that “theory is the target de jour of academic gatekeepers faithfully committed to maintaining standards of ‘clarity’ and ‘rigor’” (526).

The journal *Philosophy and Literature* famously gave its “bad writing” award to Judith Butler in 1998,⁴ and it is surely no coincidence that the culminating example of exclusionary and inefficient writing listed in Susan Peck MacDonald’s *Professional Academic Writing in the Humanities and Social Sciences* is Fredric Jameson (193–95), a familiar target in attacks on difficult writing. Tellingly, MacDonald’s supposedly scientific analysis of Jameson’s prose never addresses the substance of Jameson’s ideas, focusing instead on syntactic length, nominalization, and nonconcrete verbs in Jameson’s work. By bracketing content, MacDonald not only avoids dealing with the implications of Jameson’s argument, but also suggests that style is completely independent of meaning—as if certain ideas aren’t expressed more effectively in specific styles, as if there is one generic and universal style that is always best.

David Orr’s 2000–2001 *American Educator* article, “Verbicide,” makes the ideological implications of the argument about prose style more explicit. It begins as an attack on young people’s apparently diminishing vocabularies due to technology; Orr then accuses some academics of colluding in this decline:

However manifested, our linguistic decline is aided and abetted by academics, including whole departments specializing in various forms of postmodernism and the deconstruction of one thing or another. They have propounded the idea that everything is relative, hence largely inconsequential, and that the use of language is primarily an exercise in power, hence to be devalued. They have taught, in other words, a pseudo-intellectual contempt for clarity, careful argument, and felicitous expression. Being scholars of their word they also write without clarity, argument, and felicity. Remove the arcane constructions from any number of academic papers written in the past 10 years, and the argument—such as it is—evaporates. But the situation is not much better elsewhere in the academy, where thought is often fenced in by disciplinary jargon. (27–28)

Not only does Orr mischaracterize postmodernism and poststructuralism, but he doesn’t explain, for instance, why the “contempt for clarity” is “pseudo-intellectual” rather than just intellectual, or how “careful argument” has been jettisoned by proponents of postmodernism and poststructuralism. I won’t belabor the point that Orr’s clear prose is hardly a model of careful argument, but rather want to note the mechanism that creates postmodernism and deconstruction as the whipping persons here. Orr goes on to make his allegiances even clearer:

Nor are we held together, as we once were, by the reading of a common literature or by listening to great stories, and so we cannot draw on a common set of metaphors

and images as we once did. Allusions to the Bible and other great books no longer resonate because they are simply unfamiliar to a growing number of people. (28)

He concludes his article with the admonition that

We must instill in our students an appreciation for language, literature, and words well crafted and used to good ends. As teachers we should insist on good writing. We should assign books and readings that are well written. We should restore rhetoric—the ability to speak clearly and well—to the liberal arts curriculum. Our own speaking and writing ought to demonstrate clarity and truthfulness. (28–29)

On the one side, then, of Orr's neat binary we have clarity, good writing, truth, the canon, and the Bible. On the other, deconstruction, postmodernism, young people, technology (email), and bad writing. Note how the lineup is ideological rather than logical: the Bible and canonical literature are not necessarily models of clarity, given their often highly metaphoric styles and the multiple conflicting interpretations that they continue to engender, yet alongside "truth" they come to stand for particular political, philosophical, and pedagogical epistemologies.

The above examples are representative of the texts and assumptions of many other contemporary scholarly and lay commentators who represent their championing of clarity as matter-of-fact, when this matter-of-factness is in itself constructed by contested philosophical and political allegiances. Not all the calls for clarity are as blatantly reactionary as Orr's, but these linkages do occur with predictable frequency in attacks on theory, difficult writing, and supposed lack of clarity. Not only do complex

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prose and vocabulary and difficult ideas get constructed as the antithesis of clarity, but theory itself becomes the object of attack. And composition theory has also been subjected to this kind of conflation: Gary A. Olson has pointed to the ways in which the rise of theoretical scholarship in our discipline was met with attacks not only on the theoretical enterprise itself but also on the language in which this scholarship was written (23). In a 1996 article entitled "Textbookspeak," William Lutz attacks the language of composition studies as needlessly inflated in order to make something simple seem more important; Lutz insists, "Teaching writing isn't all that complex . . . it's not brain surgery." Here we see quite explicitly how the critique of language is imbricated in a particular worldview and intellectual position, and the renunciation of conflicting views and positions. Lutz's assertion makes at least two questionable

assumptions: (1) composition theory is only concerned with the teaching of writing; (2) the teaching of writing is a simple undertaking. Both of these assumptions have been contested by theorists and teachers of composition, but Lutz addresses these substantive issues only obliquely, via a denunciation of the language in which these appeals are made.

Once again, with Lutz, hostility to theory, or to the particular dispositions advocated in this theory, masquerades as criticism of poor writing. I could cite many other examples of attacks on theory that are in some way or another, explicitly or implicitly, similar to Orr's and Lutz's, or to those cited by Olson.⁵ On the face of it, these complaints are often directed only at the writing styles of theorists; in effect they are also ideological reactions against the theoretical enterprise itself and the values espoused in these critical theories. These may include Marxism (Jameson) and other radical political critiques of liberalism and humanism, as well as poststructuralist destabilizations of foundationalist epistemologies, unified subjects, master narratives, referential language, and singular meaning. Lynn Worsham argues that "political" interpretation of *écriture féminine* that denies the radical postmodernism of such writing "begins as a quest for meaning and ends as phallogocentric obsession with one meaning"

In addition, I hope that the examples I have briefly discussed demonstrate that "clarity" is not as self-evident as its proponents like to think—in fact, the very proponents of clarity often use strikingly "clear" language to convey arguments that are convoluted, misleading, and enigmatic.

(84)—clarity's comfort can be symptomatic of a parallel anxiety or desire to fix and control meaning in the face of challenges to such fixity and control.

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arguments that are convoluted, misleading, and enigmatic. In the quote above from Orr, for instance, the assumptions that "we were once held together" and that being "held together" is a good thing, and the failure to unpack who this "we" is, are telling demonstrations of sleight-of-hand presented as and in the name of clarity. In their introduction to the anthology *Just Being Difficult? Academic Writing in the Public Arena*, Jonathan Culler and Kevin Lamb point out that the charge of "bad writing" against scholars in the humanities is usually made without any explanation of why or how the writing in question is "bad," as if merely to quote a portion of the offending prose is proof of poor prose in and of itself: "The allegation of *bad writing* works . . . through an appeal to transparency that assigns badness to opacity. But if the most credible gloss for

bad in *bad writing* is simply ‘unclear,’ doesn’t the word itself—as an unclear substitution for the word *unclear*—enact the same failure of clarity it decries?” (“Introduction” 2).⁶ Judith Butler moves the contradictions of “clarity” a step further by examining a metonymic instance of clarity’s content:

The demand for lucidity forgets the ruses that motor the ostensibly “clear” view. Avital Ronell recalls the moment in which Nixon looked into the eyes of the nation and said, “let me make one thing perfectly clear” and then proceeded to lie. What travels under the sign of “clarity,” and what would be the price of failing to deploy a certain critical suspicion when the arrival of lucidity is announced? Who devises the protocols of “clarity” and whose interests do they serve? What is foreclosed by the insistence on parochial standards of transparency as requisite for all communication? What does “transparency” keep obscure? (xix)

Clarity, then, can be duplicity or obscurity, the very things that it purports to rectify, whether maliciously (as with Nixon) or innocently.

As I suggested earlier, not all demands for clarity emanate from right-wing politics, and certainly not all advocates of clarity are anti-theory ideologues. Gerald Graff, for example, critiques “academese,” obfuscation, and opacity and calls for clarity in academic writing in his *Clueless in Academe*. Not only does his book not bash theory, but Graff himself is well known for his engagements with and explications of critical theory. (Graff also argues that academic writing isn’t necessarily as difficult as it is made out to be.) However, it is important to consider the *results* of diverse insistences on clarity, to trace the (unwitting) collusions among these diverse insistences, and to revisit the ways in which apparently opposite political ideologies can make common cause around pedagogy and the construction of students. Asao B. Inoue’s “Community-Based Assessment Pedagogy” is an instructive case in point: while Inoue’s discussion of the problems with traditional paradigms of grading writing could signal a dissident disposition, Inoue himself nevertheless repeatedly resorts to clarity as a desirable assessment criterion (217–19). He also uses the appeal to clarity to explain his manipulation of student quotes in the article (226), an instance, perhaps, of what Worsham, describing literacy’s alignment “with the ideology of the clear and distinct,” might see as literacy’s “power to recuperate the power of those already in a position to order and give meaning to the social world” (93), and a suggestive exemplification of how clarity’s disciplining function in the theory wars might be intricately tied with power relations in the composition classroom.

I turn to the collisions and intersections among theory, pedagogy, and disparate ideological affiliations in the following section. While there might

not be a direct or obvious connection between attacks on theory and the call for clarity in student writing. I want my framing of pedagogy and student writing within the context of critiques of obscurantism in published scholarly writing to be evocative, to impel us to think of “clarity” itself as a problem, of the ways in which unreflective invocations of clarity in the classroom complement theory bashing and bring about similar results in their joint reliance on axiom and indefinability, even if the impetuses for the two deployments of clarity may be different.

IV

The ways in which demands for clarity often converge with covert resistance to poststructuralist epistemologies inform telling sets of contradictions in the composition classroom, where students are constructed and instructed in particular patterns informed by the ideologies allied with clarity. I here elaborate several interlocking sites where clarity imperatives play out in the composition classroom, and what I see as the implications of these imperatives in the context of the anti-theory discourses discussed above: these sites reveal disjunctions between composition theory and the teaching of writing around clarity’s taken-for-grantedness, the status of student writers, and the purposes of composition courses.

Despite the professed zeal for “clarity” in student writing among many composition stakeholders (teachers, administrators, theorists, and even students), critical and composition theorists have been defending difficult writing and critiquing attacks on difficult writing—and as I’ve already indicated,

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it’s hard not to see clarity as the other of difficult writing. In addition to work by cultural critics and critical theorists (such as the Culler and Lamb collection) that has treated the problematic of difficulty in interesting and productive ways, scholars in rhetoric and composition such as Victor Vitanza, D. Diane Davis, Gary A. Olson,

Lester Faigley, Sarah J. Arroyo, and Lynn Worsham have written in “difficult” language or have addressed—sympathetically—difficult writing, as have two recent issues of *JAC*. In one of them, Christa Albrecht-Crane argues that in a culture that emphasizes brevity, superficiality, and commodification, difficulty resists efficiency and utilitarianism (857). James L. Kastely’s *JAC* article, “The Earned Increment: Kenneth Burke’s Argument for Inefficiency,” sees difficulty in writing as a critique of efficiency and productivity and as a resistance to

appropriation. This body of work points to a disjunction between, on the one hand, current scholarship in the field and, on the other hand, composition pedagogy and discourse about composition pedagogy. This is one of many lags between contemporary critical theory in general and classroom practice in the teaching of writing, one of the gaps between the scholarship in our discipline in particular and the teaching that we often think of as enacting that scholarship, since both the uncritical denigration of difficult writing in critical theory and the unreflective insistence on clarity in student writing evidence no engagement with the arguments advanced in this scholarship.⁷

This gap manifests itself in a high-culture/low-culture binary that gets played out in theories and practices of reading—and in differing attitudes to student writing compared to the work of published authors, despite imperatives in the field that students be interpellated into composition as “real writers.”⁸ There is often a contradiction between the writing we enjoy reading—and expect our students to acquire a taste for—and the writing we insist our students produce. The former might be full of ambiguous and complex content and convoluted, difficult, unconventional prose. While we are often willing to recognize—and even enjoy—the work that goes into reading difficult fiction and nonfiction texts by professional writers, when it comes to our own students’ writing, sometimes neither we nor our students have the time or willingness to engage in that kind of work: the texts must be clear and easy to read—these two concepts often become interchangeable. Alas, students quickly pick up on this from us and become eager to judge all writing—that of their colleagues as well as of professional writers—based on how easy it is to read. They may use their experience of finding a text difficult to read as reason to dismiss or criticize the text, rather than to see this difficulty as exposing their own deficiencies or as presenting a productive intellectual challenge to them as readers and writers. Not understanding becomes a position of power from which to attack the text (Culler and Lamb, “Introduction” 3). We can’t blame students for this anti-intellectualism if we continue to repeat the mantra of clarity when it comes to their own writing.

To further complicate matters, some writing teachers want their students to immerse themselves in the writing conventions of a particular discipline, area of inquiry, or profession, while concomitant insistences on clarity inevitably include injunctions against jargon, the very marks of topic-, discipline-, and profession-specific writing.⁹ Rebecca Moore Howard makes the powerful

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argument that the academy's obsession with plagiarism signals its attempts at gatekeeping, at preventing students from entering into the academic and professional discourse communities of which they must become a part in order to succeed on the terms of the academy and the professions. The same point could surely be made about strictures against jargon—about the demand for clarity—in student writing: they reinforce hierarchies that fix students' places as students rather than as writers, as fake academics and professionals.¹⁰

Demands for clarity in student writing might not only be informed by assumptions about readability and reader-friendliness, but also, more parochially, by the politics of instructors' time and patience. Min-Zhan Lu's daring suggestion that student texts deserve the same kind of close reading and generous interpretation of ambiguity accorded work by published writers is frequently countered with a reductive resort to the question of student intent (despite the fact that literary theory discredited authorial intent as a foundation for the interpretation of literature over four decades ago) or protestations about teacher workload.¹¹ The disposition of efficiency about student texts marks the confluence of the ideologies of efficiency and utilitarianism critiqued by Albrecht-Crane and Kastely with the material realities of a professional underclass (composition instructors) who are overworked and undervalued, and who often cannot afford the luxury of leisurely readings of student texts: these ideologies and materialities mutually reinforce one another. But efficiency mandates also speak to the larger value placed on the (sub)discipline as a whole. Despite valiant efforts by compositionists over at least two decades to contest the diminution of composition as merely a service field, the field continues to be defined as a handmaiden to other disciplines and fields.¹² The recent efforts of past MLA president Gerald Graff to bring "writing in from the cold" might be seen as merely consolidating that marginalization: commenting on the injustices of the contingent faculty labor system in U.S. academia, Graff advises,

The word also needs to get out that the two-track system lowers the quality of education, not least because it widens the disconnections between writing courses and the literature and other subject matter courses taught by the regular faculty. At most universities there tends to be little communication between the composition program and the disciplinary faculty about what is wanted or expected in student writing. Faculty members in the disciplines rarely have a clear idea of the philosophy of writing informing the composition program, while composition teachers (through no fault of theirs) tend to be equally in the dark about what instructors in the disciplines look for in their writing assignments—assuming they give some. ("Bringing" 3)

Note how in Graff's formulation not only is composition not a "subject matter" or "discipline," but it can be imagined only as serving to prepare students for writing assignments in other classes (contrarily, it would be unthinkable to imagine literature classes as serving only to enable students to succeed in their composition courses). We might look, then, at the trajectory from Graff's criticism of "academese" to his inability to think of composition except as utility, and ask how these liberal interventions into academic practices and discourses ultimately collude with the anti-intellectualism and conservatism of anti-theory projects.

Efficiency and utility also seem to merge with functional views of higher education, usually well-meaning in their concern for students' interests and preferences but often remarginalizing those who are already constructed in opposition to intellectualism and abstraction. Faculty at my institution are enjoined to develop curricula that are intellectually rigorous, yet at the same time we are reminded that because this

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institution is a working-class university, the primary function of its programs should be to train students for the workforce. We are led to believe that this is what students want and what we are beholden to provide. In a recent interview, Noam Chomsky was asked about the growing "emphasis on the utilitarian value of higher education, the idea that people, especially poor people and people of color, need jobs and don't have time for this idea of educating the whole person." Chomsky's succinct response: "That's a point of view that belongs in dictatorships, not in democracies. It assumes that if you're poor, you don't have any need—there's no justification—for you to be offered the opportunity to participate in high culture. . . . that is garbage" (100).

In a 2004 *Chronicle of Higher Education* article, Ben Yagoda articulates a well-worn objection to my efforts to disrupt the opposition between critical theory and student writing, between the published work of established writers and the texts of apprentice writers: "We all would grant that the singularity of Charles Dickens's or Dave Barry's prose is a good thing. But would it be wise—or sane—to suggest such singularity as a goal for the average English-composition student? We are not all destined to be Hemingways, nor would most of us want to be" (6). My response, in addition to insisting on the importance and productiveness of recognizing students as real writers, is that even for students

as students there is value in working with interesting language as a means of coming to language and coming to ideas. Paul Heilker's discussion of "essaying" versus "expository" writing gives a compelling rationale for language ambitions on language grounds alone: "one reason I want students to write essays is I simply, selfishly, want more interesting things to read from them. Clarity and order are virtues, no doubt, but overdone they produce prose that is flat, predictable, and boring" (197). We also need to think about how insistences on clarity restrict ideas and thinking and might make impossible for students the kind of complex thinking to which critical theorists aspire. In addition to

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the value of language complexity in its own right, then, there is value in students working with difficult ideas and practicing—even if inexpertly—the kind of complex writing that embodies these ideas. In his critique of Joseph M. Williams's advocacy of the "plain style," Ian

Pringle points to evidence that suggests not only that when "students are going through a period of . . . cognitive growth, striving for a new range in their ability to form abstractions, their writing sometimes comes to be extremely clumsy, almost indeed 'terminally opaque'" (96), but also that "what typical judges of student writing value when they make their judgments is a complex style with heavier cognitive demands" (95). Surely inexpert complexity is preferable to expert simplicity if it is indicative of intellectual wrestling and scholarly ambition rather than the complacency of comfort?¹³ Sometimes writing that "doesn't work" is still interesting and productive. Why pretend that we aren't sometimes entranced by writing that is mysterious or enigmatic or illogical—by writing over which the writer or reader does not always have complete control? How often do we complain about student essays that are reductive or simplistic or trite? To what extent are our demands for "clarity" responsible for these problems? If we accept that form and content are interconnected, if we are persuaded by research in composition that shows how students' difficulties with language in their writing often reflect problems with concepts or arguments, then we must also own that work with difficult language and difficult work with language is an integral part of exploring sophisticated ideas. If, as Jon Spayde conflictedly laments/celebrates, French theory transformed how intellectuals look at nearly everything, "mostly by making everything more complex," by giving us "richer models of how we're formed by cultural and social forces" (76), and by generating jargon-choked fusions of diverse disciplinary and political

traditions (77), then perhaps jargon-choked prose should be rewarded for its ambition, for its challenges to readers and writers, and for its imbrication in critical thinking. Clarity in and of itself does not achieve any of these things.

V

Critical theorists and their apologists have repeatedly talked about the need to find innovative language to convey new, complex, and difficult ideas (e.g., Butler xviii; Vitanza 159; Wells 492). Existing language and conventional language structures may be inadequate to embody ideas that often critique language itself and the power structures that inform conventional language. These defenses of difficult writing have frequently been developed in response to proponents of clarity in writing who inevitably point to exemplars from critical theory or just indict theory in general, when citing professional writing that lacks clarity.

We need to ask, then, what kinds of ideas (and what kinds of writing) are being resisted in the name of “clarity.” We need to ask what values and institutions are being privileged, and what systems underlie these values and institutions. We need to ask what clarity really means. And we need to ask what “unclear” means and what it does.

Writing that gets demonized for its supposed lack of clarity may be “unclear” out of necessity or accident. It might be working to create new or unconventional understandings and new or unconventional ways of making understandings, recognizing in the process that strange language and innovative ways of using language must embody these understandings.¹⁴ In this case, clarity could simply stand for the conventional, the known, the old. New epistemologies are categorized with the moniker “unclear” precisely because they are unfamiliar. The jargon of a specific discipline or topic or epistemology might include specialized language that is necessary for the sake of precision or for writers and readers to take certain understandings for granted in order to move a discussion beyond the basics. To outsiders, this jargon may appear as willful obtuseness or a failure to write clearly.

For student writers in multimodal, postmodern, globalized composing spaces, a failure of clarity can indicate a grappling with new ideas and discourses as much as it might signal situatedness in these composing spaces. In the interstices where necessity and accident merge and change places, where authorial intent is neither discernable nor necessarily interesting, where critical theory meets student writing, sometimes something that escapes clarity’s bounds gestures toward revelation.

Acknowledgments

I thank Roxana Dapper, Ronit Sarig, Richard C. Gebhardt, and Karmen Garabekyan for assisting me with ideas and resources for and feedback on this material. I also thank audience members at the 2006 Conference on College Composition and Communication panel where I first presented these ideas for their invaluable suggestions. I am especially grateful to Aneil Rallin, Ryan Skinnell, Diane Davis, Kathleen Yancey, and an anonymous reviewer for College Composition and Communication for their careful and generous readings of and revision suggestions for previous incarnations of this article.

Notes

1. I thank Ryan Skinnell for pointing me to Bawarshi's argument here.
2. Carol Poster similarly reads the favor Aristotle found in the eyes of rhetoricians and compositionists in the twentieth century as a sign of the field's efforts to increase its prestige.
3. For a brief history of the discourse of plain style and a defense of plain style, see Pounds.
4. For more information about this "contest," see Culler and Lamb ("Introduction").
5. See Jennifer Howard for a discussion of the attacks against theory and "jargon" in the context of the supposed "devolution of theory" at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Howard also cites D. G. Myers's 1999 article "Bad Writing," reprinted in the 2005 anthology *Theory's Empire: An Anthology of Dissent* (Patai and Corral).
6. Christa Albrecht-Crane also cautions against "the dangerous conflation of clear prose with an assumed straightforward transmission of clear, simple ideas" (860).
7. For further discussion of these disjunctions, see Faigley; Barnard, "Anti-Ethnography."
8. For discussion of the imperative in composition scholarship and pedagogy that students write to a "real" audience, see Isaacs and Jackson. For a discussion of this imperative in high schools, see "Writing."
9. Culler and Lamb argue that the demand for "clarity" is made specifically of scholarly writing in the humanities ("Introduction" 2) and is indicative of assumptions that scholarship in the humanities—unlike work in the sciences or social sciences—should be accessible to all. For a spirited defense of jargon, see Olson.
10. For some arguments for and about constructing composition (and other) students as writers, see Barnard, "Anti-Ethnography" and "Whole-Class Workshops"; Elbow; Horner, "Students" and *Terms*; Isaacs and Jackson.
11. Mariolina R. Salvatori and Patricia A. Donahue's innovative text book *The Elements (and Pleasures) of Difficulty* also does admirable work in developing complex

readings of student texts. However, while the book is careful to show students how to work with “difficult” literature and undertake “difficult” writing assignments and to demonstrate the value of such work, it does not attend to “difficult” student texts. This aporia implicitly reinscribes the hierarchy that allows for and even celebrates difficult “literature” while assuming that student writing should be “straightforward.”

12. For one critique of this emphasis on composition’s service function, see Schilb.

13. Thanks to Aneil Rallin for reminding me of this point.

14. See Worsham for a discussion of *écriture féminine* doing “subversive work” on language (86).

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