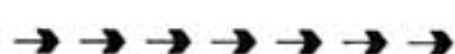
1



Another Brick in the Wall

This study considers representations of students in the context of written practitioner lore. It is inevitable that we have overheard or participated in conversations that lament our students' lack of ability. These conversations are difficult to fix in time, to turn around for observation; however, many have been transported into print and dot the pages of professional journals with the tropes of literacy that have been affirmed by the academic community: tropes that emphasize the stupid, beastlike, and childish aspects of college writers. To understand how representations of students are used by teachers, it is necessary to examine the genres and narratives in which they are embedded. Such an inquiry reveals that tales of personal experience pervade the discipline's professional discourse and that the how-to article, or testimonial, is a favored form. This examination of lore leads in turn to a sense of the contemporary *ethos* and the popular metanarratives of composition.

In contrast to the discipline of English at large, where the majority of written discourse is founded on an agonistic and logical model of theory and proof, testimonials are popular stories. They are anecdotes that tell of a teacher's experiments with pedagogy. They are "concerned with what has worked, is working, or might work in teaching, doing, or learning writing" (North 23). And, according to Robert Gorrell, they have been extremely popular in professional journals (264). Like textbooks and teacher talk, testimonials are an aspect of composition lore, "the accumulated body of traditions, practices, and beliefs in terms of which Practitioners understand how writing is done, learned, and taught" (North 22). Although lore is primarily the oral culture of the academy, in its more formal manifestations it can be shared with colleagues through textbooks, articles, and conference presentations. "Any group of workers," writes Richard Ohmann, passes on its folklore

Copyrighted Material

"through an official organization—a guild or league or professional association or learned society. The shape of such an organization reveals something about what its members conceive their function to be and about what values they share" (27). In such an institutional structure, writes Stanley Fish, "one hears utterances as already organized with reference to certain assumed purposes and goals" ("Is There a Text" 306). Official organizations such as the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) establish their identity and traditions through discourse. Professional journals, such as the CCCC's *College Composition and Communication* (*CCC*), provide one means for recording and disseminating the ideas that the members find important. Among the journals devoted to the concerns of college writing instructors, testimonials have been regularly published in the Staffroom Interchange section of *CCC*.[1]

Because they are accounts of events in a classroom, testimonials resemble pieces of historical nonfiction, yet, in their narrative structure they owe much to fictional genres. Generically, they exhibit elements of narrative, argument, and essayistic prose. Students enter the text as if they simply *are*, and frequent appeals to shared experience with deviant students among teachers indicates a widespread assumption that there is an essential, transhistorical student. While generalizations are an inevitable aspect of discursive prose and are necessary to the development of schema that further understanding, we must question why generalized student types have become part of a brutal discourse of ridicule and control. One answer may be that, in testimonials, the student and the teacher are stock characters and the plot is predetermined by a discursive history of familiar storytelling patterns that reiterate dominant professional concerns and locate practitioners in a matrix of imperial control that has transcended composition's paradigm shifts.

Negative representations of students are found in testimonials that follow a traditional wish-fulfillment plot structure, the most prevalent type of testimonial until the late 1980s. The development of testimonials as a prominent genre in composition parallels the development of composition as a specialized field in English. The original professional organization for professors of English was the Modern Language Association, devoted to the research and publication of scholarship on literature, but in 1911 the National Council of Teachers of English was formed to focus on teaching (Berlin, *Rhetoric* 32). This alignment of composition with a professional

Copyrighted Material

organization gave the field a new disciplinarity that could investigate special issues of pedagogy. Yet, composition teaching was the responsibility of professors trained in literature, of part-time paraprofessionals, of graduate students, and even of high school instructors called in to help with grading (see Berlin, *Rhetoric*). It wasn't until graduate programs in rhetoric and composition were established in colleges in the 1970s that a body of professionals trained in the history, theories, and techniques of teaching writing joined the faculties of college English departments (Berlin, *Rhetoric* 183). James Berlin records that a 1916 survey published in *English Journal* revealed that college English teachers were prepared to teach through an "almost exclusive focus on British literature," although graduate students used as temporary faculty during their studies had received some practical training in teaching prior to their appointments to the professoriate (*Rhetoric* 55). A more extensive study conducted in 1927 illustrated that freshman English was taught primarily by paraprofessionals and graduate students (Berlin, *Rhetoric* 63). Class sizes were approximately 30 students per section, with two to three individual conferences scheduled per term (64), conditions which remain stable. Those literature professors who were interested in composition teaching found that teaching writing required different pedagogical methods and raised unique issues, making the exchange of ideas with other teachers through written articles a virtual necessity.

Paraprofessionals, teachers of freshman composition who hold MA degrees, have been traditionally overworked in English departments, assigned four to five sections of a required composition course, making them search for new techniques to keep the material fresh and the classroom interesting. They are forced by their situation into having a practical interest in getting things done, something that an exercise exchange like testimonials enables. This focus on expediency is intensified by the need to be accountable to department chairs, deans, and other administrators since freshman composition is often the only required English course in a college curriculum. Testimonials hold out the promise that students' interest and performance will be enhanced by a new teaching method, an appealing prospect to someone with 125 students' essays to mark and measure every week or two.

Only twenty years ago, the majority of the selections published in *College Composition and Communication* met this need. They were conversational in tone and practical in subject. But even more

Copyrighted Material

recently, testimonials have come to serve as convenient ways for young academics to enter the publishing world. Because they are short narratives of personal experience requiring little research or critical reading, testimonials are easier to write than sustained and cohesive analyses and, once published, they are less likely to be criticized by peers. Articles falling under the "Staffroom Interchange" heading in *CCC* are virtually free from professional inquisition, befitting the assumed collegiality of the staffroom where the informality allows various thoughts and ideas to be expressed. A perusal of current educational journals published today will yield many examples of similar types of articles. The weight given to theoretical pieces in composition is only of recent origin, corresponding roughly to the rise in importance of critical theory in English departments.

A Brief History of Representations

Within the testimonial is the stock figure of *the student*, a character whose inability to perform well in school is his defining feature. The problems that students are said to exhibit are a confusion of negative aspects of behavior, writing, and thought. The students' attitudes toward school, teachers, and life are presumed to be evident in their writing: for example, late papers and late arrivals to class are equated with low interest and low aptitude. Therefore, if behavior and thought are improved, the student's writing is presumed to improve also. Teaching methods that are devised to correct the students' thought and improve their writing range from choosing books and writing topics that are relevant to students' lives, to stimulating creativity through unusual assignments, to developing critical thinking strategies.

As I was working on this study, a document that affirmed some of my suspicions about the opinions that teachers hold about their students was quite literally delivered to my doorstep, the *Teaching Forum* of the University of Wisconsin Undergraduate Teaching Improvement Council. In an article drawn from his research into the stress placed on vocal cords by delivering lectures, Kenneth Hill, a theatre instructor and vocal coach, suggests that instructors of all subjects should work to relax their voices when speaking to students. Hill's research was prompted by his discovery that many instructors experience a fear of teaching that is similar to stage fright: the vocal cords tighten and the instructor feels a loss of

Copyrighted Material

breath. A colleague of his, he relates, was "frustrated," feeling as though "she was not reaching her students, and the problem was getting so bad that her voice was tightening up and giving out" (Hill 1). The underlying attitude toward students and the classroom that results in vocal tightening did not pass Hill's attention. When he began to hold workshops in order to train teachers to use their voices correctly, Hill investigated the perceptions of students that his colleagues held, in order to create in the instructors a recognition of their own fears. When he asked professors to write down three adjectives that described a typical student, he found that three quarters of the responses were negative: "They ranged from 'listless' to 'overworked' to 'apathetic' to 'catatonic' " (5). On the other hand, he found that the ideal student was characterized as "motivated," "inquisitive," and "focused," and also as "eager," a word that is used to exhaustion in testimonials to describe the students after they have been initiated to the new teaching techniques (5).

Drawing on several acting techniques, Hill encourages teachers to control class fright through the method of "endowment," similar to a self-fulfilling prophecy: "our vision of other characters or of the audience can determine how we behave" (Hill 5). If an instructor endows students with negative characteristics, not only will the students perform without distinction, the instructor will perform poorly. Hill concludes that, "if we imagine that we are facing a hostile audience, we react with fear and anger, we tighten our throats, we feel tension in our necks and back" (5). We bristle.

Students have been the subject of despair, ridicule, rhetorical distancing, and fear for centuries. Rabelais' Gargantua was not only a giant, but a slow and dimwitted student who took five years and three months to memorize his ABCs and another thirteen years, six months, and two weeks to learn grammar and courtesy (Rabelais 38). The schoolboy of Jacques' often-quoted speech "All the world's a stage" in *As You Like It* crawled like a snail to school. From the various disparaging remarks made about students cataloged in Harvey Daniels' *Famous Last Words*, comes the example of George Puttenham, who worried in 1586 about various "vices and deformities" of students' prose. These problems included affecting "new words and phrases" other than "custome hath allowed," a "common fault of young scholers not halfe well studied" (Daniels 38). In 1909 school critic and educator Leonard Ayers published *Laggards in Our Schools*, in which he offered the opinion "that the schools were filled with the retarded (those retained in grades longer

Copyrighted Material

than one year) and that most students dropped out before grade eight" (Oakes 29). He concluded that schools devoted too much time to the education of bright children, and needed a more efficient program that would address the retarded (Oakes 29).

As testimonials illustrate, the problems with students are made manifest by their apparent resistance to pedagogy. The most important events influencing the persistent constructions of students as deficient and in need of correction are found in the development of American secondary school tracking programs and the institution of required college writing courses in the nineteenth century.

In a study of the tracking movement in America, Jeannie Oakes traces its beginnings to the development of the common schools that were founded in America before 1860 to teach morality and citizenship and "to develop an intelligent mass citizenry" (Oakes 16; see also Berlin, "Rhetoric, Poetic"). Although enrollments were small, by 1890 more students were attending secondary schools and applying for college admissions, which lead to the work of the Committee of Ten. Charles Eliot, president of Harvard University, chaired the Committee of Ten on Secondary Studies of the National Education Association. "The committee was charged to make recommendations for standardizing both secondary schools' college-preparatory curricula and colleges' admission requirements" (Oakes 18), as the transition between the two levels was unsystematic. Oakes writes that "the increased population of secondary school graduates" resulted in "the first push for schools to help *sort* and *select* students for higher education" as well as efforts "to *prepare* them for it" (18)—the beginnings of tracking programs. Eliot's committee proposed four tracks, each of which was acceptable for college admission—classical studies, science, modern languages, and English (Oakes 18). These different programs of study would be available to students in the high schools without being designated for any particular group of students:

> The committee went on record as unequivocally opposing the separation of college-bound and non-college-bound students into different programs. Further, it was clearly opposed to viewing college preparation as the major function of secondary education. The proposed curriculum consisted of the learnings the committee saw as valuable in the process of becoming an educated person, regardless of future plans. (Oakes 18–19)

Copyrighted Material

Later, the conception of equal education for everyone was altered by the development of the comprehensive high school. Rather than one kind of education being available to all students, education that would suit students equally well for their life's work was proposed (Oakes 34). Oakes quotes a report of a 1914 congressional Commission on Vocational Education: "Widespread vocational training will democratize the education of the century. . . by recognizing tastes and abilities and by giving an equal opportunity to all to prepare their life work" (34). In actuality, though, democratization was tinged with the belief that the immigrants flooding the nation were not equal in manners or abilities to the already established community of settlers. Comprehensive schools were envisioned as a replacement for the debased immigrant home life, providing education for proper citizenship. Education was a means of civilizing the immigrants. Psychologist G. Stanley Hall argued that the development of the individual followed the same stages as the evolution of human beings from savages to savants, and Hall opposed Eliot's notion that individual differences among people made little difference to schooling (Oakes 23). Hall faulted Eliot's Committee of Ten for "ignoring 'the great army of incapables' that were increasingly attending schools", many of whom were immigrants who he believed to be biologically inferior (Oakes 24). Hall argued that general cultivation was not important for all students (Oakes 24), and that immigrant students especially needed character training that focused on morals and social acculturation.

In the meantime, Eliot, in his work at Harvard, was proposing an entrance examination in writing that would sort and select the right types for proper admission.

Until the last quarter of the nineteenth century, American colleges were attended by the elite, those pupils destined for careers in law, government, theology, or medicine. After the Civil War, however, college programs were extended to serve members of the middle class. As James Berlin writes, "the new college profoundly affected the teaching of writing, bringing about a pedagogy shaped by the interests of the middle class. During the last quarter of the century, more and more students were attending college as the economy expanded and the need for skills provided by the new colleges grew. . . . (*Writing Instruction* 60). In his address on the occasion of being elected president of Harvard University in 1869, Charles Eliot announced that English would be the center of the new curriculum. He promised to unite the classical education with the elective system of new meritocratic colleges. English would be

Copyrighted Material

bestowed on the traditional elite college student and also the students who arrived in college from middle-class homes. Susan Miller notes that this new student was one "whose hold on good character and correct values was only tentative" (Miller, "Feminization" 44). The first freshman English course was thus established at Harvard in 1874 and by 1897 it was the only required course in the college curriculum. With freshman English came the institution of the written entrance exam in English, designed to keep students out of Harvard as much as let them in. James Berlin finds that the entrance exam "suggested that the ability to write was something the college student ought to bring with him from his preparatory school" (*Rhetoric* 23). Thus—because they were presumed to lack proper training—it was assumed that many students would begin their college careers in a state of lack or absence, a presumption that remains prominent today.

In order to meet the needs of the new, meritocratic student body, Harvard University appointed a committee of business leaders to study English A, Harvard's required freshman writing course. The committee, Charles Francis Adams, E. L. Godkin, and Josiah Quincy, requested teachers of English A to submit a short theme from each of their students. They looked at these themes and the students' entrance examinations, and they were astounded and outraged by what they found: carelessly written themes completed in poor handwriting (Berlin, *Writing Instruction* 61). The committee members reproduced a few of the worst themes in order to dramatize the significance of their findings: that the preparatory schools were failing to adequately prepare students for college. They recommended that secondary schools devote their attention to writing instruction, leaving more advanced studies to the colleges. Based on the committee's work, Harvard increased the standards of its entrance exam in order to exclude those who could not write (Berlin, *Writing Instruction* 61). Susan Miller has found the entire system that was set in place at Harvard to be deplorable, evidence of the humiliation of freshman writing students that continues until the present. She argues that results of the entrance examination were "often made public to humiliate them," that they "attended classes that enrolled one hundred or more students in their earliest, introductory exposure to 'English,' and were taught by ancillary help who were 'supervised' rather than admitted to collegial academic freedom" (Miller, "Feminization" 45).

One of the most influential figures in the history of composition and English departments was Francis James Child, Fourth Boylston

Copyrighted Material

Professor of Rhetoric and Oratory at Harvard from 1851–1876. Although he held the position in rhetoric, Child was a scholar of literature and one of his major contributions to the field of English was to establish the study of literature at Harvard through a series of elective courses. Where once they focused on oratory, rhetoric courses at this point were courses in writing, and Child held composition in such low esteem that he allegedly kicked a chair across a room in anger one day because he was wasting his life correcting student themes (Stewart 120). Child is also quoted as saying "that the university would never be perfect until we got rid of all the students" (Stewart 120).

In 1876 Child was offered a position in literature at the new Johns Hopkins University. To remain at Harvard, he was released from all responsibility for freshman composition, establishing a standard of exemptions that continues today (Berlin, *Rhetoric* 23). It was the priorities of Child and his subsequent elevation to a position that did not include teaching the "low" discipline of composition that, as Donald Stewart concludes, "set the tone in American university English departments" (Stewart 125).

This notion of composition as a "low" discipline informs Susan Miller's history of composition, *Textual Carnivals*. Drawing from histories of the development of English departments and curricula she examines the precedents that have contributed to the view of freshman composition as a course instituted for "failures" (*Textual* 73). She points to the condemnatory tone of the report on composition issued by the Harvard Board of Overseers in 1894 as one of the first public indications that the university wanted to divest itself of responsibility of teaching people to write. For my purposes, the report provides evidence of negative attitudes that accrued to students enrolled in writing courses. According to Miller, the report described "the grotesqueries of handwriting and paragraphing," each infraction "gleefully found and reported with the sympathy and understanding we might expect of young boys looking at a circus fat lady" (*Textual* 55).

The writing comes to represent a person, a set of traits ascribed to an individual. The students are what they write, and moreover they mark themselves by their unstable writing as something Other than the professionals whose texts are revered in academe. As Miller writes in *Rescuing the Subject*, "many theorists and teachers of written composition still unquestioningly emphasize a direct connection between thought and spoken-to-written language" while also lamenting "the differences between 'authors' and the halting

Copyrighted Material

textual voices of imitative . . . student writing'' (*Rescuing* 150). The implications are clear: authors have admirable thought as evidenced by their elegant prose, while students' thinking is rough and ill-formed. Odd and often bawdy translations of common expressions and written gestures like the substitution of the term *port-a-body* for the portable toilets found at outdoor festivals or the use of *feces* rather than *fetus* become errors to be laughed at and treated with derision, evidence of the faulty thought processes of persons inferior to authors. In the nineteenth century these errors were treated as they often are today; Miller reports that they ''were snickered over, as they still are, so that they came to represent an Other'' (*Textual* 55).

Some compositionists and educational theorists have pointed out the legacy of inequality inherent in the construction of programs in higher education. This history of hierarchy has influenced persistent views of students. Students were and are perceived as unworthy of education, needing behavioral and moral instruction. Andrew Sledd, for example, contends that despair over illiteracy is timeless and that perpetual inequality in literate abilities is ensured by testing. Discussing the literacy crisis of the late 1980s, Sledd comments that it is the result of implicit—perhaps latent—racism in testing. Tests determine who is literate and not, and the questions are directed toward a middle class. Students not in the middle class are taught to fail. The assumption is, he writes, that ''students bring nothing to contribute to their own education,'' therefore there is no need to ''permit dialogue, discussion, or cooperative work,'' all of which are ''essentials for citizens in a democracy, whom we are supposed to be educating'' (Sledd 504). Lectures, taking notes, reading textbooks, quizzing and testing all teach ''the passivity, deference, and competitive individualism becoming to our society's underlings'' (Sledd 504). Sledd's comments are similar to Oakes' on ability tracking:

> This curricular differentiation was made possible only by the genuine belief—arising from social Darwinism—that children of various social classes, those from native-born and long-established families and those of recent immigrants, differed greatly in fundamental ways. Children of the affluent were considered by school people to be abstract thinkers, head minded, and oriented toward literacy. Those of the lower classes and the newly immigrated were considered laggards, ne'er-do-wells, hand minded, and socially inefficient, ignorant, prejudiced, and highly excitable. (Oakes 35)

Copyrighted Material

Oakes' comment has important consequences for later representations of students in professional discourse, as it suggests that the descriptions of students as dull, disinterested, apathetic are built upon latent social and ethnic prejudices. However, *the student* has become such a generalized term, so prevalent as not to be readily identified with any group. Thus, although the roots of representation lie in prejudice, current representations of students are absent of a specific ethnic or gendered referent.

Late twentieth century sympathy with the underclass has relocated the fault of prejudice to the middle classes. Middle-class college students of the 1990s are considered to be as prejudiced as the lower immigrant classes of 100 years ago. While educators hold to the democratic ideal of equal education for all, we find that constructions of racist, classist, sexist, and homophobic students serve to divide students into groups of those who are always already deserving of education and those who need education to make them proper citizens. The concern for identifying and accurately sorting students into suitable courses that will either reward them or correct them thus perpetrates the same depictions of students that we find abhorrent in writing from the late nineteenth century. In contemporary writings about the classroom, however, students who have spoken out with unpopular views on unpopular topics are created into types that reflect pedagogical concerns of contemporary times. Racism and homophobia are taken to be *a priori* in the education system and an essential quality of students. Susan Miller writes at the end of *Rescuing the Subject* that students who repeatedly defy the grammatical and mechanical rules of written composition call into question the entire system of writing instruction. Errors such as missing verb endings and sentence fragments "invite us to look carefully at the relation of the individual to overwhelming and inescapable grammars constituting the civilized structures of language that we have made dominant" (*Rescuing* 167) and "call into question what we have meant and may mean by authorship" (*Rescuing* 169). The errors of the racist and homophobic students are errors against convention just as were errors of grammar, yet the consequences of these errors are higher. Students who outrage us morally are questioning the very fiber of human relationships and the belief in equality and liberty that comprises the American Dream.

A History of Testimonials

The use of standard representations of students extends beyond testimonials published in *College Composition and Communication.*

Copyrighted Material

As the next chapters will show, testimonials follow a traditional form that borrows from epic poetry, the quest motif, and historical narratives, while representations of Others in order to further one's own agenda have been common in reports of explorations of new worlds since the fifteenth century (see M. Campbell) and in the imperial and colonial governmental policies of many countries throughout recorded history (see, for example, Said). In much the same way, and for many of the same ends, traditional constructions of students can be detected in writings on education that are not especially conceived as how-to articles and they can be discovered in the language of public policy designed to aid students. For example, during the 1992 presidential elections, Bill Clinton announced his plan to have recipients of federal financial aid work at community service jobs. With his plan, students would borrow money for college from a government trust fund and repay the fund out of their income or by working in service professions such as teaching, law enforcement, or child care (Blumenstyk A1). In an article reporting reactions to the Clinton plan, Frederick Obear, chancellor of the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, was quoted as noting that Clinton was addressing the circumstances of a particular type of student, the traditional eighteen to twenty-one year old from a middle-class background. Obear feared that part-time students, many of whom are older and have families and jobs would be prevented from using the trust. Obear suggested that candidates develop programs that address the needs of the student "who's there and who can benefit from them, not some mythical student body that used to be there 20 years ago" (Blumenstyk A26). Clinton's community service plan is one indication that constructing students may be a commonplace activity in professional literature and public policy. David Bartholomae has been lead to a similar conclusion, finding that in discussions of literacy "the adult reader" is a commonplace "invoked to justify a research agenda, the expense of public funds, or the organization of a curriculum" ("Producing Adult Readers" 13). Conceptions and constructions of students create federal, state, and local educational programs and rules.

Familiar representations of students are found in writings on education not intended as testimonials, and testimonials can spring from unexpected sources. A good example of both of these cases is Lionel Trilling's "On the Teaching of Modern Literature," written in 1965. He locates his problems with students in their uncritical adoption of the latest intellectual fashions, something that Allan Bloom also finds fault with twenty years later. Trilling immediately

Copyrighted Material

sets forth his distaste for writing about pedagogy, finding it something that "is a depressing subject to all persons of sensibility" (3). To Trilling, sensibility seems a rare attribute, possessed by those who teach the literature of the classical masters, or, at best, those who teach no literature beyond the nineteenth century (6). Trilling admits that teaching can create "a kind of despair" because students enjoy a vague and uncritical attitude toward literature (4). They attempt too much to be liberal (or, in a favorite phrase of those years, to be "with it") and they try too hard to be the teacher's favorite student, merely mouthing the ideas of the instructor or those which are currently popular (5).

After discussing these shortcomings, Trilling suddenly embarks on a testimonial. He decides that the best way to counteract the problems with the speciousness of his students is to have them teach themselves. He is not thoroughly convinced of the value of the literature of the modern period, so, in his efforts to make his students "whole, or well-rounded, men" (27), he has students study works of the nineteenth century. These, he argues, are the works that created the modern sensibility, works by Nietzsche, Frazer, and Freud. Then he moves into the early twentieth century with Conrad and Mann. And does his method succeed? Yes:

> When the term-essays come in it is plain to me that almost none of the students have been taken aback by what they have read: they have wholly contained the attack. (26)

Not surprisingly, however, there are poor students who withstand Trilling's assault on the students' educative defenses, the "exceptions" to his clever idea for organizing the course, those who defy the plan. He employs traditional testimonial rhetoric when noting that these exceptions have fortified their defenses with blunt stupidity: they "simply do not comprehend" (26). Trilling even finds these exceptions to be somewhat bestial. "Poor hunted creatures," like characters in a Kafka story, "they take refuge first in misunderstood large phrases, then in bad grammar, then in general incoherence" (26). In contrast to his good students—"the minds that give me the A papers and the B papers and even the C+ papers"—who have the religious dedication of "seminarists" (27), his poor exceptions do not "have the wit to stand up" and ask why Trilling makes such demands of them (26).

It becomes clear that the students who Trilling is attempting to correct are the very types of students who have been the focus of tracking, testing, and correcting since the mid-nineteenth

Copyrighted Material

century. They are the students of the meritocracy and thus by birth and life situation naturally in need of instruction. "With them," he writes, "is neither sensibility nor *angst*" (26). The students, both good and bad, are not "patrician", but "come, mostly, from 'good homes' in which authority and valuation are weak or at least not very salient and bold, so that ideas have for them, at their present stage of development, a peculiar power and preciousness" (29). It is their fate to have been born into a life that fosters the attraction to uncritical repetitions of popular ideas, the weakness that Trilling sets out to rectify. Trilling finds their raw state to be especially pleasing and challenging for improvement. Because ideas have power for the students, they are ripe to be influenced by Trilling. Although this is the goal of education, to open students to new ideas, Trilling constructs his aim as a game of power. The students are constructed as passive and misinformed, while he is the creator of distinction and sensibility and the adjudicator of the cultured.

In the widely quoted and much contested volume on American eduction, *The Closing of the American Mind*, Allan Bloom relies on an extended trope of the Other to represent students as spiritually and intellectually undernourished. He finds careerism, families, and the work of high school instructors to be at fault. Careerism motivates students to focus their educations on narrow specialties rather than on the questions about human existence that are the basis for a humanistic education. He laments the fact that the books have become "culture," a rarefied commodity reserved only for the few, the intellectual, or the leisured. Students thus lose their connection to a past and a moral basis that provide reasons for action and guidelines for conduct. While Bloom's desire to redemocratize reading is admirable, his is an argument made at the expense of the students themselves. They emerge in his writing only as flat stereotypes, shadows of forgotten innocence and symbols of lost potential. The students who are referred to in Bloom's narrative are shallow and removed from serious questions of humanity. In the 1960s, he recalls, students were "natural savages," with an "intellectual obtuseness" that was both "horrifying and barbarous, a stunting of full humanity, an incapacity to experience the beautiful, an utter lack of engagement in the civilization's ongoing discourse" (48). Like Trilling, he found their savagery and incompleteness to be stimulating because they were raw, waiting to be cooked in the broth of high culture. In retrospect, however, the savages are for him the ideal. Drawing on personal writing from the same year that Trilling's essay was published, 1965, Bloom came

Copyrighted Material

to the same conclusions, finding that it was precisely their savagery that would make these students receptive to new ideas. He discovered that some of "the charm of American students" derived from a naivete that contributed to their willingness to make sacrifices for "grand ideals" (48–49). The students of the 1960s, Bloom felt, were "open to higher callings," and were "grateful for anything they learn" (49). But the students of the 1980s were different. They were vapid, uninspired victims of popular culture. When he writes about popular music especially, Bloom paints the students as savages who revel in their primal nature. They are rooted there, lacking the desire to grow away from it. They are moved by the "rawest passions" (73) and have become slaves to rock and roll's "beat of sexual intercourse" (73). Their bodies pulse with "orgasmic rhythms," their "feelings are made articulate in hymns to the joys of onanism or the killing of parents," while their ambition "is to win fame and wealth in imitating the drag-queen who makes the music. . . . In short, life is made into a nonstop, commercially prepackaged masturbational fantasy" (75).

Casting college students as children was a popular mode of describing students in the testimonials that appeared in *College Composition and Communication*. Bloom employs this trope himself, losing sight of whether he is angry with the college students who sit lackluster in his courses or the lingering adolescent tastes of their former selves. Students are palimpsests to Bloom. While he writes them into culture in the present, they retain an earlier cultural imprint. The question becomes for us, which student self (present or past) does Bloom choose to read? He prefers to address the lingering (old) self of adolescence, and, to reconcile this problem of suspended adolescence, he redefines the word *children* to mean any youth between the ages of thirteen and eighteen:

> The continuing exposure to rock music is a reality, not one confined to a particular class or type of child. One need only ask first-year university students what music they listen to, how much of it and what it means to them, in order to discover that the phenomenon is universal in America, that it begins in adolescence or a bit before and continues through the college years. (75)

Bloom argues that the writings of Plato and the music of Mozart would enlighten the students and give reason and order to their primal urges. They would thus move from subjectivity to objectivity, from knowing only themselves to acquiring a critical context for themselves in history. The adolescent culture he so despises is a culture built around the self, absent of ethical and moral responsibility.

Copyrighted Material

It is irrational and circular, whereas the culture he poses in its stead is logical, objective, and moral. In Bloom's reading of Plato, music "is a series of attempts to give form and beauty to the dark, chaotic, premonitory forces in the soul—to make them serve a higher purpose, an ideal" (Bloom 72), and he has found that "one of the strange aspects of [his] relations with good students" is to introduce them to Mozart (69). Therefore, with the insights of Plato in mind, Bloom proposes a pedagogical system to rectify the poor moral and intellectual state of the students. They must study the Great Books. Although he agrees with all of the objections that have been raised in response to the Great Books program of education, Bloom does find value in a serious course of study involving the Great Books as they were meant to be read by their authors. When reading the Great Books "the students are excited and satisfied, feel they are doing something that is independent and fulfilling" (344). As in the traditional structure of a testimonial, Bloom's proposed course of study is predicted to have especially gratifying results. Reason will overtake emotion; the soul will be made whole.

Like the education for the immigrant masses proposed in the early years of the twentieth century, Great Books education has the power to civilize: "education is the taming or domestication of the soul's raw passions—not suppressing or excising them, which would deprive the soul of its energy—but forming and informing them as art" (71). In Bloom's view, as in Trilling's, students are incomplete until they attain reason and enlightenment, apportioned through the guidance of the instructor. With its power to convert and to make the soul whole, education can be construed as a type of missionary crusade. In the testimonials, students are saved by pedagogy, but only after they have first been carefully constructed as bestial, *unheimlich*, and benighted in missionary rhetorical tradition.[2]

The following chapters will investigate the uses of representation in the composition testimonial. Certain rhetorical gestures mark these discussions, and the tropes of lack can be retraced in history. When the possible foundation for each of the representations is considered, however, it is apparent that the evidence supporting them is based on personal experience transmuted into the idea that teachers share experiences with certain general types. This use of personal experience should not be surprising, as in various ways composition has valorized the personal, through assignments for students and through the reoccurrence of autobiographical professional essays. As Susan Miller contends, storytelling is important to composition because narrative allows a discipline to create a sense

Copyrighted Material

of its past, to define interests in its present, and to predict directions for its future. The logical organization of a narrative line enables a discipline to cohere. A "good" story, she maintains, will be about practice, about "characters and their ordinary daily actions in the symbolic domain that traditionally marginalizes them" (*Textual* 3). The problem is the ambivalent nature of the personal, so often characterized as basic, weak, and negatively "feminine." Such characterizations permeate everything from the use in composition classes of feminine forms of writing like journals to the low status of composition as a discipline. Unfortunately, through the emphasis on the personal, composition has found itself aligned with greater American societal trends toward claiming privileged status as victims. The testimonial genre becomes one form of talking cure, through expressing the inner self and through seeking links with others who have suffered from comparable experiences.

This is a bleak characterization of the discipline and its precepts, but there is potential for change. Feminization must not be constructed as a cult of victimization, yet this trope has been established rhetorically. Through the stories composition tells about itself, composition's feminine difference may be established as primary, rather than as the inferior Other. Correspondingly, practitioners and writers need to envision in new ways the relationships and underlying assumptions of the field to reverse hierarchies and replace familiar representations.

Copyrighted Material