FUNNY PAPERS: INITIATION AND SUBVERSION IN FIRST-YEAR WRITING

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Everyone who teaches writing knows how funny student writing can be, both intentionally and unintentionally. Indeed, Richard Lederer has made a name for himself by collecting and publishing what he calls "howlers"—unintentional mistakes like "A passive verb is when the subject is the sufferer, as in 'I am loved'" (4) or "The death of Francis Macomber was a turning point in his life" (5). When I began this project, with the intention of looking at first year writing through the lens of my study of American humor, my hypothesis was that we could chart a progression from these "mis-takes" to jokes and humorous stories of various kinds, a progression that could provide markers for seeing students' increasingly successful manipulations of the conventions of discourse expected in the academic community.

In formulating this progression, I draw on Freud's contention in *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* that the joke is the most constructed and most social means of eliciting laughter, requiring a joke maker, an audience, and an object. The joke, like most of the written genres we teach, is constructed discourse: "a joke is made, the comic is found" (181).[1] The "naive" (Lederer's "howlers," for example) is, according to Freud, the form of the comic closest to the joke. The naive transgresses inhibitions out of innocence (182),[2] whereas the joke does so by design. Freud's distinctions are based on the idea that joke making relies on social, communally

experience with humor in the classroom suggests that joke making, parody, and other forms of humor can not only reflect students' socialization into their academic and professional communities, but also help teach them the conventions of their discourse and give them practice in manipulating them. As students move from "being funny" in Lederer's sense[3] to "making jokes," they are learning and practicing that discourse, making its conventions their own; the joking student not only demonstrates proficiency in using the conventions, but also comments on them.

The view of humor as socialization has considerable support in the more recent scholarship of humor, particularly from the social sciences. Joking is widely held to be intracommunity discourse, depending on shared understanding, shared perceptions of incongruities, and, in Freud's terms, shared inhibitions. The anthropologist Elliott Oring notes that "Jokes depend upon a community of knowledge and interpretation. Jokes communicate only when audiences are able to simultaneously access similar yet unstated categories, orientations, and experiences"(278). Marlene Dolitsky observes that societies have rules for transmitting the "unsaid" through the "said," rules which once internalized become part of the community's "common knowledge"; thus humor, which disregards or breaks those rules, serves as a marker of shared discourse conventions and other social rules (34–35). One must be a member of the community to understand as well as to make its jokes (36). Joking is often a means of determining or marking who is inside and who is outside a community, and "joking relationships" are an important aspect of culture. Furthermore, according to Mahadev Apte, in our culture they play a particularly important role in defining groups: "The joking relationship in industrial societies is used for group identity; this is not its significant aspect in preliterate societies. Acceptance of a person's joking is an indication that he or she is part of the social group" (54–55). Apte notes that self-deprecatory joking may expedite the process of inclusion and that joking can serve as a screening device and boundary marker (54–55). According to Apte, the humor of children is often focused on the process of socialization itself (97), and Dolitsky notes that humor

appears in children at the point when they develop expectations about discourse and awareness of ambiguity (38). I would suggest that college students also develop as audiences for and makers of humor as part of their progress in socialization to academia and their professions.

If we apply this instrumental view of humor as a means of socialization to the composition classroom, we can claim that as students move into the discourse community, they learn to make jokes consciously, and that through joking they internalize the discourse. Indeed, joke-making can be seen as an indication that students feel that they are taking their places as insiders and establishing, as Walter Podilchak suggests, at least a temporary social equality within the social hierarchy (377). The dead seriousness with which many first-year students approach their education, particularly in the first few weeks of the first semester, gives way to ridicule as students compare the ideal university outlined in admissions brochures and in the President's greeting to entering students with the day-to-day realities of classes, dorm life, and cafeteria food. Students make jokes among themselves about the content of all their courses, and in a course that focuses on language, as most first year composition classes do, such jokes naturally involve play with various kinds of discourse, i.e., parody. If we recognize, encourage, and even assign it, such parody can serve students as a way of increasing proficiency in conventional academic modes of discourse and language. It can also serve as a way to forge a connection between the language of the academy and the modes of discourse in which students are already proficient.

However, although I have found that encouraging student humor has definite pedagogical usefulness, a closer analysis of my samples of student humor has led me to broaden my original hypothesis that humor functions simply as an instrument for initiating students into the academic community. The problem with viewing humor as an instrument of academic socialization is that it assumes that humor is not very consequential, except as a learning tool. This construction of humor assumes that laughter is entertaining and collegial but not subversive, and thus I think it sells short its potential power. Humor is just not that controllable; in their play with words and forms, students can display a satiric, even

subversive edge and at least hint at the possibility of anarchy. Oring has argued that although jokes have a single base meaning (what they are about), they may have several plausible "performance meanings" (the teller's stance toward the base meaning); for successful analysis, we must consider not only the text, but also the context of the joke (279). The concept of humor as socialization simplifies the context rather than acknowledging its rich complexity; it ignores the possibility that students use humor to subvert the values of academic discourse as well as to learn them; and it depends on oversimplified representations of the academic community, the function of composition, and the worlds within which our students live and work. It is the possibility that humor may get out of control that makes it interesting

II

Part of the problem of considering humor solely as an instrument of initiation comes from my doubt that there exists any such single thing as "academic discourse" into which students can be initiated, by humor or any other means. Recent research in writing across the curriculum has highlighted the differences among academic and professional discourses, differences rooted in the historical development and epistemological underpinnings of the different disciplines.[4] The differences between the laboratory report and the English paper, for example, are not just quirks or stylistic preferences, but the consequences of different means of making knowledge and of different definitions and valuations of kinds and ways of knowing.

Furthermore, while academic discourses are much more complex than the initiation model admits, so too is the discourse of my students, few of whom come to the university simply as representatives of a single discourse community. Many students, for example, come from family backgrounds that demand proficiency in more than one kind of discourse and sometimes in more than one language or dialect, from peer groups with a different set of discourse conventions, and from occupational groups with still another set of discourse expectations.[5] Consequently, many eighteen-year-olds are

already accomplished code-shifters. And most composition teachers, I think, see themselves as doing something more than teaching students uncritical proficiency in still another code.[6] When our conceptualizations of community and of discourse are problematized in this way, the idea of humor as a means of initiation becomes, to say the least, highly suspect.

The classroom that I am anticipating here is not simply a site where teachers prepare initiates for a clearly articulated passage from one condition to another or from one community to another. Instead, the composition classroom can be seen as a location for conflict and negotiation among various discourse communities, some academic, others not. It is a crucial "contact zone," to adopt Mary Louis Pratt's concept, and it is a location for what M. M. Bakhtin calls "heteroglossia" or "the social diversity of speech types" (263). Students bring a variety of languages and dialects to the classroom, and they examine, try out, and criticize a number of modes of discourse within it. These various voices seek ways to communicate with each other, and their efforts can offer a running commentary on these processes of communication. Since first-year composition courses normally include some variety of discussion of the uses of language and the conventions of discourse, these courses provide a natural occasion for parody, that is for using the "ironic inversion" of the defining features of a particular discourse (Hutcheon 6).

Usually we try to keep the parody firmly out, insisting that students take composition "seriously," and even ignoring the parody when students try to slip it in. In "Arts of the Contact Zone," Pratt shows how teachers tend to ignore the parody and opposition in students' writing. Commenting on a subversive response by her son to a typical grade school assignment, she charges that the teacher ignored "the humor, the attempt to be critical or contestatory, to parody the structures of authority" (453). She asks "What is the place of unsolicited oppositional discourse, parody, resistance, critique in the imagined classroom community" and suggests that teachers seeking to unify their classes into discourse communities tend to do so by eliminating opposition, smoothing over difference, and recreating the social world "in their own image" (453). By recognizing and indeed promoting humor, we can get out of

the community-creating business (a business that is dubious at best given the aforementioned diversity within the university) and into the game of empowering students to recognize and interrogate the institutional structures in which they operate.

Pratt lists a number of "pedagogical arts of the contact zone," among them "exercises in storytelling and in identifying with the ideas, interests, histories, and attitudes of others; experiments in transculturation and collaborative work and in the arts of critique, parody, and comparison (including unseemly comparisons between elite and vernacular cultural forms); [and] the redemption of the oral" (455). This list of arts suggests at least a partial overlap between the metaphor of composition as "contact zone" and the metaphor of composition as "carnival." It is in this overlap that my discussion of humor is situated. "Contact zone" foregrounds the seriousness of the contact between cultures and communities, whereas "carnival" foregrounds the concept of play that is a crucial aspect of humor, and that is also one of the functions of the university. Universities are places where work and play, the serious and the funny, can become mixed up. Despite significant institutional and professional constraints, we academics are actually paid to pursue our interests, or, as those consigned to more fully profit-driven work might with some justice put it, to play. Although universities do create serious points of contact and conflict between groups, they also do many other things, some of them contradictory, simultaneously, and the profusion of contradictions resembles the profusion of voices characteristic of the carnivalesque. Universities are places where cultural artifacts are stored, created, revered, criticized, and made fun of. They transmit the dominant culture, and they critique it; increasingly they transmit elements of other cultures, and sometimes they trivialize them. Amid these contradictions, there is some space for parody and for play—even in the humanities, and even in composition.

As Susan Miller notes in *Textual Carnivals: The Politics of Composition*, although composition theory may try to generate subversive discourse, the carnivalesque institutionalization of composition instruction serves to contain and marginalize subversion (78–80). This containment is one function of the

medieval carnivals that Bakhtin outlines. According to Bakhtin, underlying the literature of the Middle Ages and Renaissance was a literature of "parodic-travestying forms," modeled on folk holidays and carnival, characterized by the mingling of languages and the questioning of linguistic and social values (76–79).[7] Carnival and the related parodic genres both allowed and contained irreverence. They offered a space of relative freedom and diversity—in clearly delineated times and places. Such outlets functioned for centuries both to nurture and to divert and contain discourse that might otherwise have threatened the power structure. Miller clearly explicates the politics of a similar containment in the contemporary university. But carnival, despite its containment function, is ultimately not completely containable or controllable; there are always unlicensed bits of "licentiousness" at the edges of even such sad, bureaucratized contemporary attempts at carnival as Mardi Gras and rock concerts. Occasionally, things get "out of hand,"[8] even in the university. And humor, like carnival, is most interesting when it threatens to escape from its confines.

It seems to me, then, that it is at the unlicensed edges of Composition, at the points where discourse gets out of control, and particularly out of the teacher's control, that students may glimpse the potential for their own appropriations of discourse, academic or otherwise. I am getting close here to soliciting what Pratt calls "unsolicited oppositional discourse," and I am aware of the absurdity of such a solicitation. But by assigning humor and by recognizing and rewarding parody and satire when we see them, we can cultivate a space in which the containing walls of our institutional functions may spring cracks. And at those points, we can glimpse the potential for engaged student writing in composition classes. Of course, this student humor can be instrumental, and it can be shallow, but, like all forms of carnival, it may also become subversive, it may get out of control—and we should be pleased when it does. There can be a "cutting edge" to students' humor, an interrogation of the very processes of discourse that we are trying to teach and of the institutions in which we teach them.[9] And we should solicit these critiques, which often parallel the limitations and aberrations of discourse in our discipline. Why should I even try to deny, for instance, the occasional triviality,

dullness, and silliness which I find in articles in academic journals? What is the kind of writing that I want my most thoroughly-initiated students to produce?

III

Recognizing and appreciating unassigned parody can be difficult for the instructor because it may well be—as in the case of Pratt's son—the composition instructor that is the object of attack. It is painful to see our own practices parodied, even when the results are amusing. For instance, in a project near the end of fall semester, a group of students writing a role-playing letter about humane society policy construct a letterhead with a too-cutesy puppy and the acronym CRAPP (for Consortium Regarding the Annihilation of Problem Pets). Another student writing a report on oral presentations writes in a consciously inflated language at the beginning of his paper, before settling down to the business of a straightforward "how-to paper":

> *The oral presentation; something feared by many, something conquered by few. The oral presentation is a threat to people of all ages. From grade school, to college, to the professional level, it is something despised by everyone. However, there are a few who have found a way to deal with this terror involved in everyone's life . . . .*

A student in a first year Humanities course leaves in my mailbox an advertisement for *The Gospel According to Bill*, a transcription of the Bible into Shakespearean English ("historic Christianity with a 'Renaissance' touch!")—an advertisement so realistic that I am on the point of throwing it out when I realize it is his final paper assignment. (This student was bound, of course, for an English major.)

What these examples show, on one level, is a kind of playful manipulation of levels of discourse, a manipulation performed by students gaining confidence in their increasing ability to negotiate among the various codes of academic life and public discourse. When I consider these examples of student humor from the point of view of the carnivalesque, however, their parodic edge becomes clear. The student writers

demonstrate not only their fluency at moving among kinds of discourse, but also their ability to turn their critical skills against the assumptions that dominate the course. It is not some abstract "academic discourse" that they are parodying, but the discourse that has dominated my particular course. Like Caliban, they have learned the language, and they use it more or less to curse, often in complex and interesting ways. With increasing consciousness and increasing confidence, students use humor to express resistance to the new expectations and conventions that beset them in their first year of college, even as they practice them. If such potentially oppositional discourse is recognized and rewarded in the composition class, the writing that students do there may increase their consciousness of what they are opposing and why.

I want at least to entertain the thought that the content even of some of the "howlers" with which I began this paper is not entirely random. Although I chose these particular examples without much thought—giving the book a quick skim, using my laughter to determine my choices—I would like to suggest that my choices reflected issues that I care about and that the students who wrote them may have cared about too. I can reread the Lederer examples as offering resistance to some kinds of academic discourse, to the need to learn new vocabularies, to the demand for a certain kind of precision, and to the impersonality of many of the conventions they are learning. The "passive verb" definition subverts the vocabulary of grammar study and the convention of differentiating between private and public life. The examples from my students' papers reflect similar but more conscious and more pointed interrogations of the work of the composition class. *The Gospel According to Bill* interrogates the "Great Books" approach of the humanities course for which it was written. ("Order `Genesis' now and you'll receive `Exodus' FREE!!!") The CRAPP joke and the inflated introduction to the oral presentations paper raise similar questions about the structure and assignments of the class.

Because the cloak of play in humor offers a space in which such necessary questioning can take place, I try to generate humor in my classes, with the anticipation that assigned oppositional discourse may lead to the unassigned sort. My

goal here is to acknowledge both the space that humor offers and the critique that can inhabit that space. In literature classes, for example, I circulate parodies of the works we are reading. In both literature and composition classes, I call attention to examples of wit, humor, sarcasm, and satire in student writing and also to humor on topics related to the class that turn up in the popular press. The students, naturally, often add to the collection.

If I have laid the groundwork sufficiently, I can assign a humorous paper and hope to get at least some papers that are funny and pointed. The satires and parodies that my students produce vary widely, and I know full well that few students risk fully candid humor. Even the students whose attempts are pedestrian, however, say that they enjoy writing such assignments and reading or hearing the results of other students' work. The humor assignments give students explicit permission to manipulate language and form and to question course content and broader cultural assumptions, in the guise of engaging in critical play. The assignments themselves vary with the class and always arise from class discussions. For example, late in the semester of a first year composition course, I have assigned Jonathan Swift's "Modest Proposal," Horace Miner's "Body Ritual among the Nacirema," or another satire, and, following considerable discussion, invited students to find a satirical way to deal with a contemporary social or disciplinary issue. In another first year composition course, I have asked students to write a "sarcastic" how-to paper for next year's students, based on the survival skills they have picked up in their first semester at the university. In a first year Humanities course, I have asked students to compose a satirical "Odyssey" or "Inferno" (both of which were read in the course) based on local people, locations, and events, or to convert one of the texts we read into another genre or form. This latter assignment has produced, among other things, *The Gospel According to Bill* and a board game version of *The Odyssey*.

When I assign humorous writing, and when I recognize parodic bits in "serious" papers, I am giving my students permission to interrogate the discourse studied in and emerging from the class, much as, according to Bakhtin, the medieval church permitted carnival and various forms of

burlesque, and I run—and invite my students to run—some of the same dangers. I see the ambiguity (perhaps absurdity) of my own institutional position as "permitter," "director," and "judge" of this work. I run the danger of seeing my hard work in the course reduced to foolishness, which can, as we all know, *hurt*; and my students run the risk of so offending me that I will lower their grades. Furthermore, I am aware that I am encouraging my students to write in a form that many of them know well and use adroitly, having grown up during a period of the resurgence of stand-up comedy of a particularly virulent form. I am aware that the carnival—unlike the circus, with rings and ringmaster—can be dangerous, for very often it is my most cherished assumptions that are interrogated. Things may indeed get out of control.

Consider, for example, the following excerpt from a piece written by an African American Naval ROTC student about how he learned to survive naval recruit training:

> *However, these push-ups led me to mistake #3. After I had completed the set I stood up. The face (which had now developed a body) spat out some sounds which had the slightest resemblance to civilized English. To quote he said "Who told you to get up!?!!"* I said "NO ONE." He said "PUSH." The third lesson of the day, do as you're told, not as you think.*

*translated from U.S. Sailor

This is not the work of a student involved in a simple transition from high school or home community to college, but the work of a student who is already a member of a collection of discourse communities, and who is being initiated into another collection of communities—at least some of which have contradictory values and beliefs. In choosing to tell this particular story in this particular way, he is "playing" on a number of levels that expose the simplicity of my earlier model. For instance, notice the interplay of "civilized English" and the dialect he elsewhere calls "U.S. Sailor." This is a highly complex move between discourse communities, and in many ways an oppositional move. Earlier in the piece, he describes getting

into trouble for not knowing what words meant—i.e. for not knowing the Navy code. The code switching involved in this bit foregrounds the differences between the codes of basic training and the codes of first year composition. The writer rejects my ideas about the concept of "profanity, " uncritically representing it both as a means by which the drill instructor asserts his dominance over the recruit and as a privileged language by which the group maintains cohesion. While my first impulse is to reject the "translation" as evidence of his acquiescence to a sense of language hierarchies that I find rigid and repugnant, I am restrained by the context: here the ability to translate between "Civilization" and "the Navy" may serve as a demonstration of the student's ability, and indeed his great need, to retain places in both discourse communities. "Civilized English," for all its similarities to the terms "standard" or "formal" English, may here be an assertion of a personal code over a rigid, dehumanizing system. "Civilized" is not simply the language of school, but also the language of home.

Another highly contextualized joke is the student's use of the term "Push," the single word that operates in both "Civilized English" and "U.S. Sailor," since "push" is also one of my favorite words, as in "Push your thinking more here." The use of first the term "to quote" and then a footnote that admits the "translation" parodies my insistence in this particular class on reliable and accurate quotations. What I am getting at here is that this is no simple story about surviving recruit training, but a sophisticated parody about negotiating among discourse communities, a parody that is set against the context of this particular class, in which he can do what he cannot do in his ROTC class. Even the "moral" of his story—"do as you're told, not as you think" plays against a rich background of class discussion and argumentation. Thinking, this student is showing, is not always a good thing—it can be dangerous.

And so can humor, as he demonstrates in the next paragraph of the piece:

> *Mistake #4 did not happen that day or even that week. It happened my third week in Basic Training. I had begun to feel comfortable there as if I knew everything. THAT was the cause*

of my error. My CC (Company Commander) told us to do pushups forever. So I dropped to the pushup position and began to push. I said "One ever, two ever, three ever, for ever!" And after I finished I even had the nerve to smile. I don't know how long they exercised me after that, but I know it was very bright outside when I started and very dark when I finished. Thus my third lesson was learned, "Don't be a comedian."

This bit offers, of course, the sheer delight of the pun on "forever," and of the naïveté and/or audacity of the recruit—anyone can see that he's going to be in big trouble. Here the translation between "Civilized English" and "U.S. Sailor" takes place in parentheses, quietly, as we all enjoy the larger verbal joke. Again, the story set in context of the class is decidedly "carnivalesque"—the composition assignment specifically asks him to be a comedian. But "comedy," he points out, like thinking, is a loaded term, with different meanings in different contexts. The Company Commander functions as an instrumental comedian—playing with language to teach the military code. The student is doing something more complex in telling the story. The work of the comedian, like the work of the writer, is not necessarily harmless.

Fortunately for my ego, it is not only my class that is interrogated. One of my favorite "funny stories" is a student's gibe at the "leadership" program run by ROTC (and perhaps as well at the "total quality management" initiative that my university's administration was undertaking). A student described how, in retaliation for a snowball fight between frats and dorms, the "dormys" poured gasoline over a fraternity's snowman and set it on fire. "I guess all those leadership classes paid off," the student deadpans. And for those students for whom the university is what Mary Louise Pratt calls a "Contact Zone," as it is at times for all of us, humor can provide a space for the emergence of a voice or voices with which to negotiate that contact and for experiment with unexpected alternative voices.

An Arab student, for example, writes a "Modest Proposal" in rhymed couplets suggesting that the Palestinians, obviously useless and placeless, be sold for body parts. I was at first baffled by his choice of rhymed couplets, but agreed to help

him revise the poem. For this engineering student, writing in rhyme was obviously a labor of love, a way of carving out a space for himself between the authoritarian demands of a very traditional family in Saudi Arabia and the indifference and sometimes scorn the American students showed for his culture. But it had another purpose as well. This poem is not just a satire of Euro-American foreign policy, but an even more biting satire of American popular culture. The student's recognition of his oppositional voice, I think, makes him want to clearly indicate that this piece is satire, and having had a much better education in classical European literature than most of his American classmates, he knows the comic potential of rhymed couplets. Using such a strict form increases his sense of freedom to say clearly what he means—and in this project he makes his points more clearly than in more conventional papers he had written. For instance, he articulates his understanding of Americans' highly selective perception of cruelty when he suggests that we "Conserve their [the Palestinians'] nails for making ornaments of outlandish beauty/To reduce the elephant massacre and the African ivory cruelty." He targets the hypocrisy in Americans' efforts to appropriate the universe: "Employ their teeth for making classroom blackboard chalk,/Or boast to your friends, 'It's a billion year old moon rock!'" With his reference to "blackboard chalk," he locates that appropriation in the classroom—that locus of American hypocrisy with which he has, perhaps, had the most experience. An engineering student in a technological university, he links the engineering triumph of the moon landings with the colonialism that has shaped his political experience. This student uses the possibilities evoked in the assignment to articulate a particularly non-American position, and he seeks to make the wit and authority of the couplet work for him. The "play" space provided by satire allows him to drop the mask of the polite visitor and lets his fellow students see, some for the first time, a differently-centered point of view, in a way they would not see it if confronted with an argument.

A similar project assigned around the time of the Rodney King verdict and rioting produced several remarkable "Modest Proposals" by African-American students. The space created by satire can become a space for oppositional discourse because

satire invites the recognition of contradictions between values called for by writers like Patricia Bizzell (672). Indeed, it relies on exposing and highlighting those contradictions. One student, assessing the issue of police brutality, concludes that since we cannot possibly succeed in outlawing police brutality, we should *require it*, and proceeds to enumerate the advantages, one of which is increasing the physical fitness of the police. Her deadpan tone—clear, careful, and restrained—testifies to the reasonableness of her approach, and her syntax buries the only objectionable word—"beatings"—in a prepositional phrase somewhere in the middle:

> *Secondly, it is well known that many of our police officers are in poor physical shape. However, after performing a certain amount of beatings, their physical strength and stamina would noticeably improve. Surely this repeated vigorous activity would be a great exercise to improve muscle tone.*

We see what Stephen Katz calls the "ethos of expediency" (257) exposed in her calm reasonableness. How could we possibly object?

Another student, allowing considerably more anger in his voice, writes:

> *Since we [young black men] are leeches, living off of whites, and since most young black men don't care whether they live or die, my proposition is that America collects all of its young black males, between the ages of 8 and 25, use some for the military, use some for medical research, and kill the rest.*

By offering three parallel solutions to the "problem," he equates death, the passivity of the research subject, and the military. This is a particularly subversive move at a school with a high percentage of ROTC scholarship students, who are trained to think that the military offers leadership and opportunity, not passivity and death. He also reminds us of specific instances in which African American men have been "disposed of" in these ways.

Later in the paper, he suggests that street fighting is good preparation for a military career:

First, most young black males are good with guns. We do military maneuvers every day. They call Compton "the concrete Vietnam." In most black neighborhoods, drive-by shootings are common. To shoot people, in a fast moving vehicle, with some degree of accuracy displays good skill, and would serve good use in America's military machine. Also, young black males are cold, evil beings. We don't care if we live or die. There lives mean nothing to them. That makes us perfect for suicide missions and the front lines, in battle . . . .

The shifts between third and first person indicate how heavily invested this student is in the points he is making. They also remind us that this is satire, restating ideas that we've certainly heard before, exposing how ugly they look when taken "personally," and making the claim that they should and must be taken personally, regardless of conventional notions about the necessity to banish the first person from academic discourse.

Like the Arab student, these students play their satire against a backdrop of the values and the discourses of American popular culture as they experience it. They piece together echoes from the contemporary media, the talk and writing of their fellow students, and the ideas expressed and examined in my class and elsewhere in the university. This student writing is like the medieval parody that Bakhtin describes, a situation in which two languages engage in argument, producing a dialogue between points of view (76). In interrogating the languages and the premises on which the class is founded or on which American culture rests, students can make the work of the composition class their own, not by submitting to it, but by transforming it into what they want it to be. They can—but will they? Parodic humor does have a cutting edge, but it does not always cut through the points of view it is interrogating. Indeed, one can look at the parodic forms Bakhtin describes either as progenitors of the novel and of the heteroglossia that it embodies, or as safety-valves that helped sustain the hegemonic discourses of liturgy and epic. Indeed, as I reread this paper, I know that I am the one who is assigning, rewarding, and privileging parody and that I am the one countering the lesson learned in boot camp, "Don't be a

comedian." The relationships among humor, community, and authority are very complex and highly interactive. Humor serves both to query the values, beliefs, and practices of communities and to sustain them. The folk humor of one age can be evoked as tradition in the next, and the agents of satire in one generation can become icons of the conventional to the next.

Such *caveats* notwithstanding, I think we need to look at the "funny papers" our students write as more than mere instruments of initiation into the conventions of academic discourse; I think we need to respect them as queries of practices and points of view that instructors too interrogate outside the classroom and within. We need to recognize in them the multiple possibilities of meaning that they can embody and to encourage the development of a critical stance. Such critique can only enrich the developing literacies of our students. For instance, in the midst of an abstruse explication of David Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion,* at the point at which Cleanthes is proposing that the world is more like a vegetable than an animal, the proverbial student in the back raised his hand and asked, "What did this Hume guy do for a living?" He brought the house down. Indicative of the subversive potential of humor is its ability to maintain more than one meaning and to call into question the process of meaning-making. Surely some of the class heard this as a commodification of Hume's ideas: how could he make any money out of this kind of writing, and how will reading it help us make money? Some heard the more critical question of what kind of economic order—and what position within that order—offers room for this kind of speculation. Others heard it as a plea, to (please!) let us tie these difficult speculations into some sort—any sort—of material reality, and used the joke as a quick relief from perhaps the most difficult text they had yet encountered in their academic careers. And a few recognized that Hume's narrator is at this point pushing the boundaries of the absurd to make his point. It is a joke that encompassed both initiation and resistance, that pushed both students and teacher to query, explain, and justify what we were doing.

Funny papers, then, can function both to initiate students into academic life, professional fields, and American culture

and to critique that initiation. These jokes, these parodies, these queries, these subversions can become points of contact through which students can gain understanding of the functions and varieties of discourse, academic or not. They can become locations in which both students and teachers can accommodate to, manipulate, and critique the institutional structures on which those discourses rest. And they can serve as instances of how impossible it can be to confine meaning, even if we wanted to do so.

NOTES

[1] Freud distinguishes the joke from humor, which can be perceived and enjoyed by a single person alone (220), and from the comic, for which only the joke maker and object are necessary (181).

Although I find Freud's definition of the joke useful, I do not adopt his terminology in this paper. I use "humor" as a generic term for "funny writing"; "joke" as a funny story that is told (without Freud's criterion of economy); and "parody" as a joke that involves imitating another piece of discourse.

[2] According to Freud, the naive is funny because it transgresses inhibitions, yet it is not threatening because the naive speaker does not know the rules or expectations s/he is transgressing. "It is a condition for the naive's producing its effect that we should know that the person concerned does not possess the inhibition; otherwise we call him not naive but impudent" (182).

[3] According to Henri Bergson, we laugh at rigidity, at failure to adapt—or to fully adapt—to the moment or the situation. We laugh, however, only in the *absence of feeling*. Thus, in order to laugh at unintentional humor, we must suspend empathy. While there may be the potential for cruelty here, however, laughter is not necessarily cruel. The Lederer examples might seem cruel if used to publicly humiliate a student; extracted from the individual student's personal work and juxtaposed with each other, Lederer's "howlers" can be laughed at in a way that would not be countenanced if they were part of an individual student's portfolio.

This use of student material as the subject of teachers' joking reinforces teachers' communally held values and beliefs about language and about the construction of knowledge, insofar as such common values exist. These values and beliefs, like the humor they support, both bind those who share them and exclude those who do not.

[4] See, for example, Charles Bazerman and James Paradis, *Textual Dynamics of the Professions* (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1991) and Robert Jones and Joseph J. Comprone, "Where Do We Go Next in Writing Across the Curriculum?" *College English* 44 (1993): 59-68.

[5] African American students, for instance, may be fluent not only in Standard American English, but also in varieties of Black English appropriate for home and street. See Roger D. Abrahams, "Black Talking in the Street," in *Explorations in the Ethnography of*

Speaking, ed. Richard Bauman and Joel Sherzer (New York: Cambridge U P, 1974), pp. 240-262.

[6] This case is perhaps most articulately argued by Don Bialostsky in "Liberal Education, Writing, and the Dialogic Self," in *Contending with Words: Composition and Rhetoric in a Postmodern Age*, ed. Patricia Harkin and John Schlib (New York: MLA, 1991), 11-22.

[7] Although Bakhtin rejected the possibility of parody in contemporary literature because modern languages are already heteroglossic and there is no distinct "sacred" language, other critics like Linda Hutcheon contradict him on this point (Hutcheon, 70-71; Bakhtin, 71).

[8] Disneyland and its imitators have "solved" this problem by instituting strict regimentation and by imbuing their staffs with the idea that they are all performers, on stage whenever they are in the park. These are "parks," which maintain their "cleanness" by forgoing the dangers of authentic experience.

[9] I am here following the line of reasoning developed by Elliott Oring, who argues that disaster jokes can be read as "reactions to the conventionalization of discourse" in the mass media (285).

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Editor's note: This article appeared in Volume 14.1&2 of the *Journal of Teaching Writing* without its full complement of end notes. It appears again in this issue, fully documented.