Dobrin, Sidney I., J. A. Rice, and Michael Vastola eds.
Beyond Postprocess. **Logan: Utah State UP, 2011. Print.**

Reviewed by Richard Fulkerson

There is a considerable irony in reviewing the new collection *Beyond Postprocess* for the *Journal of Teaching Writing* because the editors hold, as did Thomas Kent in an earlier, related volume, that writing cannot be taught. According to their postprocess approach writing is paralogical; as such it involves "hermeneutic guessing" by the writer and then a reader. Because of the necessity of interpretive processing (guesswork), no system for producing writing can exist or be taught.

This new anthology, edited by Sidney Dobrin, J. A. Rice, and Michael Vastola, is one of the most diverse collections I have ever run into. It ranges from two experimental essays to pieces about cyberculture to "folksonomic" narrative theory. Like most collections, this one is uneven, with some very strong pieces and others not so solid. The articles are arranged under three headings: "Interventions of Postprocess," "Postprocess in New Media," and "Postprocess and Post(?)pedagogy." Despite the headings, the articles in each section have widely different interests and claims, and relations with each other are anything but clear. [Note: There is some confusion in the editors' introduction, which refers to thirteen essays (when there are only twelve), and to four sections instead of three (1).]

The volume is predicated on an earlier collection edited by Thomas Kent, entitled *Post-Process Theory: Beyond the Writing-Process Paradigm* (SIUP, 1999). Although Kent did not originate the term "post-process," with that volume he became its godfather. (See also his *Paralogic Rhetoric*, 1993.)

As I read the collection, I tried to keep three questions in mind:

1. Do the twelve pieces in the collection assume common definitions of process, post-process and (even) post-post-process?

2. How do the pieces in the present collection relate to those in Kent's *Post-Process Theory*? Are they genuinely "beyond" postprocess?
3. If I were persuaded by the arguments made in one or more articles, would that impact how I taught writing?

The most useful piece in the collection, for my money, is actually Kent's preface, "Righting Writing" (xi–xxii). It includes a clear discussion of postprocess thinking, built around a specific representative example of discourse. And examples are rare things in this collection. He uses the simple instance of himself as grandfather in a restaurant. His granddaughter has begun to eat before everyone is seated. He raises an eyebrow, and she gets the message and puts down her fork. Kent then spends eleven pages analyzing what all went into this interaction. The key to postprocess for Kent lies in the "hermeneutic guessing." He had "guessed" correctly that his granddaughter understood "the social conventions of the dining-out script" (xi). And she in turn had "guessed" at what his raised eyebrow meant. Thus there had been "dual triangulation" among the restaurant situation and the two communicators (xx). Postprocess theorists are fond of saying that discourse is public, interpretive, and situated (Couture citing Kent, 25; Hawke 91).

The granddaughter had also employed the "principle of charity" (xi), meaning that "an interpreter, in order to arrive at a reasonable interpretation, will maximize agreement with a speaker by attributing to a speaker a common and shared rationality" (xi). Presumably that is one key principle upon which communicators base their hermeneutic guessing.

What has this to do with being postprocess or beyond? The exchange involved a "fairly complex hermeneutic activity . . . that cannot be explained very well by a process-oriented communication model" (xiv). Since all communication involves guesswork, no "process" will necessarily lead to effective communication. As Kent puts it, "by process I mean something like a procedure or methodology that can be codified and then

applied to circumstances in order to predict some sort of outcome" (xii). Since there is no process here to teach, we are postprocess or beyond.

In their lengthy and substantive introduction, "A New Postprocess Manifesto: A Plea for Writing" (1-20), the editors of *Beyond Process* agree with Kent:

> pedagogy–systems that assume ideas, knowledge, information can be transmitted from one agent to another– must be set aside in order to see writing as not bound by the canons, grammars, and rhetorics of pedagogy that have been naturalized as the methods through which writing is learned and performed. Because writing is nomadic and paralogic, the ability to teach or learn it dissolves . . . demanding . . . a greater focus on theorizing writing qua writing sans subject. (17)

(One might, I think, however, reasonably challenge that definition of "pedagogy.") This passage is typical of the dense prose throughout, which is partly the result of an extensive reliance on European theory: Bakhtin, Barthes, Bourdieu, Deleuse, Derrida, Foucault, Gramsci, Guattari, Heidegger, Lacan, Latour, Lyotard, Merleau-Ponty, Nietzche, and Wittgenstein all find their way into the articles (see also Dobrin's *Postcomposition,* 2011).

The editors are not shy about saying the aim of their collection is "to provide a critical site for nothing less than a broad reevaluation of what it means to study writing today" (4). And finally, "postprocess theory must continue to be insensitive [*sic*] to composition's most cherished disciplinary concerns" (7). The editors commonly object to composition's "pedagogical imperative" or even "pedagogical neurosis" (14). "Postprocess is not just a critique of process . . . but a move postpedagogy, postcomposition, and postdiscipline" (16). They have an "unapologetic resistance to simple pedagogical application" (3). In a strange disconnect, the contributors to the collection do not

share this pedagogical animus. Either they do not mention the issue or they talk directly about teaching writing postprocess.

Sometimes, as in "postwar," the post prefix merely indicates a time coming after another one. But at least equally often the prefix implies not just a later, but a better time, a time showing progress and rejecting the past. "Beyond" in a title has the same ambiguity. The Dobrin, Rice, and Vastola collection is certainly "beyond" postprocess in chronology since Kent's collection appeared more than a decade earlier. Frequently, the articles are also "postprocess" in rejecting the past, i.e., teaching writing as process.

The volume's view is that writing as process was (1) a linear stage theory, (2) with the three stages prewriting, writing, and rewriting. I have no doubt that at times some teachers, probably both public school and college, did teach that lockstep set of procedures. But the writing-as-process stress of the seventies, eighties, and nineties, as I experienced and studied it, was a totally different creature from this linear "process," presumed by the editors and at least several of the authors. Since the earliest actual research on how writers composed, the researchers (e.g., Emig, Perl, Sommers, Flower and Hayes) emphasized that writing was not produced by linear formulas, but was a messy, idiosyncratic, personal, and recursive set of activities. To the extent that the writers in this collection set out to critique the three-step linear "writing process," it's just too easy, a straw man. "The very messiness of the writing processes examined by researchers (which in itself suggested something very 'postprocess' about the nature of writing) clearly yielded to rubrics for teaching that very process, the so-called process paradigm" (Couture 24).

It would take too much space to discuss all twelve of the articles. What follows is thus selective, including the three articles on digital technology and others that seem to me the clearest or most important.

In the first section of the anthology, Debra Journet in "What Constitutes a Good Story?" usefully complicates the definition of postprocess by tying alternate theories of process and postprocess

to varying research modes. She compares three articles, all from *Research in the Teaching of English*, that use qualitative methods: Sondra Perl (1979), Stephen Fishman and Lucille McCarthy (2000), and Glynda Hull and Mira-Lisa Katz (2006). She says that respectively they reflect process thinking, postprocess thinking, and finally post-postprocess. Perl's work is a close study of student writers at work, but it is couched in the language of science, with supposedly testable hypotheses and so forth. To be "objective," the researcher's role is effaced by use of the third person. Fishman and McCarthy too use case study methodology, but they also tell their own stories as researchers using first-person in their report. Acccording to Journet, this is postprocess work. Hull and Katz use case study, put themselves into the narrative, and make their research "action-oriented" post-postprocess work. (The study is done as part of a literacy project.) Journet uses Kenneth Burke's Pentad to analyze the research narratives and shows the progression clearly. The three articles make a neat pattern, but Journet has been very careful in selecting them. Surely most contemporary qualitative research does not actually involve solving a social problem as a part of the research design.

In this section also, Barbara Couture in "Writing and Accountability" argues that instead of attempting to sway their readers, students should write with a sense of altruism, to make a better world in some way by communicating with readers. She contrasts that with the general attitude she finds among the "process movement," taking a complicated "phenomenological" approach to get there. Showing genuine concern for a reader's well being makes a piece of writing accountable and that goal makes the writing "postprocess."

Also in the first section, Byron Hawk in "Reassembling Postprocess: Toward a Posthuman Theory of Public Rhetoric" uses three European theorists (Deleuze, Heidegger, and Latour) to assert that "a new constellation of concepts could ground the notion that writing is situated . . . [we can] move beyond hermeneutic guessing to material embodiment; and a [different] concept of a public can move rhetoric beyond the human

scale" (75). Hawk's essay, definitely "beyond" postprocess, is one of the places the collection could use some illustrating (see also his *Counter History of Composition* 2007).

One of the most provocative articles is "The Page as a Unit of Discourse: Notes Toward a Counterhistory for Writing Studies" by John Trimbur and Karen Press. "The idea that the page is active and alive, with its own invisible understructures and semiotic potentialities, is one that never quite dawned on the process movement" (95). This is the case whether one is looking at an antique annotated Bible (101) or examining a modern advertising layout (105). The modern layout is probably built on an implicit vertical/horizontal grid that underlies the blank page, although two advertisements violating that grid for effect are reproduced (107, 111).

Three articles in the middle section deal directly with current digital technology. Collin Brooke and Thomas Rickert in "Being Delicious: Materialities of Research in a Web 2.0 Application" discuss both the theory of postprocess and a web browser called "Delicious" that lends itself to new research practices by allowing multiple readers to "tag" web material instead of photocopying (171). By looking at the number of tags and the headings used most often, one can get a grasp of what matters on a given topic (173). Brooke and Rickert refer to one weblog for a book, which "has been saved by roughly 700 users" with tags such as "folksonomy, web2.0, blog, . . . technology [and] metadata" (173).

Kyle Jensen's "Old Questions, New Media: Theorizing Writing in a Digital Age" is essentially an argument for using digital media to preserve multiple drafts of a text for critics to compare. Jensen cites as the major example a website maintained by the University of Virginia on Melville, which has several versions of *Typee*. A typical screen has three windows, two side by side and a wider one beneath them. Clearly there was meant to be a visual reproduction of a screen, but it has been omitted from the volume. There is nothing postprocess or beyond about this piece.

It simply argues for what we used to call textual analysis, made easier on a website.

Jeff Rice in "Folksonomic Narratives: Writing Detroit," explains that a "folksonomy" (an analogue for "taxonomy") is someone's personal classification system that juxtaposes disparate materials for personal reasons rather than rhetorical ones. The piece is actually a model of what it discusses, which apparently accounts for its being in the section on "Postprocess in New Media." Rice weaves together his remarks on juxtaposition and folksonomy with memories connected to the city of Detroit where he grew up. It is a powerful work that calls out to be appreciated aesthetically and structurally as well as logically and analytically.

Two essays in the final section actually call into question, in quite different ways, the whole idea of being postprocess. Raul Sanchez in "First, A Word" argues that process theory and postprocess theory are merely parts of a similar larger humanist mechanism, the study of the writing subject, especially in a classroom context. The only difference, he says, is that postprocess denies that writing processes can be accurately "codified." He goes on to call for something genuinely beyond postprocess thinking, but is vague about what that something might be. Again, examples would help. "This new theoretical work will be concerned with pedagogy, but its notion of pedagogy will not be guided by the classroom" (193). And "what we need is not simply the next theory for composition but the first theory of writing" (193).

"I never really got that season or two where everyone was talking about postprocess. I mean, what more is there, if you're a writer than the doing and the reflecting on the doing?" So says Geoffrey Sirc in "The Salon of 2010" (196). He goes on to argue historically that composition, to its detriment, avoided the modernist revolution (represented by Beaudelaire) except for some unusual process theorists who emphasized rule-breaking personal voice in writing (e.g., Ken Macrorie, Winston Weathers).

Finally, the most impressive work in the volume (from section two), Cynthia Haynes's "Postconflict Pedagogy: Writing in the Stream of Hearing" is an angry *tour de force* of postmodern writing, building on the video of Daniel Pearl's execution by his Middle Eastern captors. The piece is written in sections after an initial italicized summary of the video and its impact; most of the pieces are described as "riffs" on aspects of the topic: "Danny's Riff," "Abstract Riff [The Obligatory Prewriting]," "Definition Riff," "Pedagogy Riff," and "Daniels' [sic] Riff." It is an astonishing performance, weaving together Derrida, Wittengenstein, and Lyotard into a sort of scholarly meditation on violence, computer gaming, hearing as communication, and roles of the internet. It ends with a parody of the Star-Spangled Banner. It defies summary and has to be experienced.

So, about my three questions. (1) No, the writers in this volume are not working from a single definition of postprocess or post-postprocess. But there is enough harmony to hold the collection together, especially if one grants that digital media are part of a movement postprocess. (2) The articles in the current collection could just as easily have fit within the earlier collection, given that it too was built on several conceptions of postprocess. (3) What would postprocess theory imply about my classroom? I ask this despite Kent, Dobrin, Rice, and Vastola urging me to reject the "pedagogical imperative" of outmoded process theory. In an earlier review of Kent's original collection, I attempted to describe what a postprocess writing class might look like: "a course in texts, a course in reading, in which writing simply grows from the reading" (113-14). I was dubious about my own description, but it is cited approvingly by Brooke and Rickert in "Being Delicious" (167). They add that "the course tends to maintain the primacy of ideological or social justice concerns" (167). Thus my teaching of writing might have to shift to a greater concentration on reading and social justice, with less "practice" of processes like prewriting and revision. I would also need to stress the digital more, even though I don't find digital media automatically postprocess. I am not persuaded, either, that we

should abandon overt teaching of writing in favor of reading, or that teaching writing as a complex process is not still one way to go. Even though neither a rigid stage theory nor a more complex view of process guarantees good writing, and all communication does involve hermeneutic guessing, doesn't it make sense to teach students at least how to make better guesses?

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