Authoring

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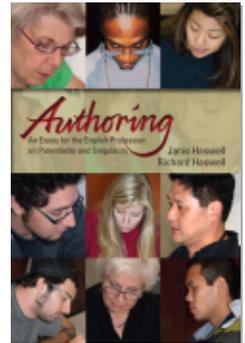Published by Utah State University Press

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INTRODUCTION
English Studies and Black Boxes

"What a box I'm in," he would cry, looking up from the gutter the next morning.

John Gardner, *Vlemk the Box-Painter*

In information science, when input is known and output is known but the process that connects the two remains unknown, the situation is called a black box. This essay opens some black boxes safeguarded by the higher-education project called "English."

Education and black boxes, of course, are joined by symbiosis in every department and discipline. This is because it takes black boxes to learn about black boxes. Fixers routinely use computerized tools about which they care to know little in order to diagnose problems—is there radon in the basement?—about which they hope to learn more. Bruno Latour (1987) shows that even in the enlightened field of the hard sciences, questioning of unquestioned procedures always uncovers more unquestioned procedures, like a Russian doll with no end to the parade of inner dolls. Yet as fixers and working scientists will respond, black boxes have to be taken for granted to get on with the investigation. That is why black boxes abound and abide. They are ideational as well as material, and they come in all shapes and sizes, as atomic as intuitions, as nebulous as presuppositions. Some of the most encompassing are the stuff our Enlightenment-Romantic-Modern-Postmodern dreams have been made on: Faraday's ether, Kant's categories, Hegel's Geist, Hopkins' inscape, Freud's libido, Bergson's life force, Skinner's mentalism, Derrida's presence. Every discipline has its black boxes it doesn't want to plumb because the work has to get done, and work would have to wait while the basement is being tested.

Every discipline including English.

Authoring, the human inner act of making texts, is the one term that most unites the four divisions of English studies—composition,

literature, linguistics, and creative writing. Yet in English depart-
ments authoring is currently a remarkably black box. Akin to the
behaviorist concept of mentalism, which can only be inferred through
measurable stimulus and measurable response, authoring—the
inward act that triggers the outward act of writing—may be the one
concept in the toolkit of the English trade that teachers of writing
and written discourse least question. Those of us in literature and
composition have often scoffed at stimulus-response methodology.
Yet we think continually of input in terms of cultural environment,
ethnic given, academic site, and instructional activity, and we think
continually of output in the form of text, learning, grades, and test
results. What lies in between we bracket as authoring: the internal
human process of turning background, experience, and imagination
into something written. It is not so much the author who is dead as
the act of authoring.

It is not a death, of course, but a truism (the logical equivalent of a
black box) or—the same thing—a suspending of attention. No doubt
the suspension has aided four decades of our field's profitable investi-
gation into society and culture on the one end, and text and response
on the other end. Authoring is the dark synapse that lies between. This
essay hopes to throw a little light into it.

We investigate authoring from two different angles. One angle,
philosophical in nature, is the idea of potentiality. Famously, potential-
ity is another black box. It does not stand as a fact since the concrete
evidence for it, its actualization, alters it, sometimes destroys it. Like
the black boxes of presence in literary deconstruction or intention in
literary criticism, potentiality is irremediably altered by its expression.
Nonetheless, that expression allows ready inference of potentiality as a
human element of authoring. Whoever scribed a word without first, the
inkling that it was scribable, and second, without imagining the poten-
tial of its imprint on readers?

Our second angle, factual in nature, is the verifiable human con-
dition of singularity. A writer is unlike any other writer and a reader
unlike any other reader, because only one person fits inside her or his
skin. Especially writers know this, and, as we will soon show, that knowl-
edge of individual uniqueness moves them to write. As they touch felt
tip to paper or finger tip to keyboard, they intuit that no one at this
particular moment is in their particular spot, and that therefore no
one has ever written what they are about to write, and they are correct.

Potentiality and *singularity*—two black boxes inside the black box of *authoring*.[1] Familiar as home, our three companion terms feel estranged from English departments. Yet instruction and scholarship that avoid these three human realities—this is our contention—make an English studies that will tend to be unmotivated, jejune, and aloof. Since we will also contend that in the last couple of decades the profession has indeed avoided the concepts, perforce much of our critique will run countercurrent. But if there is a little bloodletting in these pages, we feel it is for the good of the patient. This book is an essay for the discipline of English, not against it—a discipline to which the two of us have devoted almost seventy years of our collective lives. Currently in that academic field we find somewhat to dislike but nothing to despair. To put a proactive spin on it, we have in our kit three tools that we hope the rest of our profession may find as useful as we have.

In short, we believe our terms can help us English teachers and scholars escape from a corner into which we have painted ourselves. This disciplinary cul-de-sac or malaise can be exposed in two ways, diachronic and synchronic, and we will attempt both. As for the history, it seems that the discipline's engagement with the conceptual adventure called postmodernism has come to an end, and did so perhaps a decade or so ago. (We do not like the term "postmodern," but feel stuck with it, which is part of the malaise.)

At the core of the postmodern apparatus was an attack on foundations of every guise. This maneuver took two basic tacks. One was deconstruction, roughly earlier and especially favored in literary studies. Deconstructionists problematized and critiqued positivism in science, truth in philosophy, intention in authorship, transparency in language, ideology in politics, essentialisms and totalizings everywhere; they championed indeterminacy, intertextuality, representation, interpretation, and critique itself. The other tack was social constructivism, roughly later and especially favored in composition studies.

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1. Had we space in this book, hospitality and technology would have joined potentiality and singularity to form a quadrilogy on authoring. Hospitality is the cultural and social vehicle for authoring, the relational customs and conventions that mediate and bring together the potentials and singularities of the writer and reader (see J. Haswell, R. Haswell, and Blalock 2009, and the last section of this book, "Envoi: Hospitality and Alice Sheldon"). Technology is the material means of authoring that exercise their own mediations and allowances, including the latest conferencing tools like Blackboard or Wimba and social networking sites like MySpace or Bebo.

Constructivists problematized and critiqued individualism in politics, liberalism or humanism in ethics, expressionism in discourse, self in psychology, originality in authorship, authority in scholarship, individuality in gender and ethnicity, social independences and personal isolatoes everywhere; they championed social identity, collaboration, consensus, diversity, dialogism, performance, spectacle, and again critique itself. The deconstructionist and constructivist sides of postmodernism, of course, were flanks of the same attack.

The malaise with postmodernism also has two varieties, both stemming from its core position on foundationalism. One is the sense that postmodernists engaged in a fundamental logical contradiction (some of the earliest counterattacks on postmodernism came from the philosophers). How can one pry foundations loose without operating from a foundation of one's own? How can one deconstruct truth claims with truth claims? What is the social construction of the exposé of social constructions? There is the suspicion that postmodernism, at least the radical or uncompromising part of it, was an elitist operation, a critique of others that declined to extend the critique to itself. The other variety of the malaise, of course, is the sense that while the postmodernists investigated certain foundations, they forgot others necessary for decent and fruitful human interaction, including interactions among teachers, students, and written texts. It is the second side of the malaise that has largely motivated this essay for the discipline of English. In particular, we feel that postmodernism left authoring outside its box.[2]

Our critique of historical postmodernism is made with a high respect for it. Both of us earned our degrees and taught during the years of high postmodernism, and the dismantling of foundations and the analysis of social constructions lie in our bones. What postmodernism taught about critique itself should never be forgotten or left untaught to students. Part of our dislike of the term postmodern is the "post-," with its suggestion of an after without a continuity.[3] We agree with Neil

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2. Note that we distinguish author*ing* from author*ship*. Authoring includes the physical act of generating discourse and the author's phenomenological sense of that act. Authorship is the way authoring plays out in history materially, socially, and culturally. Naturally, the two overlap in a tangle of ways.

3. The problem we sense with various proposals for a post-postmodernism—such as neo-realism in literature and embodied materiality or post-process in composition— starts when they assume that something old, disembodied or pre- must be abandoned. We are not making up the term "post-postmodernism" (see Eshelman 2000).

Brooks and Josh Toth that "the ghost of postmodernism is essential to the future of our critical discourse. Postmodernism might be dead, but it still has much work to do" (2007, 11). Throughout this book we lament postmodernist and constructivist theory, but only the radical edge of it, not its commonsense core. But it should not be forgotten that the pronouncement of the "death of postmodernism," albeit widespread, comes from the meta scholars. In the primary scholarship and classroom practice, postmodernisms and constructivisms of the most marginal sort can operate in ways hardly ghostlike, and more with the vigor of a person in the prime of life. Radical deconstructive and constructive strategies of interpretation and composing thrive still largely uncontested in English department courses.[4]

Hence the synchronic approach to the problem, which makes up the bulk of our essay. Can our new terms—potentiality, singularity, authoring—help with current practice? Without a doubt, they disturb a lexicon that put and still puts the emphasis elsewhere. English faculty are much more likely to talk of *textuality* than authoring, of *performance* than potentiality, of *community* than singularity. These are the terms in the know, the foyer where current literary and compositional studies prefer to start. To most members of English departments, they lead to offices with a very comfortable, lived-in feel.

	Current Emphasis	*Current in Literature*	*Current in Composition*	*Our Emphasis*
Discursive Ground	Textuality	Literary Work	Composing	Authoring
Discursive End	Performance	Interpretation	Outcomes	Potentiality
Academic Self	Community or Group Identity	Canon	Disciplinary Standards	Singularity

Textuality and performance, performance and outcomes, canon and standards, etc.—each cell opens readily into the other but uneasily into our strange compartments.

Take *performance*, for instance. Discursive performance uses language to construct an identity that will survive within a group or

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4. Klaus Stierstorfer (2003) charts the rise and decline of postmodernism in literary and cultural studies and estimates its peak in the early 1990's. Some critics have suggested that the death blow to postmodernism's attack on foundationalism happened on September 11, 2001.

a community. Performance, "twice-behaved behavior" (Stern and Henderson 1993, 9), succeeds by iterating previous language. Just as actors on stage are handed and perform a script to be replaced by the characters imagined by the audience, offstage a person shapes or manipulates stock language into an identity, a performance that displays or impersonates characteristics already scripted by a particular group, during which "who you are, and are taken to be" becomes indistinguishable (Cameron 1996, 47). In English departments, the stress falls on the "taken to be." For students the rewards are in the script (input) and the performance (output) rather than in the cryptic in-between. Accountability will lie with mastery of the performed word, whether it be mastery of a literary canon or a standardized disciplinary style. Judgment will lie with interpretation of privileged scripts or with outcomes of exercise in privileged rhetorical modes. It seems the route performance takes departs farther and farther from our terms. Potentiality is only outcomes in a nascent state, and singularity is the antonym of "twice-behaved behavior."

Or take *community*. Open the panels of the black box of community, and there the members move around, identities known and accepted through the performance of their roles. Community is a shared collectivity, self-selected or not, where new members are embraced on the basis of previously agreed-upon behavior, iterated language, and displayed beliefs. There are communities within communities, of course. Within the academic community lies the community of the English department, for acceptance into which a student must appreciate an established canon of literary works appropriate to legitimized cultural groups (input), and write an established style appropriate to legitimized disciplinary fields (output). All of this rarely leads to notions of potentiality or singularity. Community is nervous with the "autonomous" self or the enterprising "self-made" individual who might be so foolish as to think that singular ideas exist and will be allowed free play. According to the community paradigm, the principle of "difference" is vital, but only to distinguish one community from another and to identify outsiders, not to legitimize insiders.

Or start with *identity*. Identity is the kind of person that a community recognizes you to be through your performance. James Paul Gee isolates four primary operations of identity, mutually inclusive. Nature-identity says we are what we are because of a given "state" that we did not select and cannot change (age, sex, genetic makeup, for example).

Institution-identity says we are what we are because of positions we occupy or functions we serve in society (receptionist, soldier, student, for example). Discourse-identity says we are what we are because of language accomplishments in interacting with other people (raconteur, mediator, plagiarist, for example). Affinity-identity says we are what we are because of habits, experiences, and practices that we display within an affiliated group (Methodist, health club member, psychology major, for example). In an English department, the identity of students—beyond that inscribed by virtue of enrolling in classes—officially depends on their literacy, that is, their demonstrated capability to handle assigned readings and discourse genres (input) and produce texts subject to evaluation (output). Although Gee says that a person can be actively or passively engaged in identity formation, clearly the outcome swings on what the person cannot control, the extant "interpretive system" that underwrites identity's recognition. In the current identity box, there seems to be no sanctioned space where the potentiality of students can form a singular self that resists identification (2002, 99-107).

Above all, or perhaps we should say surrounding all, operates the god-term *textuality*. Whether the focus is on the scribal processes that generate text types (compositional input) or on the interpretive glosses that texts generate (literary output), textuality steadfastly diverts attention from the only operation that can possibly connect the two, authoring.

We are not arguing that the current black boxes of English studies are any darker than our proposed ones. Nor are we arguing that our black boxes should replace the current ones. Although in the chapters that follow we will take our licks at various posts still more or less erect, we aim to carry on rather than start over. Basically, we feel boxed in by the going terms in English studies and English instruction, whatever their provenance, and we mean to find out where a redirection of attention may take us.

We are not suggesting, however, that all boxes are equal. At root all may be cryptic, but they vary in their usefulness in directing inquiry, prompting hypotheses, shaping diagnoses, and jumpstarting every kind of logical and moral reasoning. Different boxes—presuppositions, axioms, "self-evident truths," and the like—have very different consequences. Consider just a few implications of the textuality-performance-community paradigm. First, if discourse behavior is "performed," if every identity is constructed, produced, or practiced, then

there is little reason to look for anything "authentic" or "original" in the student. Second, if self identity can exist only so far as it is recognized by others outside the self as belonging to a category or group (organized by gender, race, ethnicity, class, ideology, etc.), then the student has little reason to look inward for his or her sources of meaning. And third, if personal self is only a "subjectivity," subject to society's projection of group identity, a projection that will change over time only glacially, then students will construe learning in terms other than personal change, freedom, and creativity.

The implications of the authoring-potentiality-singularity paradigm lead in very different directions. If teaching vests authority in authoring, students will be recognized more by their promise than their performance, will be encouraged to develop personal distinction rather than group affiliations, and will be affirmed in their inner dignity rather than in an "identity" assigned by the culture at large. The township of textuality-performance-community does not ban promise, personal distinction, and inner dignity, but it lacks clear road signs pointing in those directions.

Our three terms are not old pedagogical abstractions newly named and elevated. We are talking about realities, pedagogical effects some of which are highly unpleasant, though old indeed. In 1751 James Harris observed that British teachers treat students as if knowledge could be poured into them "like water into a cistern" (1751/1968, "Preface"). Two and one-half centuries later, Mary Rose O'Reilley observed that students in the United States learn by being "insulted, bullied, turned into objects" (1993, 30). To the extent that such a pedagogical tradition continues, it is elevated in no sense of the word, and under it the experiences of students, thousands of students every working hour, are in no way abstract. Any approach that changes this tradition will be new, no matter what it is called. It is perhaps the central argument of this essay that material objectification of students tends to be supported by classrooms that privilege canon, standards, outcomes, the public performance of identity, and a communal interpretation of texts, and that it is worth proposing a change of direction toward classrooms friendly to the potential and singularity of authoring.

Whatever directions the following chapters take—they might more accurately be called explorations or divagations—each gravitates toward the actual and the practical. In Chapter 1 working authors

describe their felt sense of authoring. In Chapters 2-7 the concept of potentiality leads first to a study of two student writers insisting on their potentiality, while peers and teacher insist on denying it; then to the astonishing history of William Butler Yeats's discovery of the woman's voice within him; next to a curious moment in the life of journalist William Cobbett, when he found himself preferring a sand hill to his college education; and finally to a feisty student who concluded that thirty-one English teachers and thirty-one peer students were wrong about her writing. In Chapters 8-13 the fact of human singularity and its implications for teaching and studying literature and composition are explored through investigations of individuals: a minor character in one novel by Paul Scott who talked her way into the central voice of another Scott novel; a student who is part Hispanic, part African American, and part Native American; another student who discovered that her mother's consoling fable was a lie; another who finally faced the truth that her brother had died in Vietnam thirty-four years ago. In Chapter 14 more individuals appear: a minor transit official at an obscure border crossing between Ecuador and Peru; two hundred ninth graders and first-year college students in Nueces County, Texas; and Michael Yeats, a famous son of famous parents, on a Caribbean cruise ship. And in transit, four interchapters relate the confounding life of author Alice Sheldon, whose nom-de-plume was not only a public script, but also a necessary part of her singular potential as an author.

This book is written to help further the project of college English. Partly, it is for English teachers who often work in departments that suffer jealousies, rivalries, ostracism, and other Pandoran ills. In that, English is no different from other university disciplines. With disciplinary black boxes, is one happier in the dark or in the know? It's our hope that if the authoring of texts is a conceptual box that holds all of the English department's various compartments—literature, composition, linguistics, and creative writing—then opening up that concept may help faculty relinquish some of their local spats, the squabbles that we have experienced and lament. As it is, this volume is too small to deal with all four of these factions, and we can focus on only the first two—literature and composition—subfields that the two of us have merged throughout our academic careers. We leave the topic of authoring in linguistics and creative writing for someone else's authoring.

Above all, our study is written for students in English classes. It is they who perhaps suffer the most from conflicts among their faculty, and who may wonder why they do not learn more about what it is to *be* an author when they are continually asked to study or become one.