

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Jennifer Mary Love for the degree of Master of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies  
in the co-departments of English, English, Women Studies presented on July 8,  
1993. Title: Fostering Authority in Readers and Writers

*Redacted for Privacy*

Abstract approved: \_\_\_\_\_

Lisa Ede

As a reader and as a teacher of introductory reading and writing courses, I am persuaded by the concept of a genuine authority in which all readers both value and seek to examine their early readings of texts. What I have come to regard as a pretended authority or mastery, on the other hand, is troubling to me as a teacher and reader. This more traditional way of reading and writing, in which readers seek to "find" an author's "meaning" and to communicate this meaning with an assured and knowing voice, has seemed in my experience as both an instructor and student to ignore or brush over the real complexity in both written texts and in the texts of students' and others' lives.

In spite of my belief in the importance and efficacy of a questioning rather than a masterful authority, I sometimes, in my teaching and reading and writing, still search for and value what I perceive as author's meanings. I have encountered this tendency in many of my students, as well, and in many of my own past reading and writing teachers; tradition has deeply lodged in us the looming image of the

Great Author, and the notion that we must master this author's meanings to be successful readers of their texts. Perhaps one of the most powerful dilemmas facing instructors of reading and writing courses--a dilemma which helps to shape this thesis--is that of fostering an authority based on self-valuing, self-conscious reading while at the same time communicating to readers that the texts we are reading can be as complex as the meanings we make of them. While the formal, institutionalized authority of authors must be challenged by all readers, these authors' genuine authority as writers--as makers of meaning like ourselves and our students--must be respected as we respect our own developing and individual authority.

Fostering Authority in Readers and Writers

by

Jennifer Mary Love

A THESIS

submitted to

Oregon State University

in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the  
degree of

Master of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies

Completed July 8, 1993

Commencement June 1994

APPROVED:

*Redacted for Privacy*

\_\_\_\_\_  
Professor of English in charge of major

*Redacted for Privacy*

\_\_\_\_\_  
Assistant Professor of English in charge of co-field

*Redacted for Privacy*

\_\_\_\_\_  
Associate Professor of Women Studies in charge of co-field

*Redacted for Privacy*

\_\_\_\_\_  
Chairperson of department of English

*Redacted for Privacy*

\_\_\_\_\_  
Dean of Graduate School

Date thesis presented July 8, 1993

## Acknowledgements

Many people have generously given their time and shared their sensitivity in the shaping and strengthening of this essay. I wish to thank Lisa Ede for her willingness to read many drafts of my paper, often at very short notice, and for making many insightful suggestions which made me feel sometimes precarious and sometimes hopeful, and always, after a revision, more self-confident, with a heightened understanding of the ideas I am working with and of how their expression can be most clear and persuasive to all readers. I am grateful also for Lisa's very steady and encouraging support of my general ideas in this thesis, for her assurance that concerns similar to the ones explored here are concerns she and other teachers have had, and continue to have.

I am thankful for the many-month-long support by Lisa and by the other members of my thesis committee--Anita Helle, Paul Kopperman, Janet Lee--and for each person's generous compliance with insistent thesis deadlines, and drafts sometimes suddenly thrust into their hands or mailboxes. The busy summer schedules of Lisa, Anita, Paul, and Janet make their cooperation and kindness in this process especially important to me. I thank Anita for her support and ideas in response to an early draft she saw, and for her wonderful suggestion at our final committee meeting about "threading authority through" and about the importance of making the reading-writing connection explicit in my paper, and connecting these ideas to readers' authority. Paul's liking of a still-troubled draft of my essay encouraged me during the committee meeting and still does so. Janet's clearly-expressed need to have the different *kinds* of authority clarified has made what was an inhibiting unsureness in my essay into a positive awareness.

My father, Glen Love, has patiently read and gently and thoughtfully responded to many versions of this paper. The heavy revising and rearrangement of so much of my essay which needed to take place came to feel like an awakening because, in part, of his advice and constant support. My mother, Rhoda Love, volunteered to read my paper in its later stages; she took it with her into a plant-filled room and was quiet for so long that I crept about concernedly. But she reappeared nodding, and having sketched in my margins many questions which had not until then been put into words. Both my parents have powerfully encouraged me during these most recent and difficult stages of my reading and writing, when I have been working at home in Eugene, Oregon. They have driven with me to Corvallis when I have needed to attend a meeting or pick up a draft, they have praised me when I have most needed it, and they have calmed me.

I wish to thank the students who have been in the Writing 121 classes I have taught at Oregon State University, for what seems when I look back an impressive willingness, in general, to read and write exploratively, as I ask them to. I am also grateful to many of these students for seeing and, I believe, forgiving the dilemmas I carry to class with me in being both a student and a maturing instructor. Special

thanks to the students whose names appear in this thesis, and whose ideas, both written and spoken, have helped me to think about and form this paper.

I thank the theorists and teachers whose written work--their experiences and ideas--enabled me for the first time to discover tangible concerns in hazy, unsettled feelings I had known as a teacher and student. David Bartholomae, Robert Brooke, Sheree L. Meyer, Anthony Petrosky, Mariolina Salvatori have in particular helped me to find my voice in this essay and in the classroom, and to write about many questions with the awareness that they are worthwhile and shared. To Lisa Ede and Anita Helle, for directing me toward the writing of these and other theorists, many thanks.

David Eiseman made me want to start writing this essay just so I could answer with echoing affirmatives his persistent and concerned winter- and spring-term questions about my progress as a Master's candidate.

Cindi Bartels whisked me out to a restaurant-dessert the day after my oral exam, renewing my belief in definite accomplishment and the loveliness of celebration.

Jessica Towbin's support in many wonderful letters has helped me through these months, as has her willingness to listen and respond helpfully to my concerns as a sometimes-disillusioned student and instructor.

I am steadily grateful to Ryan Hare, for his support in concerned looks, spoken assurances, notes left around the house, and full, compassionate letters and phone calls. I am thankful for his tapes of Mahler and Stravinsky--which I listen to in the car *because* they are so beautiful. I thank Ryan for liking walks and picnics and duets, for his commitment to other people's music and to his own, for being interested in my writing--for encouragement all the time, unsolicited, even when I startle him (or perhaps he isn't so startled) by already feeling confident and proud. Ryan--for being there; for needing, always, to know I'm well; and for cinnamon rolls and orange juice, unexpectedly, when I was dry-mouthedly revising the introduction of this essay--thank you.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

FOSTERING AUTHORITY IN READERS AND WRITERS	1
BIBLIOGRAPHY	47

## Fostering Authority in Readers and Writers

Fall, 1991 was the first term I taught a Writing 121 course at Oregon State University. During the fifth week or so, students and I were reading two brief essays by Annie Dillard, and talking over in class their first readings of these texts. I hoped my students would welcome the opportunity to voice these early readings, and would benefit from hearing the readings of myself and of other students. Since each of my twenty-seven students would soon be handing to me what students and I spoke of as an "Annie Dillard essay" (I asked students to find an aspect of the text which interested them and to write about it), such "formal writing," I felt, should be preceded by a whole-class discussion in which initial readings were aired and considered and added to in a comfortable and accepting environment. But I was surprised by the turn our discussion took, very early in the 50-minute session. A number of students had a strong, and, it seemed to me, similar response to Dillard's "The Deer at Providencia" and "The Death of a Moth." "Morbid" and "macabre" were two words students used to describe these texts. Animals die in both these essays, and in ways that may seem startling or disturbing to readers. (They seemed so to me.) But it had not occurred to me until our discussion got going that so many students would ensconce themselves so rigidly behind their simple, one-sentence reactions--reactions such as "I couldn't get into it, it was so morbid."



The subject of morbidity had not been on my teacher's agenda for our discussion that day, and my own agenda loomed far larger than my students' in my mind. I didn't know what to do with this sudden intruder. Class discussion did not get far that day, and I ended up telling my students collectively, with growing exuberance, that those who disliked Annie Dillard's essays (because they were morbid, or weird, or boring), should feel free to write about these reactions in their essays. "If you don't like 'The Death of a Moth,' write about *that*!" I cried, feeling more and more sure of myself, and feeling sure that the surprise I read on several students' faces was proof of my own liberality and effectiveness and kindness as an instructor.

The goals I embraced this first term of teaching, for myself and my students, were unarticulated and hazy. As a beginning instructor, though, I housed one definite and determined motivator--that of wanting to validate my students' readings and ideas, to foster, as I saw it, their independent authority. It was terribly important to me that my students felt that their readings of texts, no matter how casual or emphatic, mattered to me, and should matter to the rest of the class, as I assumed these readings mattered to the students who voiced them. And so I never, or only rarely, spoke a challenging word as a teacher. I questioned, timidly, sometimes, but never interrogated. Students' authority, I subconsciously felt, grew through my encouragement of their readings of and responses to texts. And I believed that to be effective, this encouragement must be undiluted and free-flowing and endlessly impartial. Only thus, I felt, could I set in motion the words I had glitteringly scattered about my students in an earlier class session: "You are

all authors!" I intended for each of my students to feel herself or himself a writer, an author--or at least to feel, as readers, full of authority.

But I was unable to help my students to see, or even really to see myself, why their responses of "It was so morbid," "It was macabre," and so on were acceptable reactions yet unexamined ones. I knew these were not careful responses, but I knew, too, that they were first reactions, and impromptu; they were in this sense legitimate, and could become more important if they enabled students to learn more about themselves, their own identities as readers in Annie Dillard's perhaps depressing or upsetting environment. But these ideas were not then well formulated in my mind. My students' responses were important to me then essentially because they were my students'--and all students' readings must be validated. It did not occur to me to ask my students to begin to consider *why* they were responding the way they were to the description of a burning moth in "The Death of a Moth." I had a vague understanding of the importance of such questioning but had never articulated it. I hoped, I suppose, that students would think of such questions themselves, in the process of writing their essays. But their essays in many cases were as self-curtailing and dismissive as their spoken comments had been.

Perhaps these readings which changed little from the time they were first put in words to their written and handed-in forms showed that my students did feel themselves full of authority--at least in our class--as readers and writers. But if it was authority, it was not the kind I could expect them to feel proud of, or could feel proud of myself for having made room for. The issue of authority is most deeply and complexly relevant here, I believe, beneath my own unwillingness to actively

and persistently question my students' blunt, dismissive readings of texts. When I write of how I first regarded students' responses to Annie Dillard's texts as "intruders," and of my own expectations about what would be on our class agenda for that day, I imply that an absence of authority I feared was my own absence of authority, as a teacher. Connected closely to this is a fear I must have had about the waning authority of Annie Dillard (the brilliant published author), and the authority of her text, in view of many students' dismay or absence of interest in their reading. I had come into class on that first day of our discussion having carefully read Annie Dillard's essays and having developed a handful of what I thought of as important points--the points that Annie Dillard, I believed, wanted her readers to know. I hoped to help my students to see what I saw, to help them feel knowing, authoritative, as I did. But when the current of our discussion was so suddenly and strongly carried by many of my students, I quickly allowed myself to be swept along with them. It was more important to me to let students know (or believe) that their early readings were valid and complete than it was to continue to try to instill in them my own, "more proper," reading of the two essays. I regretted not having had a chance to enable students to read these texts in the "right" or "best" or "most academic" way; I wanted them to feel the authority that I saw as ensuing from having, as I saw it, mastered a text. And although it seems a contradiction, I also wanted my students' own readings, even if flippant, to be validated. But these ghosts of mastery and authority which inhabited and so influenced me in my first term of teaching were in many ways, for both my students and myself, misleading and harmful. Neither in my desire to equip students with a single reading of a text, nor in my extreme preoccupation with the

need to validate and praise every student's response to a text, was I really fostering my students' authority and autonomy as readers.

I have only recently become aware, I think, that certain kinds of authority can be delegated, created--that an instructor, and the text she is using in her reading and writing course, does not naturally have the answers in terms of absolute and final meaning--and that she need not strive for such answers, for they are simply not there. In reading the work of several composition specialists who teach as well as write, and whose work is guided by the awareness that reading and writing are processes which are inseparable from one another, it has struck me how, as teachers of introductory college reading and writing courses, we can keep ancient and patriarchal values intact even as we tell ourselves that we are challenging them. My acceptance of my students' agenda might seem a diluting of some of my own, teacherly, and Dillard's authorly, power. My collusion suggests, perhaps, that Annie Dillard's organization of ideas may not be the best way, and that I have not mastered her text although I am "teaching" it. But what I see my acceptance now as more genuinely engendering was a bland acceptance, in both myself and my students, of brief responses which, if unresponded to, lead not toward a reader's awareness of her choices and assumptions and identities as a reader, but toward an absence of involvement as a reader, toward complacency.

In the nearly two years that have passed since I taught this first Writing 121 course, I think I have developed a broader understanding of the issues of mastery and authority in readers and writers which this incident brought to view. Although the reading and writing course I taught most recently--this past spring--shows more clearly, in its purpose and structure, my growing awareness of these reader-

related issues, I still have a sense of ambivalence about withdrawing from some more traditional concepts of authority as a teacher and reader. Presently, I will discuss the course I taught this spring and the role of specific pedagogical ideas in its conception and conduct. But before this, I would like to briefly describe two paradigms of reading and authority which underlie much of what I emphasize throughout this paper.

My present reading and teaching are influenced by my awareness of the first of these paradigms, a reader-response model of critical reading, which, as Ross C. Murfin writes, raises

theoretical questions about whether our responses to a work are the same as its meanings, whether a work can have as many meanings as we have responses to it, and whether some responses are more valid than...others. (252)

Reader-response theorists challenge the concept of an objective text. In the reader-response view, a text "cannot be understood apart from its results," as Jane P. Tompkins writes. How a text affects us as readers is essential in describing the meaning of this text, for this meaning, Tompkins goes on to explain, "has no effective existence outside of its realization in the mind of a reader" (ix). Two years ago I had come across these ideas in my reading and in my own experiences as a student. But I had not really begun to process them, to teach as though I believed in them. My uncertainties about my role as an instructor, particularly my strong desire to seem a warm and kind teacher, was one barrier to this deeper awareness. I realized that by accepting my students' curt responses I would never make an enemy of a student. I was wary (and often still am) of appearing to denigrate a

student's opinion and thereby hurting her feelings and perhaps arousing, both in the student and in the classroom, a palpable mood of apathy or even anger.

At the same time, I was still heavily influenced as a teacher and reader by an older paradigm of reading. Traditionally, students--and their teachers--have learned in reading and writing courses that reading texts should involve mostly mute or restrained admiration of what the author has written. "Yes, that was very well said," David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky paraphrase such responses (p. 6) in the introduction to their anthology Ways of Reading. In addition, traditional approaches to reading have encouraged readers to approach texts primarily in terms of "finding information or locating an author's purpose or identifying main ideas" (Ways of Reading, 1)--to the exclusion of our, as readers, making our own marks on texts as they make their marks on us. In the older model, readers are incapable of making these marks, of interacting with a text, for the simple reason that the text itself is thought to create the right marks, to enclose the right meanings--or the one right meaning. Bartholomae and Petrosky, on the other hand, write about pedagogies of reading and writing with the understanding that readers make and write meaning just as authors do.

These two paradigms of reading make different assumptions about the authority of readers and of texts. The older model of reading as text-based implies that texts and their authors wield authority over all readers--student readers in particular. If meaning is "in" a text, made "by" and author, it should not be misinterpreted and cannot reasonably be contradicted. In the newer model of reading--an expansion of reader-response theories of critical reading and writing--readers can reclaim their authority in their ability to interact with a text, in

making strong meanings in response to what are, in the words of Kathleen McCormick, Gary Waller, and Linda Flower, chiefly "clues and perspectives": "...it is always you, the reader, not the author, and not the author's original audience, who formulates that meaning, who decides what perspective to adopt" (23).

The ideas of these and other teachers/theorists reveal that the purpose of assigning difficult and complex texts is not so that students will learn to locate meaning in an all-knowing text, or to remember key events or to explicate or unearth symbolism or simply stand back from the book or essay or poem in helpless awe. (Nor must these students' instructors think of themselves as reading for such purposes.) Such theorists' essential goal is instead for all readers to find in ourselves the authority to look beyond "author's purpose" to "readers' purpose"--toward acceptance of our natural feelings of disjointment or confusion in our reading of texts, toward learning about our own ways of seeing the world as we begin to assimilate those of the writers and characters we are growing aware of. In this newer view, we as readers should be helped to see ourselves as moving toward the authority that can come with making meaning of a text in a way that is true to and yet critical toward what we believe about ourselves and the world--rather than toward the false authority with which we may say, with suppressed uncertainty, "I know this is what the author is saying."

These newer perspectives have helped me to clarify how reading and writing together can help to foster authority and identity. Yet I have encountered difficulties when I have tried to make my every move as a teacher and reader fit neatly within these views. I have, as this paper reveals, a continuing awareness that it is impossible to lightly set aside such deeply-set assertions as "the author

has the right meaning" and "the primary duty of the reader is to find and properly interpret (with a confident, masterful air) this meaning." I have learned in writing and teaching, and from my own experience as a student, that finding a writer's main idea is not a negligible activity and is sometimes a pivotal one for readers, that too little attention to "author's purposes" may engender too-casual attention and inconsequentiality. I am aware now that all readings of a text contain in them the beginnings of readers' and writers' authority; even brief or vague or still-internal responses contain the origins of active meaning-making activity. Yet I do still sometimes sense, in my own reading, that the process I am actively involved in is not meaning-making but meaning-seeking. And I think this inability to let go entirely of older concepts of reading is at times reflected in my teaching. My ambivalence in these areas, however, accompanies rather than overshadows my basic goal in this paper of exploring and suggesting ways of re-seeing traditional (yet still very much alive) ways of reading and writing texts which imply that all readers--students in introductory reading/writing courses and their instructors --"find" the "right" meanings in a text. Such a faith in right meanings often underlies a misleading assuredness of approach and voice in readers' rewriting of texts. I often sense, in reading some of my students' writing and in listening to them as they speak about what they have written, elements of what Sheree L. Meyer terms, insightfully and troublingly, the "Imposter Phenomenon":

The argument mode makes not only a pretense (a before-knowing) of authority but also a pretense of equality, objectivity, and universality. These pretenses contribute to the "experience of dishonesty," which is the Imposter Phenomenon. Instead we need to encourage students to pay attention to their differences and to give voice(s) to them. (57)



Such ways of reading imply that readers should become successful imposters communicating the idea (if we are to go further than bland appreciation of a writer's originality and technique) that we have mastered a text. A classroom is already an artificial environment for learning; it does not need to be made more so by our continuing to encourage in our students and ourselves the belief that meanings lie rigid in texts, to be unearthed only by an authoritative, privileged few. To foster readers' authority is, in broad terms, to encourage readers' openmindedness and self-awareness, to validate questioning over mastery in the texts we read.

Issues of authority (both students' personal empowerment as readers and writers, and the often-unquestioned, institutionalized authority of published texts) shaped my syllabus and emphases in the reading and writing course I taught this past spring. My students and I read a story or essay each week, and focused much of the week's writing and discussion on our readings of this text. I did not emphasize the differences between essays and stories--although sometimes I felt the pull of the traditional distinction--because their differences seem in general overemphasized and misleading; nonfiction so often has fictional qualities, and fictional writing which is persuasive will seem in one way or another real. Students created a draft--a one to two-page reading of some aspect of a text--each week, and revised two of these drafts, of their own choice, into longer, stronger readings. They also gave briefer, more "free" readings of poems and other shorter texts I brought to class.

I saw my spring term course, and spoke of it with my students, as a reading and writing course. It is usual to regard Writing 121 as having an emphasis on writing rather than reading, as being "freshman composition"--something quite different from introductory "literature" courses. But in the past few years I have become less convinced of the rigidity of this distinction. My coming to believe that "Literature" and "Composition" are complementary, even one and the same, began in an undergraduate course I took in tutoring and teaching writing and reading; and my security in this belief has grown steadily, just as has my awareness that all readers make meaning of the texts they read. In my teaching of Writing 121 at Oregon State I have moved gradually, and with a strong sense of its being in my teaching an inevitable and necessary progression, from spending little class time with students in discussion of stories and essays that would traditionally be called "literature," to spending a great deal of time in this process. It no longer seems crucial to me, as it did several terms ago, that my students read and discuss *primarily* the texts (essays, and so on) of other students. My essential goal for my students and myself as readers and writers is to actively and creatively engage with *all* texts. I encourage students to respond to other students' texts as critical readers, and I often read these texts (especially freer readings) aloud, usually pausing for discussion between them. In my present view, a students' reading/writing is a text, like any other, of which to make critical, reflexive meaning. Students' writing, like my own and everyone's, begins in reading what is around us--the draft we wrote last night or a poem or a classmate's essay or a short story or a recent or long-ago experience. We read far more than printed matter--

and students' reading in a "composition" course can embrace much more than "student themes."

Jane P. Tompkins explains how recent models of reading--reader-response models and the closely related models described by Bartholomae and Petrosky and McCormick, Waller, and Flower--blur the distinction between reading and writing. She writes of newer ways of reading and responding as yielding "a way of conceiving texts and readers that reorganizes the distinctions between them. Reading and writing join hands, change places, and finally become distinguishable only as two names for the same activity" (x). The implication here is that readers, in having the authority to make meanings and trust in and attentively examine these meanings, also gain authority as writers.

My present understanding of my own and my students' roles as readers and writers in the class I most recently taught concurs with and complements David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky's rationale as editors of an anthology for writers:

To take command of complex material like the essays and stories in this book, you need not subordinate yourself to experts; you can assume the authority to provide such a reading on your own. This means you must allow yourself a certain tentativeness and recognize your limits....You can speak with authority while still acknowledging that complex issues *are* complex. (10)

The authority I think of my students and myself as striving toward demands an ability to reread our early and hasty readings more tentatively and questioningly than before. Recognizing our--and authors'--limits as problem-solvers does not

preclude our ability, as readers and writers, to make complex meanings from complex texts, and to articulate these meanings with sincerity.

Mariolina Salvatori has written insightfully about the issue of students' authority as writers and readers in introductory college reading and writing courses, and I have incorporated many of her insights into my teaching. In "The Dialogical Nature of Basic Reading and Writing," she suggests that our willingness as teachers to listen to and value students' early, perhaps hasty readings of texts is empowering for students only if we and our students perceive these responses as not simply "opinions," or "openings for discussion," but as sketchings of a student's stance, her present identity, how she thinks about herself and others, within the classroom and beyond it. Salvatori writes of students' responses to Maya Angelou's novel I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings--responses such as "I could not read it because it was boring," and "I could not relate to it" (151):

The class will be happy to take these various statements as expressions of "different people's opinions" and to leave them at that. To accept this is to encourage students' *automatism* as thinkers, not their *autonomy*. It makes dialogue impossible and turns the class into a place where each individual speaks his or her piece, in a single statement, and then lapses into silence; it makes students miss the opportunity to discover the extent to which prejudgments may preclude understanding, unexamined foreknowledge can preclude further knowledge. (152)

When my own students have indicated, in their freewrites or in our class discussions, that the text they have read for that day is something they have not been able to relate to, I think I have often been too ready--as ready, perhaps, as many of the students themselves--to accept these responses as complete and

satisfactory, "to leave them at that." My teaching, and my reading of more recent pedagogical studies and theory, has brought me to a firmer awareness of the importance of fostering a classroom atmosphere which is not merely "comfortable," in which students feel not only that articulating their responses to reading is "safe," but sense, too, that their responses, if they are sincerely felt, are the threshold for critical self-exploration which can and should continue in their reading of texts beyond Annie Dillard and "English." Yet I cannot help continuing in my teaching to be nervous about relinquishing the seeming stability of class discussions in which each student speaks his or her "brief piece" and sits back in silence, unresponded-to, unchallenged--most of all by himself. My sense of comfort partly stems, I realize, from the imagined autonomy--but actual automatism, as Salvatori points out--which I sometimes still find myself encouraging in my students.

Salvatori describes in her article examples of her students' readings of texts which began not as questioning, reflective, strong readings, but rather, as brief and sometimes frustrated responses. One student, for example, listed in a class discussion of Angelou's I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings reasons for why he felt the book was not "good" (Salvatori wrote his ideas--and similar ideas of other students--on the blackboard):

There were "interesting parts followed by flat ones"; certain chapters just did not seem "to belong..."; he was confused by the "many places where Maya had lived";...he couldn't make out the connections between Maya's rape...her search for a job, *and* her pregnancy. (155)

The class discussion that day gradually grew to center on Maya's experience of the rape; after the discussion, Doug, the student who had found Angelou's novel so

confusing and fragmentary, revised his journal entry to focus on the rape as an important reason for the confusion in Maya's life--as well as, along with the many events surrounding the rape or ensuing from it, a reason for Maya's maturing, as Doug wrote in his journal, "faster than any of her schoolmates" (156). As Mariolina Salvatori notes, Doug has come in his revised reading to reinterpret "the confusion he experienced as he read Angelou's text--not as a threat to his competence as a reader but as a challenge" (156). He has, I believe, come to realize that texts, like teachers, do not secretly and smugly enclose "right answers." Doug has perhaps also come to realize, as I have, that our acceptance as readers of our own confusion, together with active examination of this confusion, can move us toward our authority as readers. In Salvatori's example, Doug, in his growing realization that Maya's life in the novel is confusing to Maya herself as well as to a reader of her experience, has gained a new and valuable perspective on his own confusion in his reading. His revised reading of many of the events and descriptions in the novel has helped him to begin to realize that the events and descriptions in books and other texts are not always so different from the things we experience in life in their disparateness, in seeming not always to make sense--or in their not making sense at all.

As a teacher, I hope to encourage students to build meanings from what can all too easily seem (and perhaps sometimes is) an assortment of fragmented occurrences. It is important to me, then, to be able to listen to my students without misgivings about the loss of my own "set" plan. I would like to elicit my students' ideas so what they are saying can be seen, so that we--all readers in the room--can ask questions about our responses. Such processes can enable us in

our reading and writing--without feeling we are revealing what may seem an inability to master the text, to "get" the author's "meaning"--to reflect deeply on the selves we have brought to our reading, the selves that we encounter there, and those that we are, in our reading, becoming.

In "Modeling a Writer's Identity: Reading and Imitation in the Writing Classroom," Robert Brooke further explores these questions of authority by emphasizing the important role which students' identities play in a reading and writing course. "[F]or it is in a writer's *stance* towards experience that written language, both writing and reading, moves from being just a 'skill' to being a way of acting in the world" (38). I understand Brooke's article to suggest that ways of presenting reading and writing which encourage students to explore their identities as readers and writers may encourage students at the same time to move beyond feeling that they have nothing more to say about their reading of a text once they have spoken or written their brief piece. If as teachers we think it is important to encourage not "students' *automatism* as thinkers, [but] their *autonomy*," as Mariolina Salvatori has written, then we are also encouraging them, in the term Robert Brooke has chosen, to have a stance (or, as Brooke should mention, stances) in relation to what they are reading, and to know something about their identity as readers and writers and people which helps form this stance. Brooke suggests that the kind of modeling that should take place in a reading and writing course is not the often-discussed, conscious modeling of authors' styles, forms, etc., but of writers' projected identities. Students' already-present and forming identities may not radically change as a result of their becoming aware of the kinds of identities which they understand their authors as

having. But importantly, students can learn about themselves in considering how the perspectives and personas of other writers differ from their own--and in considering why all of us read the way we do.

Robert Brooke's descriptions of Clare, a student in an introductory reading and writing course who has written an essay after reading Margaret Laurence's A Bird in the House, show that Clare's understanding of her own present identity as a reader is in many ways a stifling one. Clare's response when asked to make connections between parts of the course she has been in--between the reading and writing that she has been involved in, for example--makes me want to step in and set her free, somehow--yet I have felt the same mechanical, in-a-vacuum feeling as an English student that I read in her description:

I never really think, I mean, is it supposed to tie together, I mean, I thought it was just part of the (laughs) English course. I mean, you write papers you read books, and now we're ending them up and getting it all finished, you know, it's the end of the semester. (35)

Clare's instructor, Janet, has written in response to the young woman's essay, "do you realize how much like A Bird in the House this is?" (350). Clare cannot feel there is a connection, Robert Brooke finds, not only because her subject is quite different from Margaret Laurence's, but also because "she says she's only read literature for 'symbolism' in the past, and is highly aware that she didn't use symbolism and real writers do (thus, she can't be like Laurence)" (36). Clare's identity seems to be of a student who reads and writes as she is expected to do in an English class--and yet whose writing and ideas cannot be compared to, or even



spoken of in the same breath as, those of the towering Respected Author. Because Janet has not asked her students to explicate the symbolism in the book but has instead given a more open assignment, Clare has written about experiences she sees not only as far removed from Margaret Laurence's but also as inherently less important, and distant from what English courses usually ask from students. Clare cannot understand how writing "personal stuff" will help her in her other classes.

As Robert Brooke writes, she

has a strong image of a writer as someone who succeeds in English classes, writing formal papers and explicating the symbolism of literary works. She thus experiences Janet's course as an enjoyable break from such real work, but a break that is finally not worth her time. (36)

If Clare has a strong sense of herself as a certain kind of reader and writer, her self-understanding is one, nonetheless, that is curtailing her sense of her own authority as a reader. Vanessa, the protagonist in Margaret Laurence's novel, comes to understand herself as "a person who uses writing to explore, present, and hopefully understand the complexity of life around her" (27). From Clare's responses to Brooke's questions about her experience in Janet's reading and writing course, it is clear that this student's present sense of herself as a reader and writer is far different from that of Laurence's character. Glimpsing Vanessa's identity--an identity which is still unfamiliar to her--is essential in Clare's developing an ability to read her own and others' experience strongly and with authority. It is an identity unfamiliar to many of our students--who have often learned to perceive their own existence in reading and writing courses as obligatory, forced opportunities to produce volumes of "pseudononliterature," as

Nancy Comley and Robert Scholes term our students' essays so startlingly--to pretend for several weeks that they are members of an elite group of people who interpret correctly and explicate correctly.

I sense that many of my students think of themselves in Writing 121 as Clare does: "I mean you write papers you read books, and now we're ending them up and getting it all finished...." In any course, but in a required course especially, students almost inevitably feel that they are there to fulfill a certain number of assignments and to receive a certain grade. During spring term I held two sets of half-hour conferences with my students. Near the end of each meeting, when I asked students if they had anything else they wanted to talk about, many asked me how long the first of their two longer, more polished essays had to be (I had been over this so often!). One woman told me that she "needed an A"--and I could sense my officemate Tamara stiffening and disappointment flooded me: needing an A sometimes seems--although of course it is not--a phenomenon unique to introductory reading and writing classes. If students come into our courses feeling that they will write papers and read books, but not develop an ability to allow for different readings of a text nor develop firm but not overconfident or oversimplifying, "masterful" personas, what should we do to change this? What should we do to bring readers to the awareness that in reading and writing courses they are not just creating papers with an argumentative cast or which create or explicate heady symbolism, but creating, in a way, themselves--a person they can also be (responsive, questioning, and so on), with variations, in other courses? What are ways in which we can begin to convince students, as I want so much to convince Clare, that the kind of reading and responding which takes place in a

class like Writing 121 can benefit them not just as students needing to make an A in a class, but also as people needing to make meanings of a world?

Mariolina Salvatori emphasizes, in "Reading and Writing a Text: Correlations between Reading and Writing Patterns," the difficulty of fostering this conviction:

The reading of elaborate texts remains the province of knowledgeable critics whose expertise inexperienced students can only vaguely imitate through the memorization of an empty literary nomenclature, achieving at best knowledge *about* rather than *through* literature. (658)

Arriving at a better understanding of themselves and their world through the reading of texts is a means by which students can achieve authority as readers and writers. Clare comes to class firmly and understandably locked up in one especially common and injurious concept of what a good writer and reader is, a "good English student;" she leaves the class, possibly, with the beginnings of an ability to question this idea. But I fear that for many of my students, and for myself, especially when I am writing an "English paper" (especially for an instructor I perceive as having many traditional or conservative views), the questioning may never become bold or house a sense of purpose. I wonder if, for myself and many of my students, writing essays in reading and writing classes will always feel a little like setting ourselves up as interpreters who show we know what the author knows, and need merely rephrase it in our own words. (Is the "simple summarizing" so many instructors swoop down upon with red-penned claws in some sense the "right answer" they are unconsciously calling for?) Has our training has been this thorough?

What seems the exhaustiveness of our training--to properly interpret, to consume rather than produce literature, since producing it is thought of as beyond us--is described by Nancy R. Comley and Robert Scholes in their well-known article "Literature, Composition, and the Structure of English." In suggesting ways of enabling students to acquire authority and a freeing sense of identity, they describe what is often termed a prose/poetry models approach. Comley and Scholes explain that a strong poetry model, one which can engender strongly-voiced student writing, is a "short, accessible modern poem" (102), such as a poem by Gwendolyn Brooks. They write of using Brooks's poem, "We Real Cool," and others in their reading and writing courses in the spirit of taking away the texts' "privileges as sacred literary objects to be interpreted" (103). It is important to me that Comley and Scholes, like Salvatori and Brooke, bring into their article real students' voices, speaking both through and about their writing. What concerns me about their essay--more so every time I read it--is a result of what seems to be their eagerness to show that, despite the magnitude and multifacetedness of the problem they describe, specific things *can* be done to help our students to become more honest and autonomous readers and writers. In their (understandable) haste to show that there are solutions, they seem to abandon the idea, which the earlier part of their article implies so strongly, that any published text represents some form of institutional and social power. Even if students are not asked to acceptably interpret these poems--to locate in them metaphor and simile and symbols--the privileges of these texts, simply by reason of their being by an established author whose form students will imitate, are intact.

Perhaps our use of a more modern and accessible poem, like Brooks's, could be used not only as Comley and Scholes suggest, but also as a means for us as teachers to encourage our students' self-conscious and critical *readings* of this text. Perhaps such an approach would foster their authority as readers more, in some sense, than writing another poem in the same form or rhythm as the original (which no one--perhaps least of all the student--can help comparing to this published original). Where is the difference, in terms of students' authority, between "sacred literary objects to be interpreted" and sacred literary objects to be copied? Using prose and poetry models in introductory reading and writing courses may, then, more deeply ingrain the academic assumption that published texts, since they are themselves "masterful," can be only interpreted with misleading authority ("the author's meaning is--" and its variants), or be "practiced," lightly, perhaps unpersuasively imitated by ourselves and our students.

Several often-cited articles, such as Comley and Scholes' essay and J. Hillis Miller's "Composition and Decomposition," indicate that models approaches are widely used in reading and writing classes. I know that in the reading and writing courses I have taught in the past two years, the texts my students read could be seen as implicit models for the writing they do. I do believe that our reading of strong and complex texts can strengthen our abilities to read and write strongly. But I think I am guilty, sometimes, of vaguely imagining that my students' readings of texts will somehow take on the texture of the original I so admire--and of not reflecting deeply on the meaning of such a transferring, on how it is to take place, and on whether it truly should. I tend to distinguish between reading/writing approaches such as Comley and Scholes' and what takes place in my own courses

by criticizing their more clear-cut modeling as "only imitation." But I am beginning to wonder if, between these authors' more definite kind of modeling and what I see as my own more nebulous kind, their attempt to foster readers' authority is more forthright or honest. Perhaps Comley and Scholes' approach implies more forcibly than mine that certain forms, such as the modern poem, *can* be claimed by *all* writers, not just by "authorities" such as Brooks.

Robert Brooke suggests that one way to strengthen voice and self-awareness in students' readings is to present as models authors' identities, rather than the form or style of their written work. In one example, he describes such a model as "a kind of intrepid explorer of the self, requiring as much stamina and bravery as would explorers of any other unknown regions" (27). Yet Brooke's modeling cannot--as is true for all models approaches--be free from assumptions about institutionalized authority. In Janet's (the instructor whose students and approach Brooke focuses on) course, Margaret Laurence is still, implicitly, the Great Author, whose symbolism Clare feels impressed and outclassed by, and whose self-understanding will perhaps necessarily seem clearer and better than her readers'. This author's identity as an honest and profound explorer of herself is one we may see our students--and they may see themselves--as only groping for.

I am finding it hard to determine, then, if models--conscious or less conscious--do more setting in motion of students' authority and autonomy as readers, or if they do more entrenching of cultural assumptions about power and students' place in the academy. But in a recent edition of College Composition and Communication, I came across an article which suggested to me that the *spirit* in which these models are presented to readers could strongly affect how confident

they will feel of retaining their *own* styles, voices, ideas in the light of those of the author whose work they are reading. Ann Loux, in "Using Imitations in Literature Classes," writes: "When they look closely enough at a model, students give over their admiration. When they try it themselves, they learn that after all it was far from simple. They retract their first impression--aw, anyone could do that" (466). Although such a first impression is one I am acquainted with and troubled by as a teacher, it seems less debilitating for the student than the opposite reaction (which Loux seems to prefer)--almost no one can do that, so how could I? She notes, "I suspect that many students are developmentally incapable of writing anything terribly original on their own. Neither, frankly, are many of their teachers" (466). It is hard for me to see the value in presenting models--of poetry or prose or writers' identities--to students in the spirit, which I think Loux suggests we muster, of "here is something original...do you see the effort it took to produce this?...now you try." Loux recommends that instructors write "imitations" along with their students; I believe, as she seems to, that doing as many of the assignments we give our students as possible can be empowering to students simply in giving instructors much-needed glimpses into the kinds of dilemmas our students are struggling with. And her presentation of her own poem, "taken more or less from Yeats' 'Prayer for my Daughter,'" alongside those of some of her students, is moving. But her description of these assignments, in her article and presumably with her students, seems lifeless somehow:

When we study Emily Dickinson, I shuffle a Dickinson original with four imitations and ask the students to choose the original. They always win that game. Then they must explain, in writing, what Dickinson does that the imitations could not, or tell how they recognized the original. (467)

Loux states, "...that the imitations could not...." Is this firm attachment to, and seeming preference for, texts which are old, bound, revered, motivating instructors' use of reading models in their classrooms? And is every instructor's destiny as a teacher of reading and writing to become as pessimistic about her own and her students' strivings toward self-expresssion as I sense Loux to be? It is clear to me that we must not present our assignments in such a way that they stifle--or presume an absence of--students' creativity, ambition, authority, as readers and writers, before these qualities are given opportunities to emerge and grow.

Although I find myself with a fairly settled sense of how models might best be presented to students, the larger issue of readers' authority, and my concern for texts as complex products, still envelop me. In my eagerness to assume that readers' authority and strong, readerly identities will blossom if allowed and encouraged to do so, and in my continuing hope of validating students' readings of texts, I think I sometimes still foster a misleading authority--as I nearly always did in my first term of teaching. If my emphasis and most of my energy as a reader/writer and teacher is focused on the importance of readers' having the self-assurance and authority to make meaning from a text without writing in fear of "missing the point," might not simple carelessness--giving only casual attention to the text of our own and other writers' experience--ensue? And when is what I or others in a position of authority may perceive as too-casual really a stroke of sincerity, a strength? Sheree L. Meyer writes of her struggle in writing her doctoral dissertation, "I needed to construct a 'voice' in which to assert my own still fragile authority, but I wanted that voice to be different from the one I had so



frequently encountered in literary criticism" (53). But how different may a voice be before it is too "personal," ruminative? In writing this paper, I am struggling with questions similar to Meyer's. The very word "thesis" is discomfiting to me, causing me to feel that I am straying from whatever focus I began with, and am being far too open-ended and unassertive. The pull of the traditional main idea, like the assumption that a text encloses one right meaning, is still strong in me. And I think that sometimes in my teaching I overcompensate for the rigidity of this concept by presenting the idea of a required thesis statement as unnecessarily confining. Such an emphasis may sometimes in the courses I have taught have engendered readings of texts which seemed to lack a firm sense of either the writer's identity or his audience. Ideas in such readings are dropped in as they come to the writer, are left as they lie and enlivened by casualness that can be jarring: "Like Russell Baker, maybe I wasn't that great a student, but hey, I graduated." Such an off-handed, truncated reading of one's experience, if not challenged or questioned, diminishes a reader's self-awareness and his authority.

In teaching reading and writing I often spend the third or fourth day of class talking with my students about ideas they have come across or been taught in past reading and writing courses which could be considered rigid and authoritative--often narrowly prescriptive, even if well-intentioned. I am always newly surprised at there being some students in my classes who seem never to have been taught the thesis statement/three body paragraphs/restatement-of-thesis idea, and at there being some students who seem to have been told that it is crucial. This most recent term I endeavored to help my students interact meaningfully--rather than masterfully--with texts by asking them to formulate "questions at issue" in

response to their reading. Although students in my classes are usually quick to learn that I don't require them to have explicit thesis statements in their essays, many of their one to two-page draft readings of texts they had read early in spring term had an air of super-sureness, sometimes even of argumentativeness, that made me uneasy. A number of students quickly noticed what I had not fully realized when I made up my syllabus for the term: that in asking them to form this question at issue--or to begin forming one--each week after we have discussed our early readings of the text at hand, I may also be implicitly asking them to "find something wrong"--something they don't like or which bothers them--in the text. I try to slip past this negative definition of a question in suggesting to students that their question need not be one they have of the writer (need not, in simpler words, be a challenge, a complaint), but may also be a question they see as being suggested by the writer--implied in his or her text--but perhaps not fully explained or for which answers are only implied.

But this "other" meaning of a question at issue seems a tenuous one; it is hard for me to explain or to give ready examples of it, examples which reveal it as noticeably different from the "first" definition. The two inevitably mist together in my mind (as perhaps they are meant to) and possibly in my students' as well. Not long ago I spent a week in conference with my students; we looked at their draft readings of a chapter from Annie Dillard's An American Childhood and Russell Baker's "The Cruellest Month." They wrote, and shared with their classmates, their readings of both, and then handed me the one they felt they wanted to work with--to use as a place to begin a longer and more careful and more involved essay. I remember how full I felt, at the end of a day of conferences, of my students'

writing--drafts which took issue with Annie Dillard's "jumping around" in her narrative (I mentioned her fragmentary style in class as something interesting; later it seemed as if some students would not let themselves get beyond it), and which, sometimes almost angrily, censured Baker for "making excuses" for his difficulties in high-school physics. I sensed Sheree L. Meyer's "Imposter Phenomenon" at work in my students' readings of texts and in their defenses of what they had written. My students were demonstrating their understanding of the traditional academic belief that readers, if we are to do more than simply admire a text, should in effect become imposters in our readings, suggesting with a declarative, knowing voice that we have mastered a text. But mastery, as I have come in my two years of teaching to realize, is not authority. By encouraging my students to find questions-at-issue in their readings of texts--to *take* issue with these texts--I may have unintentionally endorsed this argument mode, which, in Meyer's terms, makes a pretense of authority.

In his essay "The Question of Writing: The Wars in My Head," Peter Elbow suggests a way of emphasizing the importance of real authority based on honesty rather of pretended authority or mastery. He maintains that teachers of reading and writing should be as open and sharing about their reading processes--and about how they can change their minds and become confused in reading as often as they do in their writing--as they are in talking about the writing they are working on. This, then, might be a way to communicate to students the idea that just as writers do not necessarily intend readers to unearth one interpretation or uncover/create startling and heavy symbolism in the things they have written, instructors also do not automatically form a thesis-like, unassailable response to

the text they and their students are reading, and that such Interpretation-with-a-capital-"I" is not--or should not be--the goal of any teacher. Peter Elbow remarks that tradition teaches instructors "that it would be wrong to teach a class on a text that they have not carefully studied beforehand" (132). Traditionally, texts are seen as enclosing answers and meaning; instructors in the traditional view must pore over these texts until they have "found" this meaning and can carry it to class with them. In moving beyond this view, Elbow describes an approach used by Elizabeth Wallace of Western Oregon State University, who reports that in teaching texts she has "just managed to read for the first time the previous day...those are usually the best classes. The students see all kinds of things I didn't see, and they see me learning from them and see the delight it gives me" (132).

I am experiencing a great deal of inner conflict as I transfer Elbow's and Wallace's words to my page--I think because of the very tradition, the "literary" tradition, Elbow describes. It is difficult but possible--although I am not sure it becomes easier--for me to share my freewriting or other writing in progress with my students. (I cannot for a moment seriously think of showing them even part of a draft of this essay--paradoxically, because it is about all of us.) In teaching Writing 121, I often bring to class brief texts which students and I create swift, free-formed readings of. I sense that sharing my own impromptu writing with my students transfers some of my own authority to my students in suggesting that I am not a "model writer"--or that the writer's identity I am modeling is far from perpetually inspired, a transcriber of lucidity. I let students read my free writings (with their always present, sometimes line-long scratch-outs) though doing so

makes me flush with embarrassment. But divulging the messiness of my reading --my thinking, where no incorrect or unimaginative ideas can be concealed beneath vigorous pencil strokes--such a loss of formal authority is one (though not so different from that of allowing students to read my freewriting) which I still evade.

Sharing what I feel is the plain foolishness of my ways of reading--the things I "don't catch on to," the way passages with many long jargony words or poetic rhythms or even just long sentences so often swim before my eyes, my extreme difficulty with what I think of as "abstract concepts"--the thought of confessing these things fills me with dread. I do not feel a need in my classes to "tell" my students what I think N. Scott Momaday "means" by such a passage as this--

I knew where the journey was begun, that it was itself a learning of the beginning, that the beginning was infinitely worth the learning. The journey was well undertaken, and somewhere in it I sold my horse to an old Spanish man of Vallecitos. (430)

--because I don't know myself what it means, what this "beginning" or "learning" is, or why the narrator, who has seemed so close to and respectful toward his horse, writes so fleetingly, almost impartially, of selling him. Yet the feeling persists that I *should* know what these words mean. Many of my students had questions about this passage in Momaday's essay "My Horse and I" that seemed similar to my own. Yet when I answer their questions with "Yes, I wondered about that too," the fact that I am being genuine can seem far less notable than the impression I feel I am giving everyone of "not knowing my stuff," of having to wait

for a student to respond to these questions with some hint of an answer, with some assurance of idea and tone. Sometimes students do respond in a way that moves our discussions along; sometimes, like Elizabeth Wallace's students, they "see all kinds of things I didn't see." But being shown something in a text I didn't see does not always delight me as it does Wallace. When Jenna, a student in my 7:30 a.m. class, suggested that the journey N. Scott Momaday is writing of in this last paragraph is no longer just a journey of several weeks or months but a life-long journey, I felt startled and upset--almost humiliated. I think my response was less of pleasure than frustration because Jenna's reading seemed so intelligent and appropriate--the literary tradition's "right answer" which still tugs at the hems of my teacher's habit. My deeper feeling is that I should come prepared to know and understand more about the texts we are reading than my students do, or ever will. I ask myself sometimes, isn't this why I am teaching?

David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky explore this issue--that of instructors' authority or perceived authority not just as readers but as teachers--in the early pages of their book Facts, Artifacts and Counterfacts:

It is easier...to say that students, as readers, should be at the center of a course on reading and writing than it is to imagine such a course or to teach one. If, for example, a teacher cannot--or should not--tell students what Mead says in Blackberry Winter (or if she cannot--or should not--tell students whether they have found the "right" meaning), then what does a teacher do and what is it that a teacher teaches? How, for example, does she distinguish between one student reading and another? (13-14)

In spite of my reaction to Jenna's "right answer"--my sudden bridling at her communicating what I felt *I* should be teaching--my students' writing and ideas sometimes affect me in ways that seem reassuringly remote from the sensitive issue of my teacherly authority. Something I have recently come to see myself as conveying to my students, if not explicitly teaching, is a belief in susceptibility. I feel susceptible to the ideas my students write about, if they are new to me (I xerox pages of students' freewriting and send these pages to my friends in Ithaca and Providence; sometimes I regret my zeal later, but at least it can last a few days). I feel susceptible to my students as people--perhaps this is less a good thing--but if a student stays after class to talk about something he has read or to ask how she might write to an author, or if a student comes, unasked, to my office, to talk over a draft of an essay, these students pretty much always have me. The tiniest thing--a lowered eyebrow, a looking out of the window during class discussion, can send me spinning mental tragedies of how these students I have perceived--quite in concealment--as "interesting," are upset by something I have said or some discussion I have generated--or far worse, of how they are bored by it; they no longer "choose me" as Alice Walker speaks of her father's final "choosing" of her (in an essay we recently read), when he put cool leafy compresses to her face when her eye was injured as a child. I know that it is inhibiting, selfish, perhaps wrong, to care so much that my students are as interested in me, and my own writing, as I am in (some of) them and (some of) their writing. I do not think I should be digging through the stacks of midterm portfolios my students have entrusted to me for a week in search of Jordan's response to "My Horse and I," which I never saw and always wanted to, or Huy's in-class writing connected to

something I read aloud in class, during which I saw smiles and shadows flit across his face. But it somehow seems important that although I can be bored or offended or even furious with the absence of caring or vigor or insight or humility in students' readings of texts, I can also be, like Elizabeth Wallace, "delighted," moved, deeply taken.

Bartholomae and Petrosky write of the false authority which a teacher can accrue to himself in expecting and gaining pleasure from "'naive' readings" of a text, "since those readings are the very cues that enable his performance as a teacher" (9). I do not think of myself as an instructor who holds rigidly and proudly to "right answers" in this way; I feel my susceptibility should make me immune to this tendency. Yet I cannot deny my fears about not "having" a text any more securely than my students do, my near-humiliation when Jenna offered a "right-sounding" interpretation in class. Recognizing and valuing susceptibility in myself as a teacher of reading and writing, and in my own reading and writing teachers, does not seem to alter the fact that in my teaching, in my reading of the text of my classroom experience, I continue to be inhabited, if indistinctly, by the demon of mastery. Mastery is what readers, both students and teachers, are taught to strive for; susceptibility is all too often a negative term--it is to be diminished somehow, if not by virus or iniquity, then by speciousness or fancy. As teachers we often learn to feel ill-at-ease and ineffectual if a student shows a flair for something we are less assured in: If we are susceptible to such a student how are we to maintain the paradigm of the teacher (or author) who knows most, and the student who knows but a little? Even as I strongly reject such a model of



instructor and student, it seems difficult, even impossible sometimes, to free myself from all the impulses this rigid and institutionalized authority implies.

In spite of my perceived and valued ability to be caught up in or swayed by many of my students' readings/rewritings of texts, I often sense that--at times despite our conscious intentions--as teachers of reading and writing we are all, to greater or lesser degrees, alongside our students in our expectation that good readings will, somehow, get at an author's meaning. Bartholomae and Petrosky write of students being in an "impossible position" with regard to what academia seems to expect in their readings of texts:

The concern for getting the right meaning, for memory, a concern that dominates our students' sense of the "good" reader, puts our students in an impossible position. The very gap between a text and a reader's version of a text, the gap that makes reading possible, stands for our students as a sign that they cannot read. (17)

Yet I know that it is not simply our students who are caught in the barrenness of what tradition tells us is a "good reading": to find what is important in the text--the main idea--and to remember events and facts clearly and to determine what is symbolic. My continuing to feel persuaded at times by the notion of the one right answer, and the need I sense other readers feeling to find this answer, is a need that societal and academic traditions have created in us. Yet it is a tendency which sometimes seems to me--perhaps this is the danger of all long-standing constructions--almost natural, inevitable. Here is where it gets frightening; it is easy to imagine myself slipping, pale and unnoticeable, as Emily Dickinson's ghost, into a lecture hall where dozens of professors sit gesturing and elucidating

to one another about "I taste a liquor never brewed"--and thinking, startledly, almost in laughter, "That is not what I meant at all." It can seem so indisputable, sometimes, that to approach the authority of the authors whose texts we read, we must as readers think and write as they have.

In describing ways of teaching reading and writing which foster in readers the authority to value our own early readings of texts, to regard these readings as worth exploring, Anthony Petrosky and David Bartholomae write:

For our students, the misses [the usually perjorative "misreadings"] are precisely those misses that matter--those that, because of principles of inclusion and exclusion that go largely unquestioned, deny some students participation in the play of reading that goes on within the boundaries of the academic community. (9)

But I know from teaching that some "misreadings" can seem *misleadings*--stumbling-places for us all when they come up in class discussion, if they aren't dealt with briskly. Several students in my spring term course focused and shaped their ideas around readings that were simply wrong--around the idea, for example, that Alice Walker, in her essay "Beauty: When the Other Dancer is the Self," writes of herself being shot in the chest while pregnant--when Walker writes quite plainly that this happened to someone else. And one man spoke of the shooting of this other woman in almost a foregone way as an event Walker saw as "eliminating the competition" for high school beauty. In neither instance could I remain still: in John's case I simply referred him to the page number of the passage; in Sean's I couldn't keep from saying, like the omniscient teacher (with her omniscient text) I am struggling not to believe in, "I don't think Alice Walker is

implying this, I don't see it suggested anywhere in the text." I have worried about Sean and myself since that day when I spoke so sternly and knowingly. At the time I believed I was fostering Sean's authority as a reader by removing what I saw as an obstacle in his path toward a strong and autonomous reading. But was I only yanking away his authority to think critically and questioningly *himself* about such a rough and early reading? On reflection, my response to Sean's reading may have been as misleading as his early reading itself. My words may suggest that, in my authority as a teacher (the rigid and unquestioned authority implicit in traditional views of academia), I am inevitably much nearer Alice Walker's "answer" than he.

In my family there is a joke about a nameless English student's interpretation of Emily Dickinson's lines--

I never lost as much but twice,  
And that was in the sod.

--as the poet writing about a lost golf ball. I am not sure any longer whether to laugh at this or to squirm. When does a misreading become simply a joke, unimportant, unacceptable? Is there a point at which students' and instructors' misses in their reading of texts no longer matter? I hope to be the kind of reading and writing instructor for whom all readings which are not simply incorrect rememberings of a passage in the text (like interchanging Alice Walker or her narrator with one of her classmates) *can* matter. I hate the idea of myself as "fishing" for an answer. Yet when I balk inwardly at a student's reading as being very simplistic or strange, and I don't sense other listeners and readers in the room resisting this, I often don't know how to *not* say anything. I feel I must try to move

the discussion along paths I see--sometimes quite confidently--as being more interesting.

Peter Elbow seems to suggest that *all* misreadings *must* matter, for they reveal subtleties about our ways of reading and our identities and enable us to view our reading reflexively, to consider why we read the way we do (and not the way a textbook or tradition tells us is most efficient or effective). As he writes in referring to Elizabeth Wallace's practice of not always being intimately familiar with texts before discussing them with her students,

Students and colleagues would benefit enormously from exactly this kind of workshop class where participants reveal early rough readings in process and show how these are adjusted and transformed over time and by means of negotiation through comparison with readings by others. (132)

Elbow's belief in the value of teachers and students alike giving "movies of the reader's mind"--giving an "account of the mental events that go on in one's mind while engaged in creating meaning from a text" (132)--is well known. I have done a variation on this assignment in the reading and writing courses I have most recently taught by asking students, as Mariolina Salvatori asks students in her own syllabus, to take some time immediately after having read a text for the first time and to write down what they remember from their reading--what seems significant to them. Students then write about why they think they are remembering these particular items, about what they feel is the connection to the lives they have brought to their reading. I ask readers to involve themselves in this kind of writing and thinking because I hope that it will encourage them to

value their early readings of texts, not just to assume, as so many readers do, that they are missing the author's meaning. I hope, too, that such writing will enable students to develop and respect their own self-awareness and ability to question in their reading of texts, and displace the voices in them--in all readers--which intone "Mastery." I also hope that their writing down of important, memorable things will help students steer themselves toward their longer (but still free-formed) drafts--toward finding a subject or question for this writing which truly interests them and which they can care about.

But I have seen that the kind of activity in which readers relate memorable places in texts to moments of their own experience does not always promote an ability, in Bartholomae and Petrosky's words, to "speak with authority while still acknowledging that complex issues *are* complex" (Ways of Reading, 10). Jason, a student in my 7:30 spring term class, said in a meeting with me that he not only related to Annie Dillard's description of herself (in the chapter we read from An American Childhood) as a child swayed by books and caught up in her drawing; but that her experience seemed so like his own (he had been discouraged from being a painter and so aimed toward architecture just like Annie) that he felt he had no response but that--"Yes, I've known this too." It is not that Jason's receptive but steadfast and simple response to the chapter, as I perceived his reading, had nothing "to work with" in it, as Jason suggested. But the brief writing assignment I had given him and other students did not help him move his response toward a newer self-understanding and analysis of two identities which cannot simply be mirror images of one another. Jason seemed to be suggesting that he had found in Annie Dillard's chapter a pure reflection of himself, the "answer" to

questions about his own identity as a child which he might otherwise have explored in more detail. His response implies that in his eagerness to relay to readers his ability to see himself in Dillard's character, he had full understanding of or mastery over the texts of both Dillard's experience and his own. Jason did not acquire--and I neglected to encourage--the authority to examine the real differences between these texts.

Sheree L. Meyer describes an assignment, which she calls "Double Trouble," which, like the activity Jason took part in, attempts to foster a creed of self-conscious, self-questioning reading alongside the traditional illusion of mastery and naming the author's meaning. "The purpose here...is not to hunt for evidence to prove a thesis, but to place a smaller element under the microscope, so as to see its features, faults, possibilities, and connections. I wanted to encourage [students] to focus on a concrete detail without the pressure of subjecting that detail to a generalized and abstract thesis" (59). In the assignment, students choose one or two sentences from a text they have been reading (in Meyer's example this is Pygmalion). Students write down their sentences and then fold a piece of paper in half:

On one side, tell me what you think the sentences say. Be declarative, stating your reading as though you're sure of yourself and the author's intentions. Begin your writing with a description of the text and what it "means" or represents. (60)

On the other side of the sheet, students begin their statements with, "But something bothers me":

On this side be hesitant, questioning your assertions and certainties of the "right" side. Think about contradictions, about "what ifs," about what the sentences don't say directly.... Relate what is said to personal experience and to subjective responses. Don't censor the outrageous or the improbable.  
(60)

The questions Meyer asks in "Double Trouble" encourage readers--as does asking ourselves as readers why we make the meanings of texts we do--to discover, in Salvatori's words, "the extent to which prejudgments may preclude understanding" (152). Prejudgments, if unchallenged and unexplored, can lead to subsequent readings of texts which enweb writers and readers in an illusion of mastery--the false assurance of voice and idea which conveys absolute knowledge of a one-dimensional author and a one-dimensional reader. "Double Trouble," too, could carry readers beyond brief, casual readings, beyond an ability or inability to "relate," toward a critical, reflexive, questioning approach to the world of the text and our reading and rewriting of this text.

I realize now that when Jason told me he had nothing, really, to say about the chapter we read from An American Childhood--because he felt he could relate in so many ways to her experiences that he had nothing left to add or inquire about--that I was letting both of us down, finally, by accepting what he told me as factual and final. Mine was a response not all that different, really, from my nodding in sympathy or acceptance at my first class of students' seemingly overwhelming response of distaste to Dillard's "The Death of a Moth" and in simply telling students to write about this response. Instead I might have gotten together with readers as soon as possible, in groups or as a class or one-on-one in conferences, to look intently at their dislike for reading about a moth caught in a

candle-flame, and to wonder if this dislike is deep-seated or casual, and to wonder about whether or not Annie Dillard's projected identity as a calm observer of a startling death is one they could imagine. Jason had in his own way completed the first, declarative, assured half of "Double Trouble;" he could have been helped to move toward the second part, to the stage where he asks questions of his own ability to "relate."

But a student's assuredness in his reading of a text is not inherently in need of revision--this is a certain reservation I have about "Double Trouble" and assignments like it which suggest that we and our students re-view our traditional, undoubting, masterful approaches to the texts we are reading and living. Sometimes I have said outright to students, intending not to haul them back but to set them running, "But your reaction to this story can't be as simple as you're describing it to me or in this writing you've done." When I have challenged students in this way I have once or twice been met with a blank stare, suggesting to me that I have stridden insensitively across the sometimes hazy, sometimes imposing boundary which distinguishes our readings and writing from the ways in which we understand ourselves--our identities. Perhaps the phrasing of what I have blurted to my students is too brusque but I can't shake off the importance of the idea. "Don't let yourself respond so simply," I have sometimes said. "But this is how I feel." "Are you sure that's all there is to your feelings?" "Yes." The couple of times students and I have had this exchange or one like it I have quickly backed off from it and them, feeling like a poor teacher in a terrible dream. I can't tell students--nor should I want to--what they think or feel.



Yet when I back off entirely this way it sometimes seems more for my own sake than my students'; I still do find myself, in my teaching, leaning toward a complete and hurried validation of student readings in the hope that these casual texts will somehow come on their own to question themselves more, pretend authority less. I should instead, I believe, clarify to students that these simple responses *are* valid *beginnings*--and that while most beginnings require examination, some call for less examination than others. Some matters *are* simple; some readings of texts which seem quick and sure may be readings of authority *because* (or in spite) of this sureness and simplicity. A section of the second part of "Double Trouble" which I found myself replacing with ellipses when I quoted this assignment (at first I didn't stop to investigate why) asks students to "explore double meanings"--a suggestion which, viewed alongside encouragement to think about "what the sentences don't say directly," could imply that much of what we and our students are reading *will* have double or "hidden" meanings, or could mean something quite different from what it seems to. We are creating an environment as airless and artificial as one in which only mute approval or triumphant mastery is condoned, when students' readings of texts, if these seem assured and confident, are promptly and carelessly taken as *too* assured, too definitive--wrong. It is unlikely that Sheree L. Meyer means us to conceive of her assignment in this way--of eliminating the "bad, masterful, traditional" response to make way for the "good, unsure, new" one; I believe her assignment is "double" in order to enable our students and ourselves to weigh the qualities of one kind of responding against another, and perhaps gain new awareness of the *importance* of some assurance in our responses to reading--even

if this assurance is of the complex of meanings each reader makes of her or his text.

Recently, a student and I became sure, together, of the complexity suggested by a text, and of the importance of revealing rather than smoothing over this complexity. Brandon, a student in my 11:30 course, was working on a reading of Russell Baker's brief essay "The Cruellest Month;" he wrote about an experience he had as a child in which, in Brandon's words, "a teacher went beyond the poor teaching described in [Baker's] essay to judge and shame her students" (1). We met to discuss the second or third draft of his essay. He had written about his third grade teacher, "Mrs. Curtin," and about himself and his classmates later in life--in high school--but mostly about what he believed was his teacher's divisive and damaging behavior in her classroom. Part of the last paragraph in his draft was this:

If it was bad for Baker, it was worse for us. Reality finished the essay Baker began by presenting the full circle of the experience: Neither Baker not Mrs. Curtin's students were forever damaged by their schooling. (3)

I felt uneasy when I read this section in Brandon's text because he seemed to be making a strong, almost competitive comparison, between Baker's experience, and his own and that of his classmates. (How powerful was this as a central idea? Was this an example of strongly voiced statements which may hide--instead of reveal--inner questions and uncertainty, of the Imposter Phenomenon?) He also seemed to be suggesting that, since "Neither Baker not Mrs. Curtin's students were forever

damaged by their schooling," there might almost be no serious or lasting purpose behind either Baker's essay or his own. (If there was no lasting damage, how can these writers have cared enough about their experiences to write about them? Or can damage only mean something pronounced or physical?) Brandon and I spoke about his last paragraph, and I struggled to articulate what I meant; I had written comments on his paper but was not confident of their preciseness in illuminating what I felt, or of their helpfulness. Brandon listened and looked as though he was trying to understand. Suddenly he said, "You're saying the ending is sort of fishy." "Am I?" "I think so," said Brandon. His term was so surprising that I was concerned for a moment, but then I sat back and laughed because it was such a *good* term. We were discovering and grappling with the Imposter Phenomenon not just as it relates to a writer's voice and tone and approach to his reading of a published text; we were also exploring ideas related to how a writer persuasively--and honestly--describes and classifies the text of his own past and continuing experience. I was having trouble with Brandon's seemingly easy solution to the real damage he describes himself undergoing in a class in which his clothing and parents' income were remarked on and criticized by the teacher--and reconciling this ending with the mostly passionate tone in the essay. I also felt as though he was putting Baker too unthinkingly or neatly into a category, with himself, as "one who has had trouble in school but is OK now." It is important here, though, that Brandon came to feel, and name, the fishiness. He came to sense the presence of complex implications behind the confident facade of meaning which was his draft--and in doing so he acquired a more genuine efficacy and authority as a writer and reader.

In "Reading and Writing a Text: Correlations Between Reading and Writing Patterns," Mariolina Salvatori describes a similar occurrence. She tells of Mary, a student in her Basic Reading and Writing seminar, who writes about a significant event in her life--a time when she, as a lifeguard, saved a child's life. Mary's first draft "merely reproduces a sequence of actions" (662) without making clear their significance. In doing so, her text reveals, as did Brandon's, the Imposter Phenomenon. As Salvatori writes, in "Mary's account of her saving a child, her past is like a 'text' she is skimming through but not interacting with," she "reduces the significance of her experience to the blandness of 'helping someone who needed it,' the satisfaction of a 'job well done'." Mary's voice in her text is never a pointedly masterful or all-knowing voice, as Brandon's also never is. As a reader of Mary's experience, Salvatori is made uncomfortable only by what she perceives as "blandness," a glossing over of gaps and ambiguities in Mary's description of her rescue, and not by any sense of impossibly heroic self-description. Indeed, Salvatori is concerned that Mary is neglecting to examine "the enormous implications of what she has accomplished." Yet there is still an imposterish feeling for Salvatori in reading Mary's text, simply because of what this young woman is leaving out in moving abruptly from her dive into the water to a "job well done." As in Brandon's case, "fishiness," an oversimplifying of implication and an ignoring of the ambiguity that is present in all lives, was detracting from the persuasiveness of Mary's text and from her own authority as a reader and writer.

Like all readers and writers, Brandon and Mary experience conflict in their lives which deserves airing and intent exploration--not a shutting away in traditions of summary statements smoothed to a few words of assurance. Identities

of readers--and of the writers whose texts we are reading at the same time as we read our own pasts--are lost or oversimplified in this academic eagerness to "know the answer," or to confidently, uneasily, pretend that we know it. In my teaching, I feel myself persuaded sometimes by these answers; I still find myself searching for them in my reading as a student and teacher, and when I think I have found them, feel equipped, accomplished. I know that by unconscious nods or smiles in the classroom, by abrupt words and slight shakings of my head, I convey to students my lingering faith in the rigid authority of author's meanings, and suggest or further stress to students that right answers are possible. And I know, too, that published texts are not just bugbears of academic authority, but readings of people seeking to make meaning as all readers do--people who do have, like all writers, goals, main purposes, reasons for persuasion. I believe that our real authority as readers, writers, students, teachers, grows from our honesty--in recognizing, and communicating to one another, that we are not only "writing papers...reading books" in reading and writing courses, but are also becoming more perceptive readers of our own and others' texts, and sharpening and expanding our awareness of problems and relationships.

## Bibliography

Bartholomae, David, and Anthony R. Petrosky. "Facts, Artifacts and Counterfacts: A Basic Reading and Writing Course for the College Curriculum," Facts, Artifacts and Counterfacts: Theory and Method for a Reading and Writing Course. Ed. David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky. Portsmouth, New Hampshire: Boynton/Cook (1986): 3-43.

---

. Ways of Reading: An Anthology for Writers, 2nd ed. Boston, Massachusetts: Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press, 1990.

Brooke, Robert. "Modeling a Writer's Identity: Reading and Imitation in the Writing Classroom." College Composition and Communication 39 (1988): 23-41.

Comley, Nancy R. and Robert Scholes. "Literature, Composition, and the Structure of English." Composition and Literature: Bridging the Gap. Ed. Winifred Bryan Horner. Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press (1983): 96-109.

Elbow, Peter. "The Question of Writing: The Wars in My Head." What is English? Ed. Peter Elbow. New York, New York: The Modern Language Association (1990): 126-140.

Loux, Ann. "Using Imitations in Literature Classes." College Composition and Communication 38 (1987): 466-472.

McCormick, Kathleen, Gary Waller, Linda Flower. Reading Texts: Reading, Responding, Writing. Lexington, Massachusetts: D. C. Heath and Company, 1987.

Meyer, Sheree L. "Refusing to Play the Confidence Game: The Illusion of Mastery in the Reading/Writing of Texts." College English 55 (1993): 46-63.

Momaday, N. Scott. "My Horse and I." In-Depth: Essayists for Our Time. Ed. Klaus, Anderson, Faery. Orlando, Florida: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich (1993): 427-431.

Murfin, Ross C. "Reader-Response Criticism and The Scarlet Letter." Nathaniel Hawthorne, The Scarlet Letter. Ed. Ross C. Murfin. Boston, Massachusetts: Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press (1991): 252-263.

Reich, Brandon. Essay/reading of Russel Baker's "The Cruellest Month." Writing 121, Oregon State University, April, 1993.

Salvatori, Mariolina. "Reading and Writing a Text: Correlations between Reading and Writing Patterns." College English 45 (1983): 657-666.

\_\_\_\_\_. "The Dialogical Nature of Basic Reading and Writing." Facts, Artifacts and Counterfacts: Theory and Method for a Reading and Writing Course. Ed. David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky. Portsmouth, New Hampshire: Boynton/Cook (1986): 137-166.

Tompkins, Jane P. "An Introduction to Reader-Response Criticism." Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism. Ed. Jane P. Tompkins. Baltimore, Maryland: The Johns Hopkins University Press (1980): ix-xxvi.