

Abandoned to Writing: Notes Toward Several Provocations

Victor J. Vitanza
University of Texas at Arlington

The sun had not yet risen. The sea was indistinguishable from the sky, except that the sea was slightly creased as if a cloth had wrinkles in it. Gradually as the sky whitened a dark line lay on the horizon dividing the sea from the sky and the grey cloth became barred with thick strokes moving, one after another, beneath the surface, following each other, pursuing each other, perpetually.

Virginia Woolf, *The Waves* 179

The blue sky above us is the optical layer of the atmosphere, the great lens of the terrestrial globe, its brilliant retina. From ultra-marine, beyond the sea, to the ultra-sky, the horizon divides opacity from transparency. It is just one small step from earth—matter to space-light—a leap or a take-off able to free us for a moment from gravity.

Paul Virilio, *Open Sky* 1

Face to face, but without seeing each other from now on, the gods and men [sic] are abandoned to writing. This abandonment is the sign given to us for our history yet to come. It has only just begun. My god! We are only just beginning to write.

Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community* 135

First and second things First: It is important to get them out of the way for the *wayves*.

The Question is . . . I've been called by the Co-Editors to respond to this question.

The Question is . . .

The Question is, The *place* of rhetoric in composition today? Or Where is rhetoric in 'composition studies'? What is the slash in Rhetoric/Composition? The question morphs and invites us to invent even newer forms. (The inside-the-parenthesis question, however, is, Can the shift-shaping nature of the question and our will-to-reinvent the question have a conversation two-gather? A passive and active exchange that would be finally, or rebeginningly, an *activity* of passiveness? *A radical passivity*?)

It's a third position: active . . . passive . . . *radical passivity*.

There is the impotentiality (*atechne, adynamis, potenza*) for such a conversayshun, but I often doubt that my colligs [sic] can allow for themselves to be in such a relationship with the question, that is, With Language (*Logos*)! The full question becoming, What is it that language

wants? With me? Now that the horizon by which we write is disappearing, being taken as place (writing space) from writers?

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My colligs still will-to-control language.\* Like Paul Virilio, my colligs would have us stop this disappearance. How does anyone or any group stop, put the brakes on, the appearance of a *third interval*! Let's face it: The Quattrocento perspective that still informs today's notions of writing—and the teaching of writing—is passing *awayves*, just as the Ptolemaic system passed away. The waves are climbing higher and higher until they reach so far beyond the horizon that they fall up and *awayves*. And "we," with them. Up and *awayves*.

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Life cum lives are undergoing a catastrophic metamorphosis. I mean, I agree with Virilio as well as with Jean Baudrillard. Whether or not we should feel good about all this, whether or not we should establish a composition committee to look into this matter, whether or not we should hunker down more so at the university level and tie down writing across the disciplines—for fear that such writing will be blown *awayves*—whether or not we should accept the fatal strategy that presents itself to us as we are being tossed in the sea storm of a horizon becoming a middle zone, is beside the (bye now) point. It's too late.

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In the facelessness of this imminent light wave—with its ferocious speed—we are impotent. No matter what. We are confronted with the impossible.

The dead give-a-way—it is the dead giving life away; or unbeknownst to themselves, the dead giving life *a way*—is especially noticeable in my collig's presuming the necessity for rhetoric or for writing (composition) or whatever to be a discipline. The explanation often is, "After all, we will never be taken seriously by our colleagues at the university as long as we are not a discipline!" And we must stand with the uni-versity. IOW, go down with the ship!

Perhapless, there are two possibilities here: "We" can start teaching writing precisely as the university needs it taught. Or "we" can attempt "to teach" writing the way "we" want. But there are, let us not forget, third (interval) *wayves*. And therefore, "we" should ask: **What is it that writing wants?** I suspect that "writing" does not want what either the uni-versity thinks it needs nor what "we" think we want.

Taken seriously!? In an institution! Writing scares, frightens, threatens institutions! Take, for example, Jean Genet's writing in prison and Jean-Paul Sartre's "Introduction" to Genet's writing. Take Hélène Cixous's thinking of Genet in "prison." Think of misprisions. On the contrary, at our institutions, we are taken far more than seriously. So-so-seriously. That's Why we would be suppressed so that we could dis/engage by *wayves* of "learning" students to write from their impotence while at the uni-versity and while graduating into yet other institutions! But then, Who says anything like this at any uni-versity! It is, after all, just silly!

I will skip (rocks across the sur-face) what "we" might want writing to want. Writing just wants. Wants, W.ants. It's not that writing wants what "we" want when "we" know what "we" want! Rather, WRITING WANTS! Just WANTS.

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There is something about "writing" that not only "we" hide from ourselves but also that writing itself hides from us. Though hidden, "it" cannot be found. If supposedly found, "it" is easily lost again. Actually and Virtually, "it" is not hidden! Nor is it ever found.

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Look: Let's get something made unclearly clear here: I am not going to make this easy for any would-be reader. Readers have been spoiled ideologically into thinking that they should have it easy when reading! I will drop here right before you-readers a series-without-a-series of examples. *Para-deigma*. I want to pass quickly by(e), as Giorgio Agamben would say, some "pure singularities [that] communicate only in the empty space of the example, without being tied by any common property, by any identity" (*Coming* 10-11). "The activity of the example," as Brian Massumi would say, "will transmit to the concept, more or less violently. The concept will start to deviate under the force. Let it. Then reconnect it to other concepts, drawn from other systems, until a whole new system of connection starts to form. Then take another example. [S]ee what happens." In telling me all this, as I relate it to you-readers, Massumi says to me, "You have left your readers with a very special gift: a headache. By which I mean a problem: what in the world to do with it all. *That's their problem*. That's where their experimentation begins" (19; emphasis mine).

Each of you, therefore, will have to follow the conductive linkages t.here. If you understand the restricted notion of how the classical *enthymeme* works, then, you will have to come to understand how the general economical notion of affective *conduction* refuses (to) work. (For a historical understanding of this phenomenon, I am saying that I am refusing to work for you and your complicity in being disciplined. [See Virno and Hardt, *Radical Thought in Italy* 2, 6, 84, 85, 94, 263. Cf. Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*; Blanchot, *The Unavowable Community*]) At first, I will th.ink quickly across and by *wayves* of apparently isolated examples, but then go on to an extended example.

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It's too late: Neither the uni-versity nor you can stop this bacterial-viral-crystalline infection from sp.reading to y.our students. "It" comes not from some foreign, devilush notions about writing and community; rather, "it" comes from within "writing" itself! Hahahahahahaha. To write is to infect.

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Is the question now, The place of *rhetoric* in composition that wants to be a discipline? Or The place of *composition* in rhetoric that wants to be a discipline? (One must always think by ways of



Matter of any kind, such as crystal, seeks, brings about, uncovers ways, or *wayves*, to re-verse the status quo—all things are imminently reversible—while matter flows and then treks on its *wayves* to becoming thirds, or transversals.

Yes, "writing" is about sea CHANGE. And that, my d.e.a.r.est, is why we are afraid of the thing called W~R~I~T~I~N~G~, and why we insist on "teaching" writing and IN institutions! I understand that YOU are afraid of the DRUNKEN BOAT.

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Is it not the case that What writing wants, what writing tells me and the rest of us with our waxed-closed ears that "it" wants, is to be repressed, suppressed, and oppressed by the institutions it serves so that "it" can eternally return to haunt and to destroy a *reserved* writing for a *general* economy of writing? Writing will not be writing until it uproots and unearths the uni-versity (eunuch-versity) and makes it into a per-versity (trans-versality). Writing will not be writing until it makes the uni-versity and multi-versity fly *awayves* to third terms. Which may take a long while.

But "writing"—like "thinking"—is patient. . . . Writing is like the termites that built the Mediterranean coast. Michel Serres writes: "These termites are the guardians of the possible. They sow a time of waiting, while the crystal next to them solidifies law and repetition" (*Rome* 3; *Genesis* 22-25). As we move from carbon to crystal, we must wish for new non-crystal termites. It's that *wayves* when waiting for writing ~~~~~~. But we will not have to wish too hard, for termites build but mostly destroy—eat foundations—to rebuild. They are the conditions for the possibilities of destruction, but never devastation. Termites have much in common with the ~~~~~~.

"I" cum "it" would be a termite *anarchitect-wayves* of such termites-among termites building a *termitarium*. It is the termites that give us our grounding (*Grund*); it is the termites that take it away (*Abgrund*). I would be a termite that could fly and build in the unbearable bearable lightness of becoming on thin air. Open Sky Writing!

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Blanchot quotes and writes: " 'To have a system, this is what is fatal for the mind; not to have one, this too is fatal. Whence the necessity to observe, while abandoning, the two requirements at once.' (Fr. Schlegel.) What Schlegel says of philosophy is true for writing: you can only become a writer, you can never be one; no sooner are you, than you are no longer, a writer" (61; Blanchot's emphasis).

This is *no* mere statement that says, ~~One devotes one's life to becoming a writer!~~

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"We" have yet to write "writing"! "We" may never write "writing," but "we" must start letting *writing* write. Such a writing cannot, should not, take place, and will not, unless under the most

radical, still unthinkable, conditions . . . take place . . . *in* the university (or the schools). It is simply *not safe* for students to write "in" or "at" the university. Any university. What is taught at the university is not-writing.

This is no mere rehash of what Bill Coles has said, though what he has said is, at least, a rebeginning. I am not working with the terms "art" or "craft"; nor am I interested in whether or not writing can be "taught" or "learned," though I earlier here misused the language and said "learning" students to write. Obviously what goes for writing in the academy *can be taught!* That's the problem! It is necessary to dis/engage by *wayves* of *abusio*. *Catachresis*. Rather, I prefer not to write, except at the outside, or at the threshold, of "writing" in terms of a third aplace, *atopos*.

It is at the threshold of impotentiality (*adynamis*) that I find places to (let) write "writing."

And students? Where will they find places?

Writing has a chance "outside" the university. And yet, what is an "outside" of an institution! When the whole Oedi-pedagogical system known as Education (pedagogy) is insidiously and invidiously everywhere! On the streets. At home. In one's room. "We" must hope for a parauniversity with its per-versities. That is, its contrariness that cannot not flow toward transversalities. Away from disciplines and bureaucratic administrative minds. *Awayves* from accountability! *Between* systems and no systems. Smack dab on the *wayves*, *in* the uncanny, *in* the excluded middle.

But even then, the disciplined mind has such a way of saying, *Oh, yes, but all that this is, is. . . .* Is, Is. Is, Is. Is, Is. Is, Is.

Deflection allows for the interests of writing to get stuck. But writing, with its *wayves*, will flow over and take down the perspective of the dam that attempts to stop or to control the flow of writing.

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Do not despair. There is every perverse reason to be joyful. Let us take up with that comma-of-an-interruption between the two verbs *to be*. For by *wayves* of interruption, *there is* Herman Melville's Bartleby the Scrivener and his formula that is not a formula: "I prefer not to." It's an interruption of its own; it's a refusal to work.

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What Agamben brings to the conversation on Bartleby's formula is the notion of *impotentiality*.*** *Agamben*, in discussing various Arabic commentaries on Aristotle's works—specifically on *De Anima* (in reference to the wax tablet [bk.3.ch4: 429b]) and on the *Metaphysics* (in references to potentialities [bk.9.ch1: 1046a.32])—*points to* "the potential not

to" and characterizes it, from the writings of Abulafia, who was a disciple of Aristotle in Islam, as "the *cardinal secret* of the Aristotelian doctrine of potentiality, which transforms every potentiality in itself into an impotentiality" (*Metaphysics*, 1046, a32) ("Bartleby" in *Potentialities* 245; emphasis mine).

For Agamben, impotentiality—what he refers to as "this cardinal secret"—is never investigated, though it is thought as the unthought, in the traditional philosophical topos of being and Non-being. Impotentiality remains ever at the threshold of this binary. For Agamben, in Aristotle, as previously in Plato, there is a citing of an un-citing. That is, there is a full discussion of a rational formula for power and then, at the least, an acknowledgement of a non-rational formulation for power (see 1046b.4-7). As others down through the centuries begin to read these texts, the force of a non-rational formula begins to take paradoxically the force of a third figure altogether outside of the principles of reason. Outside of negation, negativity. Outside of what constitutes a sacrificial economy of subjects and objects and predicates. There are so many ancient commentaries on Aristotle that we, of course, either know nothing about or would discount them because they are cabalistic, mystic, or downright, as we would say, vitalistic. Agamben sees these commentaries as such but, nonetheless, gives them voice. For Agamben, then, the topos, or atopus, becomes *Out of the impossible [i.e. impotentiality] can come the possible!* (I can see now that this atopus has nothing necessarily negative in or to it!)

For Agamben, Bartleby is not a subject; he is rather an exemplar of a *whatever being*. He is not subject to Kant's determination of the *Quodlibet*-like character (see *Coming Community* 35) any more than each of us has to be. Bartleby does not communicate from subjectivity, nor objectivity, nor from *abjectivity in the Tombs*, but, as Deleuze and Agamben say, Bartleby communicates, if it can be called communicating, from "the empty space of the formula, without being tied by any common property, by any identity" (11). His letter is not a dead letter.**** After all has been said and undone, it is the narrator's letter of the story "Bartleby" that is a dead letter; for the narrator, as Agamben would say, "speak[s] with the voice [of] lack, which [is the voice under negation, and therefore] has never been written" (*Language and Death* 108), but lies deep, yet at the surface of the potential to not write. The narrator's letter is the Law, which Bartleby refuses to copy, to write any longer. The law of a closed logic. Bartleby would prefer not to . . . in relation to any theodicy, God's or man's . . . copy the law. Bartleby, in the Tombs in NYC is not unlike the children born before baptism, before the erasure of the original sin, who are sent to Limbo. He not unlike them has become a being, as Agamben would say, a whatever being, who has "left the world of guilt and justice behind [him]; the light that rains down on [him] is that irreparable light of the dawn following the *novissima dies* of judgment. But the life that begins on earth after the last day is simply human life" (*Coming Community* 6-7). If Bartleby were to write a letter, he of course would write, unlike the lawyer-narrator, from "I would prefer not to. . . ." Bartleby would write not from the negative or affirmative; rather, from another third term, the non-positive affirmative.

If I were Bartleby—and I have tried my bestest to become—I *would prefer to not write* open letters to my colligs, which of course I have not written.

As such a whatever being—a non-Kantian being who is indeterminate—Bartleby is impotent (*adynamis*). His is an impotentiality that very few western, early modern readers of Aristotle

have been able to grasp since such impotentiality has remained mute or muted in Aristotle's texts. Certainly the narrator of Bartleby's story without a story cannot grasp it! But like Kant who opened up the possibility of the sublime in the third critique, Aristotle perpetually opens up for us the hopes of the compossibility of the potential not to. Both Kant and Aristotle, thereby, open up the hopes of a vertiginous heterogeneity of impossible worlds. That are always already available to the community that is not a community.

Agamben says: "In *De anima* Aristotle articulates this theory of [the potential to work with the potential *to not* work, the potential to play, as Glenn Gould does, so to speak, with his potential *to not-play*]" (*Coming Community* 36; interpolation mine). Yes, Aristotle is talking about Glenn Gould. God created the world and rested on the 7th day! Glenn Gould worked in creating the performances of Bach but rested—that is, refused to work—while playing on the 8th day!

Agamben is saying that Aristotle is talking about, way before Leibniz, the paracondition of impossibilities awaiting whatever beings who make up the coming community of students! There is much in Aristotle's texts that remains unread. Impotence yet remains un-impotentiated. (In the age of Viagra, of course, the value that lies in becoming impotent makes little sense to us since we can now be empowered again as super-duper-objects by the pharmaceutical companies! We love institutions, *n'est-ce pas!*)

Agamben, however, tells us in his conclusion to *The Coming Community* that the power of impotence is a *rebeginning* for us: "The perfect act of writing comes not from a power to write, but from an impotence that turns back on itself and in this way comes to itself as a pure act (which Aristotle calls agent intellect). This is why in the Arab tradition agent intellect has the form of an angel whose name is *Qalam*, "Pen," and its place is an unfathomable potentiality. Bartleby, a scribe who does not simply cease writing but 'prefers not to,' is the extreme image of this angel that writes nothing but its potentiality to not-write" (37).

This way, then, is our rebeginning way out of our being an avenging angel. Our rebeginnings are Qalam, Qalam, Qalam. . . . Then, and only then, when realizing un-power will we have become "capable of the irreparable" (40). Which is yet another atopic of the power of impotence. Which I save for yet another occasion of an 8th day.

The Assessment-Test Event (Prepared by the Committee to Investigate V.j.V.)

1. Now that you have test driven the above essay—it is an essay!—What do you think Vitanza's attitude is toward what he is saying? Variously? We mean, Do you think that he is being sarcastic, ironic, satirical, scholastic, or just down pomo ludic?
2. How do you feel towards Vitanza personally and professionally after reading this essay? On a scale of 1 to 10 (one being least; 10, most).
3. Why do you think Vitanza says such terrible things about the "uni-versity"? Why do you think Vitanza, apparently, is always *attacking* his "colligs" in rhetoric and/or composition?

4. What do you make, if anything, with all this sea imagery and wave stuff?
"~~~~~"! Why does Vitanza keep using the coinage "*wayves*"? Why does he here, once again, write in this retro '60s style of *notes towards*? Why will he not argue like the rest of us? Is this unjust a bad imitation of Cixous?
5. Why is Vitanza against "the will-to-control" *logos*? Do you think that he is a Vitalist?
6. What really could Vitanza mean when he writes that the university is not a *safe* place for students to learn to write?
7. What is all this talk about *a third interval* and the loss of grounding (*Grund*)? Why should any writing teacher be concerned with all this?
8. Why does Vitanza tell us that if we find what he is saying unreadable, it's just our problem? Our "headache"? Our moment to experiment?
9. Vitanza says that he is giving a number of quick examples and then one long sustained example. What are these examples "of"?
11. Termites?!
10. Bartleby? Why Bartleby?

Once you have finished this assessment, please email your evaluations to the Co-Editors Lisa Coleman and Lorien Goodman to let them know whether or not you think Vitanza should be blackballed from the discipline of rhetoric and/or composition.

Notes

*The will-to-control language is my first counterthesis in "Three Countertheses" (*Contending With Words*).

**These are obvious allusions to Woolf. I thank Lisa (Hill) Coleman for reinteresting me in Woolf's writings. See Lisa's dissertation, which will someday become a published book.

***The notion of impotentiality is to be found, rediscovered, in Heidegger's thinking in *Being and Time* (section 50) as out of the impossible comes the possible. Agamben goes back to Aristotle, which no doubt Heidegger had as well. See Georges Bataille, Blanchot, etc.

****Hardt and Negri briefly dismiss Bartleby as altogether passive. This is puzzling since both are familiar with the arguments put forth by Deleuze, Agamben, et al. See *Empire* 203.

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Contact Information:

Victor J. Vitanza, University of Texas at Arlington

Email: sophist@uta.edu

Home Page: <http://www.uta.edu/english/V/>