

Interruptions, Particularly One

The purpose of my response...will be as much intentional as critical. To begin with, a confession, if not exactly an apology...I wanted to learn something...I wanted to discover how to go from rhetoric writ large to rhetoric writ small—from rhetoric as a process to rhetoric as a product. For example, at one pole of my work, the “M” pole, I am interested in understanding “rhetorical epochs,”—symbolic events so massive as to constitute a “before and after” of meaning. Placed on a chronological line, these kairotic occurrences become self-constitutive chapters in the anthology of meaning we call history. At the other pole, the “L” pole, I am interested in texts. Particularly, one.”

—John Angus Campbell
“Between the Fragment and the Icon:
Prospect for a Rhetorical House on the
Middle Way”

On the last morning of the academic year, I emailed the delay to my students from my phone in the ER at a small regional hospital in northern Vermont (“so sorry—have to start class a touch late today—small accident, weird fortune—writing from the ER and can’t get discharged and back to my computer quite in time—see you soon!”). No one batted an eye.

This was, after all, nothing/not-COVID.

Stupid, I splashed bleach into my left eye on the way to class, stopping to scrub out some mildew on the walk by my bathroom to the computer. Strange how the computer was the door through which we walked into the classroom together, and it moved and moved.

Chlorine bleach, only one of the latest in a line of a chemical discovery dating back 7 millennia, was invented in Swedish Pomerania (now Germany) in the late 18th century by pharmaceutical chemist Carl Scheele, discoverer of oxygen and, perhaps paradoxically, of chlorine gas, breaks down surprisingly quickly into water and salt. Before this, burning.

Not one student was absent. When class began online, things were normal, relatively speaking.

When fundamental unpredictability congeals as Just-Tuesday, we stop reacting to sudden changes to the coming near-future—it was never very stable to begin with.

The chemical burns had not affected my vision, and we were all together, as we had been. The doc seems shocked. “What are the odds?”

The nature of existence is the only ground from which to make sense of this period in our history.

Everything is connected to everything in all times and places.

It turns out, Vermont, where I live now, and the University of Denver are everywhere. My students were in China, Botswana, Peru, Finland, all over the US, one in New Jersey near Kenneth Burke’s farm in Andover.

For many years, I have liked to say to students that writing, rhetoric, and research are not tools for school but tools for living. Burke would have had a field day with the writing of the pandemic and was the grandfather of Harry Chapin, who was killed in the middle of making a documentary about Burke when his 1975 VW was hit by a flatbed tractor-trailer

on the Long Island Expressway about three weeks before I was born in a few hours east.

From (t)here, the entire notion of teaching writing as something to be done wholly intentionally hinges on a parts-to-whole-error view of both will and chance and of their being in some kind of binary relation. Instead, something more like a boundless totality that is our existence and that, by nature, always-already includes interruption.

Everything is con-substantial, but I have been thinking about and teaching about place and writing for a long time, and it turns out that (even as “scene”) I have never properly understood the term *everywhere*.

You can only attend to so much. Maybe that’s what Burke was really trying to tell us over and over in all those millions of words across so many texts: you can *only* attend to so very, very much.

How do we not read *The Writing of the Disaster* in a time like this? Blanchot says a lot of shit.

Worth repeating.

Reminded of their absolute freedom of choice or chance in topic, audience, and purpose for writing, the majority of my students wrote at least once about COVID vaccine hesitancy with the intention of bringing around resistant folks they knew to the idea of getting jabbed. Not one wrote about the virus. Not once. I asked a brilliant favorite, and she said:

because it is pointless.

What the process and post-process movement got wrong amid so much right was not the question of the degree to which writing and writing processes are or can ever be fully iterative but the question of the *motive* to

iterate in the first place. Blanchot says, “we constantly *need* to say (to think): that was quite something (something quite important) that happened to me. By which we mean at the same time: that couldn’t possibly belong to the order of things which come to pass, or which are important, but is rather among the things which export and deport. Repetition.”

What had I meant to mean by all that “writing and rhetoric and research are tools for living” business? It is becoming fashionable to attack transfer theory as a totalizing occlusion of the self-development work that FYW should enable students to do, but a) that’s a lazy false-binary, and b) it’s the wrong paper tiger—self-development, understood as an individual’s act becoming a Bestself is really the edu-spoke articulation of a self-helpism marionetting Neo-Liberal politics. The one is for the one.

No.

The purpose of self-development is the improvement of all life—not, primarily, of one’s own life, because one’s own life is and never has been only one’s own.

I think they mostly heard, and, though I aimed at much more, I think I still too often meant: “That which you can only use in school without deliberate adaptation is small potatoes.”

What I wanted to mean was that life is simply, inclusively *larger* than school and that Vast Inclusion is the house that writing lives in.

I meant to mean a whole that is bigger than the sum precisely and only because we cannot hope, as human beings with (de)limited knowledge and capacity and, perhaps more noticeably this year than others, very finite time allowed to breathe, breathe, breathe—to live—we can only approximate the whole of even our own small lives, let alone the ever-evolving complex system of lives through

which we thread as we live, by extrapolating a totality that can never be more than an heuristic from the small patchwork of parts to which we can attend at any moment in the infinite vastness of what-is-has-been-will-be—and that that is the proper place to begin when teaching or learning about writing.

Writing, rhetoric, and research, as tools for both Being and Otherwise.

I meant this better this year because I noticed. Not only for students as writers. I needed to do it, myself—not to waste time and breath saying, “Yes, I’ve read Levinas, too—take me seriously (enough), please” when I should be asking: “What is my responsibility when I write at a time in which many of us are losing everything or will?” Perhaps this is broad—what moment in real life would not qualify?

I had been teaching online for many years before the coronavirus reminded us that a university is not located on campus but in the networked imaginations and identities of all the people who work there, learn there, and think of/speak of themselves as either “going” or coming “from” there.

The *there* there is the University of Denver, but the campus is, paradoxically, not.

There is no true binary of “on-campus” and “online” teaching or learning—there is, instead, a choice to attend [to] the University of Denver as a mode of connection and identification between us wherever we may be located or to mistake a part for more.

The collection of buildings and grounds that make up the most stable and continuous (how long do any of us live? shorter lives by an average of 1½ years by last count from the start of the pandemic) physical body of the university is just a part of that much, much

larger and more fluid, rhizomatic, fundamentally decentered whole.

Where were we?

I cannot teach from anywhere. Always somewhere, which is always not-somewhere-else. I taught this year where my students and I met—in video meetings and in writing. Video, which is boxes of moving parts in a frame, occludes the spaciousness of writing. Multimodality is over- and underlooked as its own cause of rhetorical erasure this way. We were in Africa and Asia and North and South America in class. Four continents in one classroom.

One classroom as our collective virtuality—funny how the root of that word somehow is not *virtue*, yes?—and in the space between the texts we wrote and shared with each other and our reading and responding to those texts. I taught writing this year on the road, in motel rooms, in family members’ houses, in hospitals.

Not technê. Ethos. Dwelling. Character-where.

Rosanne Carlo is helpful there, even more so if we shift narrative to imperative: “...[U]nderstand place as something we are always in the process of attaining, as something we are continually getting situated into with others and with things” and, further, from imperative to instructive, “getting into place is rhetorical...we can see place as the originary rhetorical action because it gives place to all the variables in the rhetorical situation” (97).

I like to try to remember what it was to read another’s thought without, as though a reflex, mentally listing who else thought it first.

I started writing an essay about the nature and function of the *done-ness* of writing, which is forever and bizarrely left out of discussions of writing's finitude and of even (post)process writing theory, when I first started teaching at DU in 2010, and I have just come to terms with the fact it will never be finished.

Between iteration and interruption is writing and its teaching. The breakage between repetitions that makes many out of one (the national seal on the coin has it backwards). The composition from Composition. "I'm teaching writing again" from either "teaching writing" or "I am."

Laura Micciche reminds us that "because writing often moves in fits and starts, it has the potential to be an interruptive technique, both intentional and unintentional" (177). As a rhetorical tactic, and riffing on interruption and disruption from Nedra Reynolds, our great geographer of writing, she writes that "the intentional variety desires interruption as a political tool, the goal of which is to unstick normative conventions from fixed locations, making possible a questioning of what is in order to make claims for what might be," whereas, unintentional interruption tends less toward the political-effective and more toward the bodily-affective.

"Writing," as she says, "reveals idiosyncrasies and breaks in consistency that interrupt meaning and purpose—a familiar dissonance to teachers of writing at all levels. It's important to distinguish between intentional and unintentional interruption so as not to romanticize interruption as an always empowering rhetorical strategy..." not only a cause of rhetorical effects but also "a consequence of writing through doubt, without awareness of how and where one's text interrupts itself or those of others," or, I would say now, looking back, of simply living through times of great uncertainty.

I taught the intentional variety of writing for many years and overlooked the unintentional.

That was foolish. And wasteful. The latter is more fully iterative than the former for there is so much more that *happens* than is *made* to happen.

Strange how the damage was not permanent. What is, though. Teaching from home has been complicated.

Victor Vitanza writes that "members of composition studies" have historically seen luck and its use, the chance-operational, in writing and its teaching "as foreign, poststructuralist, or too ludic and therefore as having less value to a field that aspires to be a discipline" but argues for continuing to try "to understand both the conditions and possibilities of this apparently rather mysterious approach to invention called aleatory procedures, or as it is sometimes referred to, 'a throw of the dice'" (186).

As though optional. The human eye is just about 9/10 of an inch in diameter. The diameter of the earth is around 50,1652,800 inches.

What are the odds chlorine bleach will land anywhere on this earth but in your left eye? What are the odds, should it land in your eye, that it won't burn blind shapes through the cornea?

This is the ridiculous nature of luck—it is most often unnoticeable and fundamentally dependent upon juxtapositions and proximities to bloom into visible good (or terrible) fortune. The train we missed by moments. The truck that just missed us by half-inches or didn't.

The burned conjunctiva and perfectly spared cornea.

Still having been employed and insured.

The many who are gone now, families trapped behind webcams and unable to enter the hospital, the room, the space of breath. And here are so many of us now relatively unharmed.

Whom do you know who has survived it all? Janice Lauer once claimed that “aleatory procedures offer little guidance to students” (122) because she just happened to be writing before the pandemic. This is chance.

Things are fluid.

Fuck COVID.

The year before, any year before, eyeful of bleach and burnt tissue, I would have cancelled class.

It is an attentional error to read “Why are we here?” as somehow asking a categorically different question from “Why are we here in this FYW class?”

One student, clever, asks in a reflection discussing the experience of learning about rhetorical futures in a time of great uncertainty: “Is Kairos related to Chaos?”

Not etymologically, but, now that you mention it.

Funny thing, attention.

Let’s say a definition of sanity is doing a thing over and over to generate the same general outcome between contiguities. Wake, go to class, eat, go to class, study, write, sleep. This learns. Do it again? Sanity is only boring when repetitive. When they closed the university, and we did not know when it would open again, or how, or whether—that was different.

According to the *OED*, the word was first used in English by Geoffrey Chaucer in the mid-1370s translating Boethius, as a thing to be gathered; v., to attend to, evolving from the Latin “to stretch to/ward” into Old and then Middle French and English over the next century and a half as the act of “direct[ing] the mind” before “present[ing] oneself for the purpose of taking some part in the proceedings, at a meeting for business, worship, instruction, entertainment” seems to have emerged by the mid-1600s and, finally, catalogued by the *New English Dictionary* in 1885 in the usage of concern this past year, “to attend school regularly.”

To *go*. To *keep* going.

I call “iteruptions” those onto-rhetorical events constituted by the repetition of disruption, however (un)intentional, unto the point of always-oncoming interruption (Interruption, that is) as a (re)stabilizing expectation of the present and near-future.

Where was I.

Let’s see a pattern.

Rhetorical futures, as I had been teaching the concept for a number of years, are not predictions per se but strategic and/or affective depictions of that which is to come and whose outcome, intended or otherwise, is the motivation of an audience to take one or another course of action in the present moment.

They are the species of suasive asset most fundamental to deliberative rhetoric and upon which the whole logical structure of futures-oriented argumentation hinges (Will-Be-Therefore-Now-Should).

This year, new hinge. Better, door always swinging open I had not noticed before.

In affective terms, the rhetorical potential of this genus of futures is always-already defined by a ratio of rhetoricality and arhetoricality relative to the ratio of certainty to uncertainty in our experience of a given moment or phenomenon.

What can be written, what can be read, that can stop the Sun from dying? Speed or slow the expansion and collapse of the infinite universe?

Try this:

Show teenagers an image from a few billion out: the Sun has exhausted its hydrogen core and, red giant, has consumed Venus and Mercury, and Earth is unoceaned, unatmosphered, unlifted.

Say: Don't forget to revise your rough draft for Thursday.

This proves more a/effective than you might think.

Kairos. You can't always pick your moment, this year reminded us. Thursday, it might all be gone.

The trick is [in] linearity. Carlo, again, says "kairos suggests a disruption in that linearity, as we can experience the future of the past, the present-past, the future of the present. One need only recall the disorientation of a moment of déjà vu to know how skips in linear time are disruptive to our normal routine. Thus, Kairos...is largely—I think—a feeling" (44).

What was said and written and heard and read that enabled the miracles of vaccines and death as something momentarily preventable?

We never stopped talking about this. No matter what conversation, one student was saying "I don't want to talk about COVID,"

and someone else was saying "what else is there?" and we all were saying "what am I still doing here?"

What happens when a global pandemic comes to your house? We sold it and moved away. This was a time of closing campuses and losing jobs, but, really, we are all of us throwing the dice at every moment between first-consciousness and death. Sometimes, say when the act of assuming we will remain employed and able to feed and house our children exactly as we had done becomes intentional, we notice.

Uncertainty is everywhere, certainty is somewhere. "Where I might be a writing professor yet, many classes will have to be taught online, and many of the people I work with will work from home wherever possible. At least for a while." Mallarmé said it this way:

plume solitaire éperdue

sauf

It can be easy to miss, your career in the classroom/your co-being in the real with others in the moment of learning, when trying to decipher whether the signs point to a return to normalcy and financial stability or a different future in which having hung on too long to an outdated version of life and work will be proven to have been a mistake.

Ellen Handler Spitz says that "to read Mallarmé's poetry against a backdrop of repeated unpreventable tragic human loss is to

attune oneself to its elegiac aspects,” and that, “knowing this, we can better understand how, in “Un Coup de Dés,” the empty space never feels empty.”

Is the last time you teach a writing class in the city where your campus is located a last thing when you’ll teach the next one in the motel room on the road?

Spitz says of reading *Un Coup de Des...* elegiacally that “each human life, after all, starts and ends” and “no tricks of the intellect can disrupt that fated aspect of our being.”

Easier to catch it this year—writing and its teaching are life and death because living is. Have I taught it that way? Did I miss my chance? Again?

What is it about the lastness of things? To state the truth, there is no resolution coming because nothing ends but attention.

Still, the last hour of a three-day car trip, but also the last two bites of the first hot meal in a while?

What do you call it when interruptions become so densely contiguous that continuity happens as though a chemical reaction? Salt and water. Perhaps we notice only phase change: my left eye is *healed*, it’s *summer*, the statistical majority of us alive at the start of this one are *still-here*. Now what?

I haven’t finished a thought all year, I think. I think.

I think: sometimes, I write to survive.

I think: some writing can only say goodbye because it is written to whoever survives.

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