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Saying And Silence

Frank Farmer

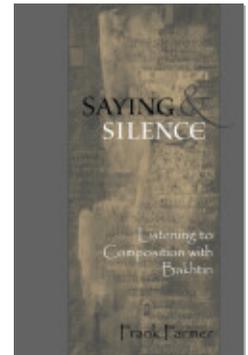
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2 AESOPIAN PREDICAMENTS, or BITING MY TONGUE AS I WRITE: *A Defense of Rhetorical Ambiguity*

Over a decade has passed since the appearance of Peter Elbow's essay, "Closing My Eyes As I Speak: A Plea for Ignoring Audience." In the years since its first publication, Elbow's article has been cited, praised, disparaged by some, but generally acknowledged as an important counter-statement to a good deal of then-current thinking about audience.

Elbow's article proceeds from what he calls a "limited claim," his view that "even though ignoring audience will usually lead to weak writing at first . . . this weak writing can help us in the end to better writing than we would have written if we'd kept readers in mind from the start" (51). Audiences, Elbow maintains, typically get in the way, interfere with our struggles to discover what it is we want to say, especially at the point when our thinking is inchoate and tentative about its ultimate direction. Yet, despite a title that might suggest otherwise, Elbow's argument is not for ignoring audience completely. Once we "have figured out our thinking . . . perhaps finding the right voice or stance as well," Elbow allows, "*then* we can . . . think about readers." A sequence emerges, then—one that accommodates a salutary disregard for our audience, followed by a scrupulous heeding of all such "traditional rhetorical advice" that requires us to take audience into account (52).

Elbow also recognizes that certain audiences—those he calls "inviting" or "enabling" audiences—may very well be "helpful to keep in mind from the start." But clearly his first interest is in those audiences who disturb our ability to write anything at all, listeners and readers whom Elbow refers to as "inhibiting" audiences. These are composed of "that person who intimidates us" or those "people who make us feel dumb when we try to speak to them" (51) or even such

“readers with whom we have an awkward relationship” (52). Indeed, for Elbow, it goes without saying that inhibiting audiences are, by definition, impediments to a writer’s struggle to say something authentic and compelling to others. But they are something else too.

Notice that, in Elbow’s descriptions, inhibiting audiences are almost always personal, immediate, overwhelmingly present. Inhibiting audiences, in other words, are made up of “that person” or “of people” or (in educational contexts) of individual teachers, classmates, and proximate adults. When Elbow gets around to suggesting that certain, more general audiences might also be inhibiting, he mentions only those audiences that would appear nowhere else but in (not especially inspired) writing assignments—audiences such as “the general public” and “educated readers” (52). Whatever intimidating force these larger audiences might have, it seems to originate not from any implied danger or threat that might be unleashed, but rather from the sheer vagueness of who these audiences are.

A second matter for which Elbow does not show much concern is the possibility of *resisting* those audiences that inhibit or intimidate. Elbow does not extend much consideration to how it might be possible to subvert or possibly circumvent an inhibiting audience, how it might be that we are able to overcome an inhibiting audience in order to reach an intended, secondary audience. True, Elbow will concede that writers sometimes find themselves having to *disguise* their point of view. But that fact alone doesn’t exempt the writer from the need to ignore audience, because, as Elbow points out, “it’s hard to disguise something while engaged in the process of trying to figure it out” (52).

Elbow, moreover, acknowledges the problem of what he calls “double audiences,” those audiences constituted of two readerships: for example, a memo sent both to colleagues and to a supervisor; a submitted article that must satisfy the demands both of editors and of readers; and, perhaps most relevant to my purposes here, a student paper written supposedly for a designated “real world” audience, but understood by every student to be written “really” for the teacher. Indeed, Elbow concludes by asking us to consider the obvious: namely, the possibility that we teachers might represent both an enabling and inhibiting audience for our students.

In the pages to follow, I elaborate on a number of these ideas, developing those points that receive not much more than passing mention by Elbow. In particular, I point out how inhibiting audiences can and do surpass the merely personal and immediate, even when it may seem that such audiences are located exclusively within those domains. Moreover, I show how what Elbow calls disguised writing can be illuminated through the prism of intellectual and literary traditions in Russian letters, wherein a certain kind of disguised writing can be understood as a strategy for creative resistance to powerful audiences that not only inhibit, but inhibit in ways that could prove injurious or even fatal to the writer. I then return to the classroom to examine the far less violent (but no less real) predicament—I will call it an “Aesopian” predicament—of one writer and the particular strategies he uses to disguise and confound his purposes for an audience that he perceives to be threatening.

AESOPIANISM IN THE RUSSIAN TRADITION

Aesopianism is a term that has emerged fairly recently in much of the secondary literature about Bakhtin and his circle. Michael Gardiner, in his *Dialogics of Critique*, attributes the origin of the term to the Soviet scholar Boris Kagarlitsky, who describes a Aesopian the general condition of the Russian intelligentsia roughly from the period of 1917-1940, a time characterized by enormous social upheaval followed by state-enforced repression and terror. As explained by Gardiner, because writers and intellectuals could not “address pressing contemporary political and social issues directly,” they were forced to develop alternate ways of writing and speaking—or, to be more precise, *allegorical* strategies for communicating with each other while, at the same time, escaping the notice of censors and various state agents and bureaucrats. Gardiner observes, for example, that an Aesopian approach to social and political matters resulted in such problems being discussed under camouflage, that is, under the precarious cover of acceptable cultural and literary forms (232, n. 37).

Caryl Emerson, on the other hand, claims that Aesopian language—or rather, the need for Aesopian language—has been something of a constant of Russian discourse for nearly a millennium:

For most of Russian culture . . . the printed word was viewed as sacred, and it was, in varying degrees, unfree. To outwit the unfree authoritarian word, numerous strategies were developed in the nineteenth century—among them “Aesopian language,” a hermeneutic device perfected by Russia’s radical intelligentsia. Designed to work under combat conditions, Aesopianism assumes that the word is allegory, that no one speaks or writes straight, and that every officially public or published text (by definition censored) has a “more honest,” multilayered, hidden subtext that only insiders can decode. . . . Russia’s greatest writers have been alert to the dangers of Aesopian thinking and at the same time fairly drawn to indulge in it. In the words of two prominent American students of Russian contemporary culture, Russian literary language was “the antithesis of ‘plain-speak’; instead it was a kind of culturally institutionalized and revered ‘oblique-speak.’” (*First* 8-9)

Emerson goes on to observe that honest, critical ideas sought and found refuge in literary discourse. For at least the last century and a half, she argues, “Russian readers were trained to see nonfunctional referents beneath every fictional surface” (*First* 9). Thus, in Russia, literary ascendancy in both artistic and critical genres *mattered* in ways that American writers of the same period might not have been able to fathom. As Emerson points out, literary accomplishment, while desirable, was nevertheless an extremely hazardous business. To be blunt, “you could get arrested and killed for it” (10). And yet, at the same time, literary artistry and criticism offered the best venues for disseminating serious, critical ideas in disguised forms.

And what does this Aesopian milieu tell us about the life and times of Mikhail Bakhtin?

I believe that Aesopian requirements permeated most of Bakhtin’s thinking and likewise determined a good many events of his life. For example, we know that, in an interview with Sergei Bocharov conducted toward the end of Mikhail Bakhtin’s life, he insisted that he was first and foremost a philosopher and that his “turn” toward literary criticism, if one can call it that, was occasioned by pressures that could only be called Aesopian. Thus, when asked about his relatively uncontroversial *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, Bakhtin declared his brilliant work to be “morally flawed.” When further pressed as to what he

meant, Bakhtin replied, “The way I could have written it would have been very different from the way it is. After all, in that book, I severed form from the main thing. I couldn’t speak directly about the main questions.” Bocharov then asked: “What main questions, M. M.?” “Philosophical questions,” Bakhtin answered. “In the [Dostoevsky] book I was constantly forced to prevaricate, to dodge backward and forward. I had to hold back constantly. The moment a thought got going, I had to break it off. Backward and forward” (1012).

Bocharov reports that Bakhtin was, on the whole, rather dismissive of his contributions as a literary critic and historian and that, moreover, Bakhtin deeply regretted that he could not broach philosophical questions in a directly philosophical manner.¹ Though literary criticism may indeed have provided Bakhtin with a mask that he donned reluctantly, it also provided him with a new way to think about Dostoevsky, a way that departed profoundly from rather entrenched traditions of Russian philosophical criticism. More than that, Bocharov further suggests that the fact “that he [Bakhtin] was unfree to think philosophically ‘about the main questions’ directly” may have resulted in his discovery of dialogue not only as “the inner form of the novel,” but likewise as the single, overarching theme with which his work has become identified. “Surely,” Bocharov adds, “we don’t need to regret this achievement” (1020).

But just as surely, Bocharov notes, we need to recognize that Bakhtin did indeed regret, if not the achievement, then the decision to compromise his inclinations. And yet who could fully resist the Aesopian call and its ethically questionable demands? “Everything that was created during this past half century,” Bakhtin laments, “on this graceless soil, beneath this unfree sky, all of it is to some degree morally flawed” (1012).

Of course, many of the controversies surrounding the authorship of the disputed texts must be understood in light of Aesopian requirements as well. Whether or not, or to what extent, Bakhtin authored or co-authored texts signed by his contemporaries, V. N. Volosinov and Pavel Medvedev, it remains clear that the severe hazards of publication in those times had no small influence on how the word—Bakhtin’s word—was disseminated. After reporting Bakhtin’s

admission that he wrote much of the disputed material, Bocharov quotes Bakhtin as saying that “publications not in my name were acceptable.” Bocharov then explains,

[H]e could speak out, but only from perspectives that he would not adopt under his name. Evidently, this strange form of cooperation suited his friends as well, who accepted (or proposed) it. “M. M., in your own name you would have written differently,” I asked him on 10 April 1974. “Yes, I would have.” (1015).

Bakhtin’s admission, of course, does not resolve the many complexities of the authorship question. And, as Bocharov is quick to point out, “even Bakhtin’s personal testimony is not enough to decide the question,” especially for those scholars who continue to demand “incontrovertible proof” (1014). Yet surely, if Bakhtin (and Bocharov) are to be believed—and there is no reason to doubt either—then Bakhtin’s pseudonymous ventures must be understood not only as helpful gestures to close associates, but also as strategies by which he could simultaneously disguise and circulate his ideas.

And what of those ideas? Does Aesopianism in any way shape not merely the conditions and forms of his thought, but the content of it as well? To my knowledge, no thorough examination of the Aesopian influences on Bakhtin’s ideas has been undertaken. But surely there is ample warrant for such an analysis, especially since Aesopian requirements were so relentlessly pervasive in the culture in which he wrote. I will mention two examples where it seems likely that Aesopianism had a determining influence on his thought.

First, and perhaps most obviously, Bakhtin’s analysis of double-voicing in Dostoevsky’s novels undoubtedly had its analogues in the larger culture in which both Dostoevsky and Bakhtin wrote. In his charting of double-voiced discourses presented in the Dostoevsky book, Bakhtin catalogues a variety of double-voiced forms, the most compelling of which are those that fall under the title of “active double-voiced discourse.” Here, among other possibilities, Bakhtin introduces us to what he calls “hidden polemic,” or “internally polemical discourse,” a particular species of double-voicing that he also refers to metaphorically as the “word with a sideward glance.” Internally

polemical discourse, Bakhtin observes, always casts a sideward glance at “someone else’s hostile word.” “Here,” Bakhtin tells us, “belong, in everyday speech, all words that ‘make digs at others’ and all ‘barbed’ words. But here also belongs all self-deprecating overblown speech that repudiates itself in advance, speech with a thousand reservations, concessions, loopholes, and the like” (*PDP* 196). In other words, hidden polemic is wholly shaped by an anticipation of how it will be received, and, as a consequence, stakes its position (caviling, accommodating, qualifying, etc.) toward its anticipated reception. What it simply cannot afford to do is forget those who will receive it, the presumed others to whom it owes its special construction.

Of course, we admire Bakhtin for the insights he brings to bear on the kinds of double-voicing that occur between characters and between author and character in Dostoevsky’s novels. But we may just as well admire these insights as a description of the conditions under which Bakhtin and many of his contemporaries were forced to write. After all, in Aesopian contexts, one had better not risk leaving home, so to speak, without a sure and steady supply of “sideward glances,” especially if one hopes to survive, much less be heard. Bakhtin, in my view, understood that double-voicing went far beyond the limits of the novel and that it was a concept that could usefully describe the cultural and political exigencies of publication during these times.

A second, likely example of how Aesopian requirements entered into the substance of Bakhtin’s work can be discovered in his theme of carnival. Here, certain scholars have indeed examined the Aesopian dimensions of the carnival theme and, in particular, the work where it finds its most thorough elaboration, *Rabelais and His World*. In their biography of Bakhtin, Katrina Clark and Michael Holquist read Bakhtin’s carnival theme as a veiled critique of Stalinist repression and what Bakhtin perceived to be the hierarchical imposition of a “‘vertical world’ of absolute values” (308). Bakhtin’s carnival writings, with their famous celebration of “joyful relativity,” stand as a guise by which to confront the monologic seriousness of Stalin’s power:

Thus, in a time of increasing regimentation, Bakhtin wrote of freedom. In a time of authoritarianism, dogmatism, and official culture, he wrote of the masses as ebullient, variegated, and irreverent. At a time when literature was

composed of mandated canons, he wrote of smashing all norms and canons, and ridiculed the pundits who upheld them. At a time when everyone was told to “look higher” and to deny the body and its dictates, he extolled the virtues of the everyday, and advocated reveling in the basic functions of what he called the “lower bodily stratum.” (312)

How, then, could Bakhtin possibly get away with what would seem to most a transparent attack on the prevailing regime? According to Clark and Holquist, Bakhtin was able to make his points “palatable by an adroit use of Aesopian language and allegory” (312). Again, the genre of literary criticism provided Bakhtin with a vehicle for criticizing social and political repression in a disguised manner. In the literary context of the Rabelais work, the fount of social repression and official culture is not to be identified ostensibly with Stalin, but rather with the Roman Catholic Church, a predictable enemy for Stalinist dogma. Clark and Holquist add that Bakhtin consistently “exploited the device of ambiguity,” and that he often borrowed certain stock clichés from official discourses, making certain that his carnival thesis, moreover, had already found authoritative expression in the work of approved writers, such as Maxim Gorky and party functionary, Anatoly Lunacharsky. Thus, Clark and Holquist conclude that in the Rabelais book, as elsewhere, Bakhtin deployed a strategy that he found particularly useful. He would borrow “the ideas and rhetoric of his age,” Clark and Holquist observe, and use “them to his own ends.” Yet importantly, they are quick to add, “he co-opts only those elements that can in some way be made to approximate his own views” (312-14).

What’s clear from this discussion is that Bakhtin’s works and days were marked by Aesopian requirements, by a tacitly understood need for the act of saying to be disguised, elusive, resisting, allegorical, confounding—all of these, in fact, if the word, especially the published word, was to be heard by those for whom it was intended.

AESOPIANISM IN THE WRITING CLASSROOM

Do our students ever sense the need to disguise their opinions, to write in a purposely oblique, deflective manner as a strategy by which to voice their resistance to what we teach? Do they ever choose, in other words, to write in ways that salvage a measure of honest expression, yet

simultaneously escape the institutional penalties that accrue to school culture in general and to the individual teacher in particular?

At the outset of this section, I hope it is obvious to readers that I do not plan to suggest an equivalence between the Aesopian circumstances faced by Bakhtin and the ones faced by our students. Those distinct circumstances do not compare—either in their historical moments or their cultural ubiquity or the severity of their consequences. For these reasons, there would be no warrant for attempting to draw an equivalence between the conditions under which Bakhtin wrote and those under which our students write. But there may be some value in exploring an analogy—a limited analogy, to be sure—but one founded upon a shared need *to utter truly* under circumstances that are perceived to be hazardous for doing so. Bakhtin and our students have in common at least this much.

Yet how do we know that our students possess an awareness that writing is a tricky business, a matter fraught with dangers, traps, unexpected snares, assorted humiliations, and, not least, a host of what are often thought to be punitive consequences?

We know this from what they tell us. What experienced teacher, for example, has not heard from that student who, in tones of utter despair and sometimes anger, implores the teacher to “just tell me what you want?” The student who voices this plea is one who has surrendered to the institutional authority of school and its most immediate representative, the teacher. Such a student has simply given up any illusion that what she writes for class might somehow reflect her life, her values, opinions, feelings, thoughts, and so on. Unfortunately, such a student has abandoned as well the possibility that there might be ways to circumvent what she perceives to be an impossible situation. Or, to put the matter baldly, that there might be ways to satisfy the teacher and, at the same time, exercise some fidelity to one’s own words—to have one’s say without inviting reprisals in the form of, among other sanctions, lower grades. Still, at the opposite end of the spectrum, we may just as well ask: what teacher has not encountered that student who is apparently intent on resisting everything we say, everything we teach, and everything we require of our classes?

I first met Devlyn three years ago.² He had enrolled in my Advanced Composition class and during the first week of the semester, Devlyn made an unforgettable impression both upon his classmates and upon me. Devlyn seemed to me then, as now, to be extremely bright, charming, energetic, funny, chiding, socially conservative, and unrelentingly argumentative. Among his classmates, I had the impression that Devlyn was, more than anything else, indulged. I sensed that many of the other students were uncomfortable with Devlyn's intensity in our class discussions and the sheer earnestness with which he spoke. Perhaps his classmates felt Devlyn's manner to be merely off-putting, but I am inclined to think that Devlyn was seen as a threat to something less obvious. To be more precise, Devlyn represented an unwelcome disruption to that atmosphere of genteel non-involvement that some students come to expect and, indeed, depend upon. Devlyn, in other words, upped the verbal ante for his classmates. It was not hard for me to imagine any number of his classmates saying to themselves, "If this guy speaks so passionately about his views, must I do so as well?"

One student, however, had no reticence whatsoever in speaking with comparable passion. Unfortunately, her passion seemed to be directed toward Devlyn and not course materials. Mary Beth was a returning student who had come back to school to pursue a degree in English Education. She hoped to become certified to teach middle school, and my course was part of her degree requirements. What was *not* part of her requirements, I gathered from her later comments, was that she would be asked to put up with someone like Devlyn. After listening in silence to my increasingly frequent—and, I would add, uncomfortable—jousting with Devlyn, Mary Beth had had enough. She finally gave vent to her anger at Devlyn, and not surprisingly, he responded in kind. Before long, their skirmishes became legendary, at least among classmates. Moreover, their disputes also became more personal, until I was forced to do something I had not done in any other class: I enforced a verbal cease-fire between the two antagonists—much to the relief of their classmates, I was later informed. I came to see that, notwithstanding what I had thought was a commitment to open, free exchange in the classroom, I had allowed a very unproductive situation to go on far too long.

But what exactly was it that provoked these outbursts of classroom ferocity? As I look back, it seems that Mary Beth's vehemence was largely a response to Devlyn, and Devlyn's was, for the most part, a response to the assigned readings and class discussions. In particular, what annoyed Devlyn was our first reading of the semester, Paulo Freire's "The Banking Concept of Education," from our required text, Bartholomae and Petrosky's *Ways of Reading* (3rd ed.). Freire's essay was one of three that made up our first unit, "The Aims of Education"; the other two selections were Richard Rodriguez's "The Achievement of Desire" and Adrienne Rich's "When We Dead Awaken." Devlyn didn't much care for these latter two either, but it was Freire who seemed most to provoke his sense of outrage.

As our class made its way through the many difficulties of Freire's essay, it became clear that Devlyn disagreed with each and every concept that Freire introduces in this selection—the very notion of a "banking concept of education," the annoying fuzziness of what Freire means by problem-posing education, the idea of teachers and students as "critical co-investigators," the political importance of *conscientização*, and the implied value of teaching circles as a method for adult literacy education. On all of these points, Devlyn voiced his uncompromising disagreements, his forceful arguments usually directed toward me, but occasionally toward other students, fending off, in particular, the likewise forceful comments of his nemesis, Mary Beth.

I wondered if—or perhaps how—the fervor of these class discussions might appear in Devlyn's formal writing for the unit. I already had a good idea of what I was likely to read in his journal, since we began each class with a journal prompt that often served to frame the discussion for that day. But I had *no* idea of what Devlyn would do with an assignment that called upon him to recontextualize Freire's ideas. Here's a shortened version of the first assignment for this unit:

Consider a recent event in your life which you found, in some way, oppressive, and which you believe exemplifies the "banking" concept as it might be confronted in everyday, "real" life. Your description of this event or situation will constitute the first part of your essay. Then, using the idea of problem-posing education as a tool, analyze your experience from a Freirean perspective. Note, however, that your particular experience need

not be one which occurred in the classroom or as part of your formal education. Your purpose is to apply Freire's ideas to your personal experience, and your audience is Dr. Farmer.

Withholding my comments for the time being, I offer below Devlyn's response (in full) to this assignment.

Oppression for the Opposition, Please

When this essay was assigned, we (your humble students) were asked to recount a recent experience that we found to be "oppressive." We were also asked to include examples of Freire's "banking" concept, and show how these events followed the same path as Freire's ideas. After reading the assignment sheet with despair, I raised my hand looking to Dr. Farmer for relief. I proceeded to ask if someone (read: *me*) had a problem with Freire's ideology, were they to put that aside and write the paper as if they agreed with him. Dr. Farmer's bemused answer was, yes, for the sake of the assignment, follow the directions to the letter. Disgruntled, I left the room with the arduous task of applying some event in my life to a set of criteria I didn't even BELIEVE in. Then, it hit me . . . asking me to write a paper that adheres to Freire's ideas without questioning them is, in essence, both *banking* and *oppressive!* Anxiously, I reread Freire to gather the support for this idea.

In the "banking" concept of education, Freire reveals that "the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing the deposits." When Freire's essay was first brought up for debate in the classroom, I vehemently rebuffed his ideas and dismissed them as "touchy-feely" liberalism. My attitudes towards Freire's concepts, although unpopular with the majority of my classmates, were allowed to stand on their own. Freire would have been proud, I believe, that I wasn't asked to receive the information, consider it to be fact unquestioningly, and then regurgitate it later for proving I learned the material. What I think Freire would have found oppressive is the fact that when the assignment was brought to light, I was asked to abandon my opposing viewpoint, and simply *concede* to what was being taught and then apply it to my own life. This eliminates my critical co-investigation skills when I'm not left to explore any viewpoint but what's already been written. The option wasn't given to write a paper AGAINST Freire's ideas, only to support them. I learned Freire, remembered Freire, spit him back up without challenging the authority of the teacher. The "banking" result is this paper.

I considered going against the grain and writing a paper on “Why I Dislike Freire’s Ideas,” but I realized that when Dr. Farmer told me that I was to put my own ideology and opinion aside, this strengthened Freire’s concept of the oppressor’s behaviors. Freire states that when a teacher or authority figure “chooses and enforces his choice, and the students comply,” that is considered oppressive. Dr. Farmer told me that I had to follow the guidelines even though I didn’t like them, and I did. That, according to Freire is oppression. Freire also contends that when teachers simply choose the content to be pored over without consulting the students, it’s the mark of the oppressor. I wasn’t asked whether or not I wanted to read Freire, nor was I given a choice to write this paper supporting Freire without being punished. Dr. Farmer, in his syllabus nonetheless, informs his students that all of his assignments must be completed “in order for you to pass this course.” In Freire’s eyes, Dr. Farmer could not be seen as anything *but* an oppressor. An oppressor who has told his students, by way of threatening to fail them, that they must do things as he has laid out for them. The result of these commands is this paper, a jumble of non-authentic thoughts.

Freire states that most oppressors don’t see themselves as such. I think Dr. Farmer should be made aware of his oppressions, and be helped to change his ways. Perhaps on the next assignment Dr. Farmer should allow more dialogue and flexibility between student and professor. Freire contends that in true problem-posing education, Dr. Farmer should present “the material to the students for their consideration, and then reconsider his earlier considerations as *the students express their own*.” I think Freire makes a very good point. Teachers should readjust their priorities, assignments, and readings to the liking of their students. That way, students wouldn’t have to endure the evils that professors inflict upon them, which we might never have known about unless Freire taught us about them, right?

To recap, this entire paper was an exercise in oppression, which was created by an oppressor, to oppress me and make sure that I could regurgitate Freire if I HAD to. After playing up Freire’s ideas and concepts on education for three pages, I think it’s only fair that I end the paper by making this point. I don’t believe a word I said.

After my initial reading of this paper, my first inclination was to return it to Devlyn and ask that it be rewritten according to the requirements of the assignment. In particular, I was bothered by the

scant attention given to problem-posing education—even though other students, too, had a difficult time paraphrasing what Freire meant by this term. I was also bothered by Devlyn’s handling of audience. Because this was the first assignment of the term, I had designated myself as the intended audience, believing that Devlyn and his classmates would be both well-practiced and comfortable with having to write for their teacher. Even though from this point in the semester we moved into more distant and complex audiences, it seemed appropriate that for the first assignment, I name myself as primary audience.

Now, apart from the *ad hominem* quality of Devlyn’s discussion, what bothered me most was his choice to refer to his audience in the third person. Thus, Devlyn informs us that “Dr. Farmer told me I was to put my own ideology aside” and that “Dr. Farmer should be made aware of his oppressions” and so on. It seemed odd to address his specified audience, me, in the third person. An obvious question arose then: to whom are these words addressed? Surely, one of composition’s most durable truisms is that audiences are always, in some measure, constructions. But is it possible that the same audience may be doubly constructed? This is exactly what I sensed in Devlyn’s essay—the presence of two Dr. Farmers, one spoken *to*, the other spoken *of*. In Bakhtin’s terms, the person referred to as “Dr. Farmer” is the hero of Devlyn’s discourse, its central theme to which Devlyn is oriented in an obviously evaluative way.⁴ But the other Dr. Farmer, the one actually reading Devlyn’s essay, it would seem, is enlisted as an ally who will stand alongside Devlyn in his many grievances against the named “Dr. Farmer” who appears in his essay. Again, using Bakhtinian terms, we might be tempted to say that Dr. Farmer, the reader, constitutes a *superaddressee* audience for Devlyn, an ideal but necessary third party, who will be responsive to his complaints, his request for the sort of fair hearing that Dr. Farmer, the teacher, could not or would not provide.

Of course, yet *another* Dr. Farmer—the one writing this book—did not respond warmly to Devlyn’s representations, at least not after a first reading. To be called an “oppressor,” not once but on several occasions throughout Devlyn’s essay, was admittedly a bit hard to

take, especially when one doesn't usually see oneself that way, as Devlyn (citing Freire) is quick to point out. Nothing too earth-shattering about that, I suppose. Nevertheless, after recovering from the initial sting of Devlyn's words, I resolved not to react—or overreact—to the personal, *ad hominem* features of his essay, but to try to understand what Devlyn was doing, to fathom why he decided to write *this paper this way*.

Simply put, what I determined was that Devlyn had something clear and forceful to say, but that his judgments about his teacher, about our particular class, about the rules, niceties, conventions, and habits of the institution—all of these, in fact, required Devlyn to be elusive and confounding in the manner of his saying. Elusive? Confounding? On a surface reading, it would seem that Devlyn's essay is nothing but straightforward—brutally direct, as a matter of fact, at least within certain passages. How could it possibly be argued that his paper seeks to elude the one reader it most desires to confront? How could it be said, in other words, that Devlyn's writing is Aesopian?

My earliest written response to Devlyn's essay tries to point out these contradictory tendencies or at least to show him the confusions I experienced while reading his paper. At the bottom of the paragraph that closes with "a jumble of non-authentic thoughts," I questioned Devlyn about his intended meaning(s):

Hmmm . . . You seem to be saying that this protest against my banking methods is "a jumble of non-authentic thoughts." Does that mean that you don't really believe that I'm a banking teacher, or that Freire is way off base? I don't find your essay jumbled or insincere, though only you could know the latter.

I was obviously struck by that phrase, "a jumble of non-authentic thoughts." Confused by this admission, I wondered to which of Devlyn's statements his seemingly blanket disclaimer was meant to apply. Given the positions he assumed in class, it was not hard to understand why Devlyn would consider the requirement of having to draw upon Freire for argumentative support as "non-authentic." He was no doubt miffed that the assignment forced him to write from a

Freirean point of view, or, in Bakhtinian terms, in a voice that he unequivocally rejected, indeed loathed. But notice that Devlyn's efforts to invalidate his statements are not limited to what Freire has to say. In fact, Devlyn tells his reader that it is "*this paper*" (my emphasis) that constitutes a "jumble of non-authentic thoughts." Would that not, then, include his condemnations of Dr. Farmer? When Devlyn says that "Dr. Farmer should be made aware of his oppressions," am I to read that statement as an authentic or non-authentic expression of Devlyn's views? And what if I choose to read Devlyn's unflattering judgments of Dr. Farmer as insincere or "inauthentic"? Would that not mean, oddly enough, that Devlyn approves of the banking methods that, in Devlyn's view, I (hypocritically) embrace?

My confusions did not get clarified in the remainder of the paper, nor did my uneasiness abate. In fact, by the end of his essay, when Devlyn closes with that magisterial final sentence, "I don't believe a word I said," I was more baffled—and, I should add—more deflated than ever. What teacher, after all, would be pleased at this confession of dishonesty? True, as before, that final sentence could be interpreted to mean that Devlyn doesn't believe a single word or idea he appropriated from Freire for the task of writing this paper. But could it not also mean that Devlyn didn't believe any of those *other* words either, the ones he used to convey his rather severe judgments of Dr. Farmer? And if the latter possibility is true, doesn't Devlyn's last sentence amount to a sort of "just kidding" close to a paper that in every other moment seems to relish lambasting his teacher for inconsistencies and "oppressions"?

In my final comment of his paper, I once again drew attention to the perplexities I experienced as a reader.

Will the real Devlyn please stand up? This is a smart, creative, and well-written response to the assignment. One of the keys to understanding your paper is uncovering the central assumption upon which it is based, namely, that because Dr. Farmer assigns Freire, he must therefore agree with everything Freire says. I wonder. . . . The confusing thing is where *you* stand on the issues you raise. You make a very strong (and insightful) critique of

your teacher (on behalf of your “real” views), and then you tell me those aren’t the real views you hold. Baffling.

I once again found myself struggling to make sense of yet another of Devlyn’s grand, sweeping comments, a statement whose only apparent purpose was to invalidate everything else he said. My end comment reiterates my confusion, but with something of a reflexive twist. I tried to call Devlyn’s attention to what I think to be the single guiding assumption of his paper, one that basically says that because a teacher teaches Freire, he or she must agree with Freire. I wanted Devlyn to entertain the notion that it might be possible to think *with* Freire, to write *with* Freire, to teach *with* Freire, and yet not to surrender oneself completely to Freire’s ideas. Indeed, I hoped to nudge Devlyn into considering that he just might become a *better* critic of Freire if he agreed (however briefly) to place himself inside of Freire’s perspective. I wanted Devlyn to know that positioning himself with Freire need not involve a compromise of his integrity. In short, I thought if I could establish the conditions for Devlyn and his classmates to make Freire “their own,” or in Bakhtin’s now familiar terms, to make Freire something of an “internally persuasive discourse” instead of an “authoritative” one, then I had, in some small measure, accomplished the important pedagogical goal of bringing close an otherwise remote and difficult text (*DI* 341-42). I wanted to give my students the opportunity to wrangle with, contend with, struggle with Freire. Indeed, my assignment was designed with this sole purpose in mind.

These intentions for Devlyn and his classmates were admittedly self-serving. When I teach Paulo Freire—or Adrienne Rich, Walker Percy, Richard Rodriguez, Joyce Carol Oates, and others—I customarily present their respective texts *in voice*, as if I were ventriloquizing their perspectives. In my experience, I have discovered this method to be more provocative of classroom dialogue than, say, disclosure approaches wherein teachers announce their social and political stances, their opinions of particular texts, and so on to their students. In my experience, such disclosures have something of a chilling effect, often eliciting more silence than vigorous engagement, more parroting of teacher’s views than honest discernment.

But, then, doesn't Devlyn prove me wrong on this point? Indeed, in retrospect, it seems to me that Devlyn was invigorated by the prospect that my teaching of Freire was somehow a full disclosure of my endorsement of Freire's views. As I note in my end comment, Devlyn concludes that because I chose to teach Freire and that because I spent a good deal of time explicating Freire's concepts, I must wholeheartedly embrace Freire's views. Otherwise, that "gotcha" quality to his writing would not be so sharp, so pronounced. (As a matter of fact, there is much in Freire that I do endorse, but there are facets of his work that I question and find rather off-putting.) And yet the Dr. Farmer constructed by Devlyn in his essay is clearly someone who is an enthusiast, a true believer, a devotee to a Freirean worldview.

What Devlyn does not allow himself, or me, is the possibility of some middle ground on the issues raised by Freire. For Devlyn, the requirement to write *with* Freire, even temporarily, could involve nothing but a compromise of his own viewpoint, his very integrity. The problem he faced then was how to give expression to his point of view, and, at the same time, satisfy what the assignment called for. More than that, he had to accomplish this task in such a way that did not invite severe reprisals from his instructor. Devlyn, in other words, faced an Aesopian predicament and responded appropriately to his predicament with Aesopian strategies.

What sort of Aesopian strategies? As I earlier noted, Devlyn's essay can be read as one that constructs two audiences, two Dr. Farmers, one of whom he musters as an ally in his disagreements with the other. Recall that Dr. Farmer, the teacher, is something of a prop, a straw man, a foil, for Devlyn's vehemence, while the other Dr. Farmer, the one reading and evaluating Devlyn's essay, is, potentially at least, someone who could lend a sympathetic ear, someone who might be able to understand the predicament that Devlyn found himself in when faced with having to write this essay.

Had I been satisfied with a facile reading of his paper, I would have been content to dismiss Devlyn's words as the grumblings of a bright, clever, and fairly resentful student, apparently someone who, for whatever reason, was hell-bent on offending his teacher. But I heard in Devlyn's words other tones, beseeching and earnest tones, tones

that sought out a fair hearing for his point of view, that sought some understanding beyond the diatribe that he presented to me. Whatever inclinations I had to be punitive in my response to Devlyn slowly faded as I came to realize that I had been doubly constructed as an audience, that I was for Devlyn both an enemy and a possible ally. I chose to be more of the latter toward Devlyn, a decision that marked our relationship throughout the remainder of the term.

As I also observed, Devlyn's essay is Aesopian because it periodically issues sweeping disclaimers, blanket statements whose apparent purpose is to invalidate everything else that has been said by its author. Although Devlyn seems to be most direct and clear when he divulges that his paper is "a jumble of non-authentic thoughts" or when he concludes with the sentence, "I don't believe a word I said," Devlyn is, in fact, at his most elusive and obscure. He ends up leaving his reader, *this* reader, thoroughly confused as to exactly where he stands. Was that what Devlyn wanted to do? Did he intend to befuddle? Confound? Evade? Did Devlyn devise a clever way to avoid being pinned down—a way that also served to exempt him from responsibility for his words?

I don't know. But I realized that, had I chosen to confront Devlyn about those somewhat personal accusations toward his teacher, I would have had a difficult time doing so. By making sure that he disavowed all that he asserted, Devlyn had effectively given himself a loophole (or in official parlance, "deniability"). Had I confronted Devlyn about the various accusations of "oppressions" that he leveled against me, he could simply deny that he ever intended his words to be read that way. After all, could he not justifiably remind me that he didn't believe *a word* of what he wrote?

If I read him correctly, Devlyn had found a way to make his point and, at the same time, protect himself against a harsh reprisal. Not that what he turned in entailed no risk whatsoever. It surely must have occurred to Devlyn that he might receive a failing grade or a demand that he rewrite the entire paper or, at the very least, a verbal reprimand of some kind. Such likely responses must have crossed his mind. But Devlyn chose to take a measured risk: using the words and concepts of a thinker he despised, Devlyn turned those same words

and concepts against his teacher, the person who made him write an assignment that he found to be distasteful, “oppressive.” More importantly, he took pains to minimize the risks involved by deploying the sorts of Aesopian strategies that I outline here.

Devlyn received a high mark on this first paper. I liked the intellectual energy I sensed in reading his rather combative prose, however uncomfortable it was to encounter upon a first reading. I also liked the ingenuity with which he approached an assignment that he clearly did not want to write. More than anything, though, I liked how Devlyn had discovered a way to speak his piece yet do so in a manner that made teacherly sanctions difficult or unlikely. For this assignment, Devlyn proved himself to be a deft rhetorician, an Aesopian writer of no mean ability. Or, was it possible that I read too much into his paper?

In keeping with the dialogic purpose of this discussion, I asked Devlyn to answer my interpretation of his paper. I close with his response.

Looking Back, Three Years Later

When I arrived at East Carolina University, I was excited at the chance to finally write as an adult. I had endured the restraints of high school censorship for four years, and I was eager to push the buttons of any college professor I encountered. Whenever I was asked to compose a paper, I found myself purposefully trying to go against the spirit of the assignment but still fulfilling the requirements for it. My intention, honestly, was to see if I could be penalized for my views while still completing the work as instructed. It was innocent at first, slipping in curse words when I felt justified, personally insulting the subject(s) of the assignment, or using colorful but unnecessary analogies. I breezed my way through my freshman and sophomore courses, never receiving any criticism for the faux-fanaticism with which I approached my work.

This being said, I must admit that there were times when I really did not believe a word of what I wrote, because I was writing mostly to shock and elicit response from my instructors. Upon arriving in Dr. Farmer’s Advanced Composition class, I fully intended to keep pushing until I was reprimanded. I envisioned the day when a teacher tried to censor or dock my grade because

that teacher didn't agree with my opinion. I knew I could win that argument (I was very confrontational at that point in my schooling). Fortunately, I realized within a week of taking Dr. Farmer's course that I would not need to fabricate outrage, but would be supplied it on a class to class basis.

Dr. Farmer makes reference to Mary Beth, a woman with whom I had numerous heated discussions during class. When ideas and ideologies are being bandied about, I am not one to back down. Half of the situation was honest disbelief at what was being taught; the other half was playing devil's advocate. It was very rare for me to go to a class and actually have an intense discussion—more common was the uninterested silence that pervaded my lecture-based classes.

When the Freire assignment was first handed down, I was somewhat taken by surprise. I couldn't really believe the box that Dr. Farmer had constructed for himself. As someone who was dying to find conflict and "nail his teacher to the wall," so to speak, this absolutely overjoyed me. How, on the one hand, could Dr. Farmer actually teach Freire's ideology of educational freedom, then expect me to write a paper that would ultimately end with me using an experience from my own life to validate Freire's views? After receiving additional confirmation that this was what Dr. Farmer wanted, I strolled home along Tenth Street, relishing the almost certain conflict to come.

As I sat down at the computer to write what I felt at the time to be my most defiant masterpiece, I actually reconsidered it for a moment. Was this going too far? Attacking a teacher for doing his job? I wondered if it would just be simpler to do the assignment and let it go. After discussing Freire at length in class, and being verbally chastised by fellow classmates (at least that's how I saw it then), I knew there was no way that I was *not* going to write this paper.

I have always had a knack for manipulating words and ideas and turning them against people. I was absolutely dumbfounded at how Dr. Farmer could plant the seeds of Freire (with great fervor, I might add) in our minds, and then engage the very thing Freire discourages! I set out with the intention of writing a paper that would simply make him angry, but, as I found myself in the middle of my essay, I realized that I was actually making a valid point.

Teaching students about educational freedom obviously comes with many perils, the most basic being, "How do I teach someone *not* to merely receive the information as *I* see fit to dispense it?" It has been my experience that only the very exceptional student will go beyond the classroom and

assigned readings to the point of actually having an “authentic” learning experience. Most students have a predisposition to simply learn the material well enough to pass the test, and then forget it. This pattern is bred from a continuous line of teachers who fail to inspire, and students who fail to care about their education. I think Freire is misled when he makes the teacher the culprit of educational wrongdoing, because students, too, must take responsibility for allowing this situation to continue in their classrooms.

It occurs to me now (very upsettingly, I might add), that in writing this paper that railed against Freire and Dr. Farmer, that I may have validated Freire in a way that I had not intended at the time. I had become so intent on throwing Freire in Dr. Farmer’s face that I ultimately achieved what Freire would have wanted. I did not simply take the information, learn it, accept it, and regurgitate it for Dr. Farmer. I absorbed it, twisted it, turned it, cursed it, and tried my hardest to use it against the one who had shown it to me. Now, after pointing out the fallacy of Dr. Farmer’s assignment, I fully understand that, even though my paper may not have been the response he wanted, Dr. Farmer taught me Freire on levels that I did not understand at the time. He personalized Freire’s ideas, made them real to me without my realizing it.

It played out in my favor in the most immediate sense, I suppose. I received a passing grade on the assignment, and succeeded in, well, if not defeating, then at least confusing someone I regarded as my intellectual superior. And honestly, there were no sanctions that Dr. Farmer could impose on me in retaliation for my paper, even though what I said most certainly bordered on character assassination. You cannot preach educational freedom and then penalize someone for using it! (I remember feeling very smug when I wrote the last line of the paper, thinking to myself, “You can give me boundaries, but I’m going to do everything I can to mess up what’s inside them.”)

After three years, my initial defiance toward Freire and Dr. Farmer has led to a deeper understanding of what was trying to be said during those class sessions where I mounted my soapbox in vehement rebuttal. Educational freedom is a difficult subject to define, especially if you take into consideration the fact that all teachers teach from *some* bias. But that’s another problem for another time. . . .

I would like to personally thank Dr. Farmer for allowing me to participate in this exchange. I think it’s only fair to end this paper by making this point: I believe every word I said.