

Reading Joe Malkovich

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At the risk of cliché, I have to begin here with thanks. Donna Qualley points out how a writer sometimes needs to “crawl inside of a term or concept in order to inhabit it and experience it for oneself.” I’ve been fascinated and humbled to watch these six authors inhabit my prose and redirect my thinking. They’ve added to the range of uses to which *Rewriting* can be put, and in doing so have made it a more nuanced, flexible, and suggestive text. I am deeply grateful.

But there can be something a little unsettling, too, about having others crawl around inside your phrasings and ideas. I’ve felt this especially when I’ve assigned *Rewriting* in my own classes. How does Harris teach Harris? In trying to figure that out, I’ve been reminded of the scene from *Being John Malkovich* when John Malkovich, playing himself, goes through the mysterious portal that allows the other characters in the film to enter into his mind (if all this seems like wheels within wheels, well, it’s that sort of movie) and once there—inside his own head, as it were—discovers a world where everyone has the face of John Malkovich. What a nightmare for a teacher. While I may aim to intrigue, to inspire, to provoke, the last thing I want is a classroom where people recite me to me.

And yet I feel it would be odd not to assign the book. Students in other courses at Duke read it, and it does still very much speak to my aims as a writing teacher. And so I find myself stuck with this other Harris—the one in the book,

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who almost always seems more articulate than I can manage at any one moment to be, as well as, in a peculiar way, more authoritative. Harris and I. How can I do something more than ventriloquize this other me? How do I ask students to make “generous and assertive” use of a text their teacher has written?

It took me about a year to work out a response to this problem. Let me briefly describe what I now ask students in the classes I teach to do with *Rewriting* as I think it turns out to be (unexpectedly? but of course?) similar to what the authors collected here do with my work. For what moves me in reading both the work of my students and the essays here is how they enact the very sort of intellectual conversation that I wrote *Rewriting* to encourage.

Each fall semester the Duke Writing Program publishes *Deliberations*, an in-house journal featuring some of the best work done by students in Writing 20, our first-year writing course, in the previous year. Many programs have such journals. In this issue, for instance, William Morgan describes the strong and imaginative uses that tutors at the NYU Writing Center make of the essays in Mercer Street in explaining the moves of intellectual writing to the students they are working with. In a similar effort, I ask my Writing 20 students to read *Deliberations* with an eye for examples of the moves I talk about in *Rewriting*. In part, this is simply a way to make sure that they really do read the journal, and *Rewriting*, too. But it is also an attempt to get students to think about *Rewriting* as trying to describe the sort of work they are themselves engaged in doing. We then spend a class talking about the passages they’ve noted in *Deliberations*, and answering any questions that they might raise about *Rewriting*.

The real work follows. Here’s how I ask students to respond as writers to *Rewriting*:



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Extending Rewriting

Please read the introduction and first three chapters of *Rewriting* (pp. 1-72).

In *Rewriting*, I describe a set of moves that writers make in using the work of others: coming to terms, forwarding, countering, taking an approach. In this assignment, I'd like you to add to or revise that list of writerly moves.

Find a passage from the most recent issue of *Deliberations* in which a writer makes what seems to you a particularly interesting or effective use of another text. You might ask: What would make a move particularly interesting or effective? I'd reply: When a writer uses a text in a way that is not well described by the terms offered in my book, that puts a new spin on coming to terms or forwarding or countering—or that does something altogether different.

I am thus asking you to extend my project in *Rewriting*, to take my approach and make it your own. Your task is to write an essay in which you point to a way of using texts that I have not described. There are a number of challenges embedded in this task: You need to identify a clear example of an interesting move made by a writer in *Deliberations*, you need to give that move a name, and you need to show how this new move adds to what I have to say in *Rewriting*.

Good luck! I look forward to seeing how you push my work!

Form: Critical essay, about 750-1000

words

Deadline: etc., etc.

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I should note that I don't give these essays a letter grade, or ask students to revise what they've written. We do, however, talk about several of their responses in our next class meeting. My sense is that, whether they read *Rewriting* or not, students in a class that I teach will end up spending much of their time trying to "inhabit" the approach to writing that I have to offer. My aim in this assignment is to give them a chance to step back, to reflect on that approach, and to think about how they might move beyond it.

Most students find this an unusual assignment, but one that they take some real pleasure in doing. In a recent semester, for instance, here are the terms that students added to the list of moves in *Rewriting*:

- Relating
- Defending
- Self-speculating
- Interpreting
- Progressing
- Placing texts in social context
- Accounting
- Clarifying
- Refining
- Extending extending
- Connecting
- Backdropping
- Filtering
- Linking
- False forwarding

Allow me to offer a quick sense of what students meant by a few of these moves: By refining, one student described how a writer summarized a text in way that helped it make more sense that it had originally appeared to; by interpreting, another insisted on the value and difficulty of simply explaining what a very complex text actually meant; and by connecting, another student pointed to how a writer made her point through comparing and linking two seemingly



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disparate texts. In these and most of the other brief essays composed for this assignment, students did not review or rebut or simply praise *Rewritings*, but rather continued the sort of work that I began in it.

I realize that there is an irony here, but I think it is a generative one. In asking students to push beyond the terms I offer in *Rewritings*, I am in effect asking them to rewrite my work—that is, to take my approach. As one student remarked, “I never had to write about a book by somebody I knew. I felt like I had to be nice but also really try to say something.” The only thing I could think to say in reply was, “Well, that’s what we do.”

And that is indeed what the essays in this issue do so well. They make *Rewriting* their own by reading it in new contexts and emphasizing new possibilities in its ideas and phrasings. We all know other modes of response: debunking, critique, accolade. But those are not the distinctive registers of our work. Conversation is not debate. The aim of intellectual writing is not to tear down but to create. The point of putting one’s oar in is to move the boat forward.

So let me respond to these essays by looking for the terms and ideas that they add to our ongoing conversation about teaching rewriting. I’ll start with Donna Qualley’s rich account of the work she does with new teachers of writing at Western Washington University. I agree with Qualley that the crux of such work is helping new teachers learn how to construct their own courses—a process I suspect we often forestall when we simply provide sets of readings and assignments for them to walk through. At the least, along with her, I’ve been discouraged by the lack of interest many veteran teachers show in course design as a form of writing. I was thus impressed by how Qualley and her colleagues used *Rewriting* not as a template for their courses but as something more like a theory of intellectual writing—that is, as one way of describing the sorts of work we might want students to learn how to do as writers. Once we have such a sense of

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where we want students to go, it seems to me, it becomes the job of the teacher as a professional to locate materials and write assignments that can help them get here. One of the things we should expect from people trained in our graduate programs is clear evidence that they can compose distinctive and thoughtful writing courses of their own.

The term that emerges out of this work with new teachers that resonates most for me is complicating. As

Qualley puts it,

Complicating seems to sit somewhere between forwarding and countering or maybe it involves both simultaneously. It’s neither “Yes, and . . .” or “Yes, but . . .” It’s both. It’s the move that is always in motion.

Complicating is a term I associate with my friend and colleague from my years at the University of Pittsburgh, Mariolina Salvatori. I can’t imagine there is anyone who spent much time working at Pitt over the last two decades who didn’t, at some point, have Mariolina turn to them and say, “Let me complicate that idea for you.” I admit that I wasn’t always happy to listen to Mariolina saying that—that my own instinct is to acknowledge complexity but quickly push for clarity. Qualley helps me here to see the importance of that first move, of pausing to recognize and articulate the complexity of a text or position before trying to forward or counter it. For if we move too fast, we risk missing much of the interest of the ideas and materials we are working with.

Similarly, in his fine essay on the role of reading in writing center conferences, William Morgan writes about the value of stepping back, of giving students time to play with the possible meanings of texts before committing themselves to writing about them. I was pleased to see this focus on reading. I actually began work on *Rewriting* in the hope of writing a book on reading as a practice, but found that whenever I tried to describe how one might forge a “reading” of a text, what I was really talking about was the act of



writing. But there is no question that the sort of writing that most interests me begins in reading and remains intertwined with it. Morgan is right to say that I am vague in talking about invention; I don't think I understand how it happens. Indeed, I've found it troubling that, in my own experiences, so much of what it is involved in producing a first draft seems to take place when I am walking my dogs, or talking with friends, or trying to get to sleep, or unable to shake the memory of one text while I am reading or watching or listening to another. I've never been sure how to make these inchoate moments part of a pedagogy, or even if they should be. But Morgan persuades me that I might want to reflect more on what is going on at such moments, on "why writers must step back at times from their sources if they are ever to say something new," and on how I can help students know when they need to pause, to rethink, to consider alternatives. And his story about Chris, the NYU tutor who asks students not to define the main idea of a difficult text but instead to list three to five important aspects of it, offers a compelling example of such teaching in action.

It's telling that all of the authors here write from the perspective of someone working with new teachers, and William Fitzgerald centers his prospective reading of *Rewriting* on precisely this issue—that is, on the connections (and gaps) between classroom and program. Fitzgerald notes what he calls the double-voicing of *Rewriting*. The point struck home with me. For at several moments during my work on *Rewriting*, I was urged by both readers and editors to address my text directly to fellow teachers. I declined. For what I wanted most to do in the book was to model a way of talking with undergraduates as beginning intellectuals. I wanted, in effect, to use *Rewriting* to say, "Here's how I talk with students about these things."

But, of course, I wanted to say that to other writing teachers. And the sort of teacher I was imagining as overhearing my conversation with students was someone with

the time, authority, and desire to remake her or his course. And that sort of professional is someone whose work needs to be supported and valued by our field and by our schools and programs. As Fitzgerald writes,

To read *Rewriting* prospectively, then, is to consider not only the practices one wishes to examine and model in a writing class, let us say one's own, but also to interrogate the conditions at an institutional level in which a project such as rewriting can be sustained.

Fitzgerald works through much of his essay to relate what I've had to say about writing programs to what I say about teaching writing. He is especially sensitive to what he calls the "ecology of writing courses and programs"—to the ways students and teachers are positioned to make more or less effective use of differing sorts of texts or approaches. And he offers a brilliant illustration of this ecology in his analysis of the sort of program that might be needed to support teachers working with *Rewriting* compared to the wider reach of Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein's *They Say/I Say*—a smart text whose aims are in many ways similar to my own, but whose approach to teaching academic writing is far more direct. As Fitzgerald points out, the sort of writing course I describe "does not come cheap." I value his prospective reading of *Rewriting* for its insistence that innovative teaching depends on fair working conditions and strong support for writing faculty.

The essay I find hardest to inhabit as a reader is Catherine McDonald's, but that may be because she extends my thinking so far. McDonald's key concepts are rhetoric and genre—and these are not terms (or fields of scholarship) for which I hold much feeling. I admire McDonald's determined effort to avoid universal models of academic prose and instead to set our talk about writing in motion, to use genre to describe not types of text but forms of work. But I still hesitate to define the goals of a writing course in terms of



an increased awareness of genre or rhetoric, or anything else. What distinguishes our work, I think, is its concern with practice. Students should end the semester writing in different ways than they were at its start. Something needs to happen in and to their prose—and that something is what we need as teachers to describe.

In making such claims, I am aware of entering another discourse—that of the field of rhetoric and composition—a discourse which revolves around questions about the relationship between theory and teaching, rhetoric and writing, scholarship and pedagogy. In “This Is Not a Handbook,” Scott Campbell and Wendy Pfrenger question the stance I take in *Rewriting* towards that professional discourse. They astutely note the irony of how, in writing a book about using the work of others, I fail to talk at much length about many of the influences on my own thinking. Instead, they suggest, drawing on an image from Plato’s cave, that I tend to project a flattened image of arguments about writing from our field onto my text. *Rewriting* is clearly recognizable, they argue, as a book written within the “Pittsburgh school” of teaching writing—a tradition emphasizing a performative view of language and a close attention to student texts. The problem is that this perspective isn’t made clear as a perspective in my book.

They’re right—both about my intellectual antecedents and about the nervousness that they sense at some points in the pages of *Rewriting*. Part of that anxiety can be traced, I suspect, to the particulars of my career. I’m proud to be grouped with scholars like Coles, Bartholomae, Kameen, Salvatori, Lu, Horner, and Miller—the Pittsburgh school. But I am also aware that this is a tradition firmly associated with teaching writing within an English department—which is not a site where my own work has been located for some time. My PhD is in education, and for the last ten years I’ve worked in an independent and multidisciplinary writing program. But Campbell and Pfrenger also note an ambivalence in the very

form of what they call “a theorized handbook, or maybe a handbooked theory.” In trying to speak to undergraduates in *Rewriting*, I often came up against the question of how much the arguments of our field would be of practical use or interest to them as writers. My inclination was to avoid what I think of as “inside baseball” talk, the sort of behind the scenes conversation that takes place among professionals in a field. But what reading this set of essays makes clear to me is that this professional discourse is not at all behind the scenes in *Rewriting*, but is rather right up front as one of the conversations I want to enter. All of the authors here read *Rewriting* as not only offering advice to writers but also intervening in debates about teaching. In doing so, they push me to state more clearly why I wanted to write such a double-voiced book.

Donna Qualley hints at one response when she places *Rewriting* in a line of books by people like Peter Elbow and Donald Murray—of teachers who draw on their own experiences as writers in speaking to students. I’m flattered to be put in such company. But I had other books in mind, too, as I was working on *Rewriting*, although I hesitate to set my work on the same shelf as them—books like Roger Sale’s *On Writing*, Walker Gibson’s *Tough, Sweet, and Stuffy*, Ann Berthoff’s *Reclaiming the Imagination*, and Bill Coles’ *The Phrased I*. What I admire about these texts is how they are not so much textbooks as books about writing—books that blur the lines between theory and application, that suggest that there can be a kind of writing about writing that speaks at once to students and teachers. What worries me is that they are all old books. Indeed all of them were written before I started work in the field, and I’ve now been around for a while. The last twenty years have seen a flowering of scholarship in writing and rhetoric, as well as the production of many smart and well-informed textbooks. But the intended readers of our scholarship and of our pedagogy have grown increasingly distinct. I’d like to see more books that try once again to mix the two.



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Notes on Contributors

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William FitzGerald is an Assistant Professor of Rhetoric and Writing Studies at the University of Rutgers, Camden. He has published on the personal statement as professional discourse and on the rhetorical theory of Kenneth Burke. His project, ongoing, is *Speakeable Rhetorics: A Rhetoric of Prayer*.

Joseph Harris directs the independent and multidisciplinary Duke University Writing Program. At Duke, he teaches courses in academic writing, critical reading, writing and social class, images of teaching in fiction and film, and writing pedagogies. His recent book, *Rewriting: How to Do Things with Texts*, offers writers a set of strategies for making strong and generous use of the work of others. He is also the author of *A Teaching Subject*, *Media Journal*, and several articles on teaching writing and supporting the work of writing teachers. From 1994-99, Harris edited CCC: College Composition and Communication, and he is currently series editor of the CCC Studies in Writing & Rhetoric.

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William M. Morgan directs the Writing Center and an advanced essay writing course for the Steinhart School of Culture, Education, and Human Development at New York University. He is currently writing a piece on the essays of Rebecca Solnit and researching a larger project about the teaching of writing and the professional classes.

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