

David Bleich. *Know and Tell: A Writing Pedagogy of Disclosure, Genre, and Membership*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann-Boynton/Cook, 1998. 248 pp. \$28.00

Darsie Bowden. *The Mythology of Voice*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann-Boynton/Cook, 1998. 149 pp. \$21.00

These two books address the teaching of writing as a form of care for the self. Darsie Bowden offers a stinging critique of teachers who mystify the task of writing by demanding that students somehow forge “voices” that are uniquely their own; David Bleich describes an alternative practice in which he asks students to examine how their memberships in various communities help shape what they have to say as writers. Both books are published as part of Boynton-Cook’s CrossCurrents series, edited by Charles Schuster, and both are composed in the clear, slightly informal, teacher-oriented prose that has long served as that publisher’s house style, while also showing a theoretical and scholarly edge that Boynton texts have often lacked. They are impressive books—pointed, well-versed, and sensible. But they are also limited in a way which the task of reviewing them for *WPA* makes apparent, as both offer good advice about teaching but little sense of why such advice is so routinely ignored, or of how one might work at a programmatic (rather than classroom) level to improve writing instruction.

In his great, ordinary set of essays in cultural criticism, *Mythologies*, Roland

Review

Unmanaged Care

Joseph Harris

Barthes argues that myth is a “second-order semiological system” (114) in which the first, historically-situated meaning of a text is displaced so that it can then function in service of an ideology—his key example being the way in which the image of black soldier offering a military salute is transformed into a benign symbol of the French empire (116). “The fundamental character of the mythical concept,” Barthes argues, “is to be appropriated” (117). While Darsie Bowden does not invoke Barthes, she presents voice as a myth in terms very similar to his, arguing that the concept as now used refers less to the actual tone or register of a text than to the felt “presence” of its author in its phrasings. Voice thus becomes a key term in a mythology of writing as the expression of self—and more invidiously, of a certain kind of self: controlled, unified, authentic, idiosyncratic, sincere. Bowden believes that the foregrounding of voice obscures key questions about how writers locate themselves in relation to other thinkers, texts, and issues—that such a focus in effect depoliticizes the activity of writing.

This is by now a familiar line of thought in composition studies; indeed, the famous debate between Peter Elbow and David Bartholomae, staged at the 1989 and 1991 CCCCs and reprinted in CCC in 1995, centers in large part on questions of voice, with Bartholomae arguing for much the sort of contextual, Bakhtinian approach that Bowden advocates. What Bowden adds to this discussion is a useful tracing of notions of voice from classical rhetoric to our time, showing how the concept ironically grew in importance as the actual role of the human voice in delivering a speech or reciting a text declined. Perhaps her most interesting chapter surveys psycholinguistic research which suggests that readers must mentally revoice the words of a text in order to “chunk” and parse its syntax, and that the more complex or unfamiliar a text is, the more such “acoustic imaging” may be required (88-95). But what is most intriguing about this literal view of revoicing as comprehension is how little it connects up with the metaphor of voice as self. The proponents of voice, Bowden makes clear, are not concerned with how readers make use of internal speech rhythms to decode texts, or with how writers use the same to help their readers understand what they have to say, but rather with how authors imprint ownership on their work, identify their texts as uniquely as their own. In the market of ideas, voice thus functions not only as index of expression, but as a form of copyright.

I enjoyed reading Bowden’s book and agreed with much of what she had to say, but in the end had some problems in figuring out what use to

make of it. I suspect that she had something of the same problem, as she closes her text with the hope that in re-examining voice and other common metaphors for writing, we might “come to understand thereby a bit more about ourselves” (140)—a goal that oddly echoes the sort of therapeutic teaching she has spent her book in criticizing. Early on her book, Bowden briefly describes a style of teaching that asks students not to be “authentic” but to be “interesting”—that is, that tries to value writing not in terms of how expressive, dramatic, or honest it may be, but rather for how well a writer incorporates other views and texts and locates what she has to say in relation to them, that defines her “interest” in the discussion (13-19). I wish that Bowden had sacrificed some of her critique of voice to further articulating this program for a different sort of teaching, especially since it seems so well-attuned to the kind of work with texts that students are asked to do when they enter college.

David Bleich’s work on the uses that students make of language dates back to the 1970s with his landmark studies of reader-response to literature, *Readings and Feelings* (1975) and *Subjective Criticism* (1978). Since then, in *The Double Perspective* (1988) and now in *Know and Tell*, Bleich has grown progressively more interested in situating individuals within a social context that accounts for how their work as readers and writers is shaped by gender, ethnicity, and—especially—schooling. For the constant in Bleich’s career has been his interest in teaching—as shown in the respectful attention he pays to the writings of students and the care with which he analyzes how the dynamics of the classroom can shape their encounters with texts. “I thought the academy was school,” he muses at the start of *Know and Tell*, before quickly asserting that he now realizes that “teaching is not valued” (1)—and much of his book can be read as an account of how Bleich has struggled to retain a sense of mission as a teacher in an academy which values research over work with students. *Know and Tell* contests this hierarchy relentlessly, returning time and again to the classrooms that Bleich has worked in and to his efforts to engage students in collaborative projects and dialogue.

It’s good stuff. Bleich comes across as a provocative teacher who seems to have never tired over a long career of his rethinking his theoretical positions, inventing new courses, and responding vigorously to the ideas and writings of students. The specific examples in *Know and Tell* illustrate his growing interest over the past decade with modes of collaboration and the need for individuals to disclose themselves as members of intellectual

communities and traditions. But Bleich seems far less interested in forms of collective work beyond the classroom; rather, he offers a view of the teacher as a heroic individual bucking the system, holding out against the corporate down-sizing of faculties, attacks on tenure, large-scale placement efforts, the reduction of complex intellectual work to a single letter-grade, and other “military, corporate, and bureaucratic interests” in education (173). What this leaves Bleich with, it seems to me, is a pedagogy and politics of charisma, in which change is almost always pictured as taking place at the level of interaction between teacher and student, or between students under the guidance of a teacher. How faculty and administrators might work to revise programs and curricula, or to reform their institutions to support teaching as well as scholarship, only gets hinted at in *Know and Tell*—with a brief early discussion of the efforts of the Syracuse University Writing Program to define a range of sites beyond the classroom where teaching can be said to take place (9-11).

I don't mean to fault Bleich for what he did not write. But it is useful, I think, to read *Know and Tell* against another recent study, *As If Learning Mattered*, in which Richard Miller urges compositionists to admit to our roles as middle-managers in a highly bureaucratized system of education as a first step in trying use those positions to reform the institutions in which we work. Bleich and Miller offer two competing modes of resistance to the corporate university: the rebel and the critical insider. *Know and Tell* shows, I think, both the appeal and the limits of the rebel, the dissident intellectual, as an agent of reform. I'd jump at the chance to have an energetic and innovative teacher like David Bleich on my faculty, but there is a somewhat nostalgic tone to his book, a sense that he is one of a dying breed, a last hold-out against big-money researchers and disciplinary careerists. We need books that will help us create programs that will allow teachers to imagine themselves not only as alien intellectuals but as members of a collective project, a new sort of faculty. At the end *The Mythology of Voice*, Darsie Bowden urges us to attend to the work of scholars in Women's Studies as offering new perspectives on authorship and collaboration. I would make a slightly different proposal, that we look carefully at how *programs* in Women's Studies (as well as Africana Studies, Latino/a Studies, Urban Studies, and others) have altered business-as-usual in many universities, changing the paths that many undergraduates take toward their degrees and putting pressure on the sorts of courses that traditional departments offer—and that we then try to imagine how writing programs might play a similarly disruptive role.

Works Cited

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