Writing the Social Text

POETICS AND POLITICS IN SOCIAL SCIENCE DISCOURSE

RICHARD HARVEY BROWN
EDITOR

Chapter 3

The Interpretation of Disciplinary Writing

Charles Bazerman

The reflexive rhetorical turn in knowledge-producing disciplines has called attention to the text, which is the medium through which knowledge is transmitted and is the matter in which knowledge is embodied outside the consciousness of any individual. Although text only gains meaning through the interpretive act of the reader, nonetheless text is the representation of knowledge that reaches beyond the mind of any individual. Text is knowledge that stands between people. Once attention is called to the text as the interpersonal, social realization of knowledge, many questions immediately arise as to what can and cannot be accomplished through a text, a purely symbolic artifact of human symbolic activity. Are these texts any more than arbitrary remnants of arbitrary signs? How can words and symbols, the shadows of transient mental concepts, embody any substantive knowledge of the physical world? How can language reach beyond the social beliefs and assumptions on which it is based and which it embodies? Even in purely social terms, is the intersubjectivity or apparent intersubjectivity on which language use is predicated of such a kind as to ensure fully shared meaning, univocality of expression, or even common understanding?

These are indeed puzzling questions that I have inevitably had to address in the course of my studies of scientific writing. But in addressing these questions I have gradually moved towards an interpretive stance where these questions no longer seem so troubling or important. The answers to the questions are not to be found by direct assault on epistemology, so much as by adopting an appropriate perspective on the interactions that occur through discourse. The questions as phrased all come out of a traditional hermeneutic perspective where the importance of a text is to be found in what it says, its meaning, as though essential meaning resided in the text, and all one

needed was the right method to read that meaning message correctly. Because texts exist between people, and only gain meaning in the individual acts of reading and the social acts of negotiating interpretation, such questions inevitably lead one down nihilistic paths of infinite regress and mirrored hallways with no end. I will argue here rather for an interpretive perspective that focuses on what a text does within local networks of activity, rather than on what it says. Such a perspective does not try to remove text and meaning from human symbol-making, but rather grants power and substance to the text as operationally significant in human affairs. Such a perspective takes language as neither essentially grounded nor irremediably insubstantial.

The beginning of traditional hermeneutics study is the text, the meaningful text, the sacred text, the text enbued with meaning by an extrahuman power. The aim of hermeneutics is to locate that meaning either in the correct reading of the surface of the words or more deeply within some underlying framework, metaphorical system, or secret decoding process. Hermeneutics takes the point of view of the reader confronting a text that is taken to be capable of revealing a correct and definitive meaning when interpreted by the skilled or knowledgeable reader. Despite the loss of universal belief in a divinity who guarantees that absolute meaning inheres in the word, the problem of meaning remains the central problem that activates and troubles most literary studies. The main activity remains, under many guises, developing a truer, deeper, more meaningful reading of various texts that are considered to yield up new secrets to hermeneutic gymnastics. The critic remains the primary intermediary between the unknowledgeable reader and the special meaning of the esoteric text, not unlike the role that some professors of literature take in the classroom, introducing students into the arts of literary reading and interpretation applied to the body of more meaningful, but difficult because so meaningful, texts that comprise the literary canon. This interpretive tradition, in which I was trained during its late-new-critical phase, has been transformed by the ideas of latter-day theory, which often attempts to show that texts mean nothing, that they are vapors of the moment, blown by political, ideological, cultural, or idiosyncratically personal winds. Yet meaning, or the lack thereof, remains the focus of literary attention. The daily practice of literary criticism, applied to texts deemed to be more meaningful, whether in a narrow traditional or broadly expanded canon, remains much the same. Thoughts of the evanescence of meaning, when addressed, are treated largely in the realm of abstraction and polemic, where these thoughts evoke either anarchic joy or outraged denial.

Of course, inherent in the idea of hermeneutics is the notion of difficult texts, texts whose meaning is not self-evident. When attention turned from divine, sacred texts, holding depths of wisdom beyond human understanding, to texts of human making, hermeneutics took for its domain those tricky texts written by clever authors who were thought to have greater wit or wisdom than the rest of us. This class of interesting texts was designated literature (along with several other classes of culturally valued texts), and was in most cases thought to be fictive, to be not responsible for conveying any state of affairs in the world in which we all live our daily lives. Texts that described that daily world were assumed to be mundane, and the familiarity of our own world made the meanings of such texts contemptuously easy to decode. Only by the free play of the imagination could writers create texts worthy of hermeneutics. Romantic versions of the self and the power of the imagination were crucial in institutionalizing this sacred role for literature and its interpretation.

The study of disciplinary texts as I practice it reverses all these assumptions. It is not hermeneutical; it is not primarily interested in drawing out a meaning taken to inhere in the text. It is in fact granted that these texts may be very easy indeed for the usual users of these texts (although not necessarily so, for philosophers and physicists and lawyers may devote many hours to drawing out the depths and crannies of a page). Moreover, it does not even assume there is a meaning that inheres in the text, although users may take the meaning as inhering unproblematically. Rather it considers the meaning to be constructed locally within the occasions of the text's appearance. Meaning is negotiated and accomplished between writer and reader across the text, both drawing on their understanding and experience of their social, literary/linguistic, natural, and psychological worlds, but does not exist within the text itself. It is within the art of writing to constrain potential meanings that might be imputed by readers from their likely frames of interests and interpretation to within the bounds desired by the writer. And it is within the art of reading to reconstruct out of the reader's own cognitive resources a meaning that might plausibly account for the words handed over by the writer. Lawyers and contending philosophers might hostilely test the bounds of the constraints of words within the relevant social context of linguistic practices, while poets and their readers might grant each other greater interpretive sympathy and leeway.

What I am interested in are the interactions and relationships established across the text, how the text conjoins things (people, words, memories, experiences, institutions, groups, actions, plans, literary traditions, conversations, and so on) within dynamic relations. The intentions and meanings attributed by writers and readers are only momentary events within the processes by which texts enter into the

manifold dynamics of life. In this volume we are particularly concerned about the rhetorical dynamics of social science disciplines as they carry out their various activities of knowledge creation, application, and transmission as well as of institutional maintenance. The language is integrally part of the projects, activities, states of being, and foreseen and unforeseen consequences of disciplines.

The mode of interpretation I espouse situates texts within actions, and thus is fundamentally historical, placing texts as dynamic operators within stories of events. This general approach includes studies of sequences of texts to note how they evolve out of and act upon each other [such as my study (1988) of Newton's seven versions of his optical findings, which change in relation to the social circumstances of the presentation, contending texts of scientific opponents, and Newton's highly motivated search for compelling arguments to subordinate all other optical discourses beneath his own]; of negotiations within literate communities [such as Greg Myers's studies (1985a,b) of the social negotiation processes shaping the proposals and articles that are finally accepted by the relevant gatekeepers or Susan Cozzens' study (1985) of how discussions surrounding citations negotiate disciplinary beliefs about the primary conceptual message of an article]; of historical genre emergence and evolution to see how standardized features of texts respond to changing rhetorical needs [such as my studies (1988) of the invention and changing form of the experimental article from 1665 to 1800 and of the adaptation and codification of the experimental article in twentieth-century experimental psychology]; of the formation of social roles, relationships, and norms across and within literate activity (such as my study of the proliferation of social roles within the scientific community as a result of the development of specialized forms of discourse, the kinds of role conflicts that emerge within the social complex of scientific communication, and the development of normative attitudes towards scientific communication as conflict-mediating devices); of the emergence of single texts within and as part of a writer's professional activities [such as my study (1988) of A. H. Compton's drafting and revision of an article]; of writing and reading behavior as part of socialization [such as Berkenkotter, Huckin, and Ackerman's studies (1988, 1990) of changing literate practices of a graduate student or Cheryl Geisler's study (1990) of the differences in the way undergraduate and professional philosophers conceive of and use philosophic texts in their own writing]; of the cognitive processes by which individuals construct meaning within specific contexts and their individual cognitive biographies [such as my study (1988) of how physicists read physics articles]; and of any other phenomenon that will shed light on how texts are located within, reach out towards, and help realize the complex worlds we live in.

Even when looking at a text in isolation, I look at how the text reaches out beyond the page, what connections it makes with the reader, the ambient natural world, the ambient social world. I look at how a text defines or reorders relationships and implies activities, how it places itself within its multiple heterogeneous contexts and creates a temporary stable place within which the text exists and within which the reader may confront the text and construct a meaning.

Such an approach obviously treats the regularized literate practices of disciplinary discourse as more than arbitrary conventions or habits. Genres and conventions (not just within the text, but in how we handle the texts and how we act in response to texts) represent deep-seated regularities in the practice and organization of disciplines with major social and epistemic consequences. Within stories of the emergence of familiar features of texts we can find disciplines sorting out what their business is, how to go about it, how they should relate to each other as colleagues, and how to relate to various other groups and individuals that they cast as outsiders in the very acts of creating and enclosing the space of their literatures. In so doing they regularize modes of writing and thinking and of acting accountably with respect to their disciplinary material, for every statement implies a range of activity that comes before the writing and after the reading, all accomplished within expected disciplinary procedures.

Ultimately a study of these regularized practices returns us to a theory of meaning, or rather a theory of how meaning is accomplished within a range of variation sufficient for people who share a regularized disciplinary space to cooperate on their endeavor. Put more simply, with the regularization of practices we can see how people can come to understand one another well enough to get on with what they are doing. This social theory of meaning is local and dynamic; meaning is accomplished only as the regularized space is brought into being and only as part of the activity realized within that space. Within that space meaning is held accountable by the network of relations constructed within that space, including relations with material objects, so that empiricism need not be treated as a naive fiction (as it currently is by naive relativists).

That is, if a particular community incorporates regularized material activities within the same network of activities that includes text production and text interpretation, the material activities and the texts can become mutually accountable. The material activities become part of the processes by which texts are framed, understood, and evaluated just as much as the texts become part of the processes by which the material practices are framed, understood, and evaluated. The theoretical regularities of physics or chemistry are dependent on the experienced material regularities of physical and chemical experiments as performed by socialized members of those communities as much as those experimental

regularities are produced within a context of theories and bench practices. This interdependence of experience and formulation within discourse communities holds particularly strongly in those discourse communities that make it a point to hold their formulations accountable to empirical experience. In such communities the very grounds of intersubjectivity depend on a body of material practices first introduced in laboratory courses and elaborated throughout the professional career. Of course, among other communities whose intersubjectivity is based on other kinds of communal experience, such as the group recitation of the Koran or the social practice of each individual retreating to a semiprivate space to contemplate the human spirit, the accountabilities that are used to frame, understand, and evaluate discourse can be very different and perhaps quite removed from the constraints of empiricism, but not removed from the constraints of memorized formulations or of the character of human contemplation.

This interpretive project I engage in is itself located within its own moment, aimed at developing reflexive, complex, literate praxis for our eclectic, mobile, and self-conscious time. The desire for such a self-conscious praxis of language in the production and use of knowledge seems indeed to motivate volumes such as this and the more general movement toward rhetorical studies of disciplines. The rhetorical, reflexive turn in scholarship is difficult to attribute simply to the appearance of some ideas within continental philosophy, because similar ideas have been readily available since at least the time of the sophists, if not before. More fundamentally, the social sciences have been undergoing a reorganization of knowledge based on increasing information and results, which have strained the limits of early broad-stroke generalizations in social sciences, on increasing variety and availability of approaches produced by an expansion of active research-ers, on increasing access to extensive accounts of history and other cultures, on an extension of professional status to individuals of many backgrounds, on the advent of the cheap air ticket and the sharing of global economic and political power beyond the North Atlantic, and on a thousand other things that have made us less able to maintain unreflective allegiance to exclusive stable social views. How are we to contend with such a world? What do we make of the variety of claims we come across? How do we stand back from our own words and literate transactions with sufficient skepticism and self-knowledge so as not to appear patently foolish to ourselves and others? We indeed feel compelled to work out a new attitude toward language and our statements of knowledge so that we will not be held speechless before the babble of worlds constantly before us.

It is not surprising that social science would feel this problem acutely, for in our academic society the social sciences are where we gather knowledge of human beings in all their varieties, their relations, and their attendant beliefs about who they are. Moreover, in the social sciences we formulate our own beliefs about who we are. The social sciences provide the space in which to compare humanity. Moreover, it is hardly surprising that anthropology is the first place this issue has come to a head, for anthropology has always been concerned, as Geertz (1988) has pointed out, in bringing the there over here, even now when the here and there are so intermixed. History has had a longer concern over the implications of its narratives, but the issue was largely contained to limited questions of politics and morals, so the question was only seen as one of Whig and Tory in past moments rather than of fundamentally constituting who we are as literate creatures at this moment. Literary studies long had a knowledge of power of language to shape relations and reality, but that knowledge was thought relevant only to the special class of writers who dreamed dreams within that privileged unaccountable world of the imagination and spirit. Sociology is somewhat of a latecomer to reflexivity, but its long concern with social realities and symbolic interactions gave the project a remarkable enthusi-asm among its adherents. Large parts of academic psychology for many reasons have been able to keep themselves at a distance from reflexive puzzles, but cognitive and social psychologies do seem to be edging toward the brink and are starting to generate their own crops of constructivists and reflexologists.

As a teacher of writing, someone professionally concerned with enabling people to use the written language effectively for their own purposes, I find it particularly interesting that this movement towards reflexive examination of language is carried out by people who think of themselves as users of language. Some reflexologists appear to have an ideological axe to grind and to use their reflexive stance to undermine the claims of their perceived opponents, but far more often people reflecting on the language of their discipline seem to be trying to figure out where they stand and what they can say. They are trying to find a way out of the hall of mirrors they find themselves in.

I do not believe that reflexivity must end in a world of unreliable appearances. By reflection one can come to know the systems of which one is part and can act with greater self-conscious precision and flexibility to carry forward and, if appropriate, reshape the projects of one's discipline. Meaning can be contingent and local without becoming meaningless, and experience need not be universally uniform beyond an experiencing and reporting subject to be the grounds of an empirical discourse. Rhetorical self-consciousness need not end in a distrustful disengagement from all knowledge-making and a privileging of radical skepticism where one wisely savors the moment of profound disbelief, freed from attachment to the idols made of language. Rather in rhe-

torical self-consciousness we can find the beginnings of new skills to help us make our meanings, our useful meanings, our local meanings, as we find our way around the human world.

References

Bazerman, Charles. 1988. *Shaping Written Knowledge: The Genre and Activity of the Experimental Article in Science*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

Berkenkotter, Carol, Thomas Huckin, and John Ackerman. 1988. "Conventions, Conversations and the Writer." *Research in the Teaching of English* 22:9–44.

———. 1990. "Social Contexts and Socially Constructed Texts: The Initiation of a Graduate Student into a Writing Research Community." In *Textual Dynamics of the Professions*, edited by Charles Bazerman and X. Paradis. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

Cozzens, Susan. 1985. "Comparing the Sciences: Citation Context Analysis of Papers from Neuropharmocology and the Sociology of Science." *Social Studies of Science* 15:127–53.

Geertz, Clifford. 1988. *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Geisler, Cheryl. 1990. "Towards a Sociocognitive Model of Literacy: Constructing Mental Models in a Philosophical Conversation." In *Textual Dynamics of the Professions*, edited by Charles Bazerman and X. Paradis. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

Myers Greg. 1985a. "The Social Construction of Two Biologists' Proposals." *Written Communication* 2:219–45.

———. 1985b. "Texts as Knowledge Claims: The Social Construction of Two Biology Articles." *Social Studies of Science* 15:595–630.

Chapter 4

No Anthro-Apologies, or Der(r)id*a*ing a Discipline

Renée Denūvo[1]

> At the precise point at which sense emerg
> from non-sense . . . at this frontier . . . ╲
> realize that man defies his very desti╷
> when he derides the signifier.
>
> —Jacques Lacan, *Ecrit: A Selecti*

A Review of Books . . . without Consequence

Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences. George E. Marcus and Michael M. J. Fischer, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1986.

Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography. James Clifford and George E. Marcus, eds., Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986.

I had a bad dream *and* in slow motion, or rather SUPER SLO-MO according to the new technologies. With the detail and magnification of an ob-scene and obsessed pornographic representation, it was clearer than clear, more real than real. It was hyper-real!

I remember two voices, like a dialogue. But out of phase it sounded as if there were many. A symphony? a polyphony? no . . . a cacophony! These were hollow-phonic sounds, precisely out of phase at their point of divergence (pi/2) to produce a false sense of depth when recombined on a shiny support surface. The false, seductive depth of interpretation, where the asynchronous multiplexing of representations generates a hollow-graphic image of culture; ethnography with an added dimension: 10% real pulp/people.