RHETORIC AND COMPETITION

Academic Agonistics

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To begin, a confession: I take the first part of my title from an embarrassing verbal slip I made while giving the presidential address at the convention of the Modern Language Association of America in December 2000. With considerable irony, at that moment my topic (and my title) was "Rhetoric and Composition"—the one area within my field of literary and language studies that I felt had moved *beyond* competition, beyond purely argumentative models of teaching and research, in order to explore more collaborative possibilities. My unconscious substitution of *competition* for *composition* was greeted with much merriment by the audience, and I admit that I have been haunted by it ever since—not so much out of personal embarrassment as out of concern about what my mistake revealed about the linkage between what we say (rhetoric) and how we act (competition) in the academy. Why is it that rhetoric and competition seem to go together so well in our current academic context?

One of the themes of my address was a plea for us all to learn to think beyond agonistics and to conceive of new ways of working together collaboratively—in the classroom, in our research, and in our professional life generally. Just before my tongue tripped me up, I had made a perhaps perverse analogy between the modern academy and its historical predecessor in Greece. Noting that the lyceum had been named after Apollo Lukeios (the wolfish Apollo), I had suggested that this root made that earlier place of learning into a "place of

42

wolves"—and this description resonated all too well with my growing sense that higher education was also becoming wolfish. At some point in the twentieth century, we appear to have lost the sense of being part of a "novitiate culture," and in my field that has meant (for better or worse) losing a sense of being what Donald Goellnicht calls a "priesthood presiding over the dissemination of Truth and Beauty."[1] I had argued that to link this loss with the expansion of market economies, as Goellnicht does, is not as farfetched as it may at first seem. Today's increased competition, both within and among institutions, all too often does follow the model of corporate capitalism; and the "pecking order" evaluation methods of business have been all too easily translated into the status hierarchy of higher education.

This competition (and its attendant rhetoric) exist, however, not only at the institutional level. The classroom and the academic conference can equally be sites of combat and one-upmanship. The clever and the articulate win in the battle of words that has become the defining characteristic of education, at least when conceived as a primarily adversarial process. This definition may explain why certain personality types dominate academic life: they are the ones who "enjoy, or can tolerate, a contentious environment."[2] Jane Tompkins recounts a conference scenario that many of us, sadly, will find familiar:

A woman is giving a paper. It is an attack on another woman's recent book; the entire paper is devoted to demolishing it, and the speaker is doing a superb job. The audience has begun to catch the spirit of the paper, which is witty, elegant, pellucid, and razor sharp; they appreciate the deftness, the brilliance, the grace, with which the assassination is being conducted; the speaker's intelligence flatters their intelligence, her taste becomes their taste, her principles their principles. They start to laugh at the jokes. They are inside the paper now, pulling with the speaker, seeing her victim in the same way she does, as the enemy, as someone whose example should be held up to scorn because her work is pernicious and damaging to the cause.[3]

A colleague as an "enemy" to be scorned and condemned? The academy rightly values critical thinking, but increasingly we seem to define that quality in terms of the wolfish belittling and even demolishing of opposing positions. Is this limitation of what constitutes our critical, intellectual mandate in any way a productive restriction? Need enmity enter into the question at all?

Tompkins's scenario illustrates what Deborah Tannen calls "critique schol-

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1. Donald Goellnicht, "From Novitiate Culture to Market Economy: The Professionalization of Graduate Students," *English Studies in Canada* 19.4 (1993): 475.

2. Deborah Tannen, *The Argument Culture: Stopping America's War of Words* (New York: Ballantine, 1998), 268.

3. Jane Tompkins, "Fighting Words: Unlearning to Write the Critical Essay," *Georgia Review* 42.3 (1988): 587.

arship," a sign of that deeply competitive, indeed adversarial, culture that has been fostered within the academy, as in the culture generally.[4] Another Greek term, equally wolfish, comes to mind: *agon*. Connoting contest, debate, and struggle, *agon* has its roots in the verbal battles of the protagonists of Greek drama; in other words, it does not connote the commenting interventions of the collective interpreting chorus, but rather suggests . . . rhetoric and competition. Combative oral performances of this kind have a long history in Western culture, as Walter J. Ong has pointed out.[5] Attack has meant survival—not only in physical terms. Tannen among others has shown how the "argument culture" of the political, journalistic, and legal arenas in the United States (and elsewhere) today thrives as well in the verbal joustings of academic discourse; and Elaine Showalter, assessing that extension, has asserted that "invective and personal attack are the American way."[6] However, the word *agon* originally meant just a gathering or assembly—as in the case of public games. It came to have its associations with fierce competition, with struggle, through a linkage with the contest held among the contenders for prizes at these games. We can see the next step in this etymological history in the extension of the term *agonistic* from its meaning "pertaining to athletic feats" to its meaning (in the context of rhetorical feats) "polemical, combative, striving to overcome in argument" (*OED*). Recently I was witness to some striking examples of this extension in practice when I attended a related series of lectures in a range of humanities disciplines at my university. I was repeatedly struck with the disciplinary differences of style in the question period after each talk. The audience responses during the lectures in the field of philosophy were the ones that particularly stood out for me: the questions were always posed as aggressive attacks and followed by sustained counterarguments aimed, it appeared, at undoing the entire edifice of the speaker's argument. A colleague in the philosophy department explained: "We listen to try to prove—and then show—that the speaker is entirely wrong." Is this oppositional mode of thought defined by and for a particular discipline, or has its critical mode been translated into a contentious and competitive *form of social interaction* that is becoming symptomatic of our moment in the academy?

Of course, others have argued that differences in degree of competition and aggression are actually defined, not by discipline, but by gender, claiming that the radical individualism implied is related to a defense mechanism of male identity formation within the hierarchy of the profession.[7] This claim has become a commonplace of some feminist positions, often deriving from Julia Kristeva's

4. Tannen, *The Argument Culture*, 248.

5. See Walter J. Ong, *Fighting for Life* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981).

6. Elaine Showalter, "Regeneration," 1998 MLA Presidential Address, *PMLA* 114 (1999): 319.

7. Bruce Wilshire, *The Moral Collapse of the University: Professionalism, Purity, and Alienation* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1990), 264–65.

description of the "symbolic" order as hierarchically organized and as revealing an epistemology of opposition.[8] But there is another dimension, a more violent one, that also finds its articulation in feminist discourse. As Hélène Cixous puts it: "Opposition, hierarchizing exchange, the struggle for mastery which can only end in at least one death (one master–one slave, or two nonmasters = two dead)— all that comes from a period in time governed by phallocentric values."[9] But more recently, Nellie McKay, following Jane Tompkins, has argued that women in the academy have (unfortunately) come to share those phallocentric values and their attendant modes of exchange.[10] The ubiquity of the agonistic struggle that makes the academy into "more of a snake pit than an ivory tower," more of a combat zone than a place of learning together, suggests that this issue is not entirely one of gender.[11]

Whether *agon* connotes a gathering or a contest, the two connotations share the idea of a performance site of (here, academic) ritual—and ritual has always, it seems, involved violence.[12] But rituals can also be ways of sublimating violence, of dispersing violent impulses, though usually at the expense of safe, sacrificial victims (as René Girard suggests).[13] Violence, however, is a real threat to the social existence of any group: "Inevitably the moment comes when violence can only be countered by more violence. Whether we fail or succeed in our effort to subdue it, the real victor is always violence itself. . . . The more men strive to curb their violent impulses, the more these impulses seem to prosper."[14] Have we reached this point in the academy today? Violence is not, I think, too strong a term for what we so often witness. "Critique scholarship," Tannen argues, actively teaches us to adopt "an attitude of contempt toward scholars who work in a different theoretical framework" (or, frankly, who hold a different position even within the same framework). This kind of scholarship entails, in her terms, "systematically inculcating an attitude of contempt toward others and an inclination to see them as not quite human."[15] What she is describing is violence. Contempt can lead, in that context, to misrepresentation, distortion, oversimplification—all for the sake of winning an argument. Given this drive to upstage

8. Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, trans. Thomas Goro, Alice Jardine, and Leon S. Roudiez, ed. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), 38–39.

9. Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," *Signs* 1.4 (summer 1976): 893.

10. McKay's position is taken in her contribution to Linda Hutcheon, "She Do the President in Different Voices," 2000 MLA Presidential Address, *PMLA* 116.3 (2001): 526–27. Tompkins's is cited above.

11. Lennard J. Davis, "The Uses of Fear and Envy in Academe," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 11, 1999, B8.

12. Richard Schechner, "Ritual and Performance," in *Companion Encyclopedia of Anthropology: Humanity, Culture and Social Life*, ed. Tim Ingold (London: Routledge, 1994), 633.

13. René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), 36.

14. Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 31.

15. Tannen, *The Argument Culture*, 248.

and discredit others, it is no wonder that any sense of genuine community—intellectual or social—might be missing from the academy today.[16]

Despite our protests against the commercialization and corporatization of the universities, we seem to have fallen into, even embraced, a business model of competition in our professional and even intellectual lives. In this model—a zero-sum game, if ever there was one—the opposition must be destroyed; our profits must be maximized by minimizing the profits of others. Rhetoric and competition. I would wager that this model is one whose rhetoric, at least, most of us would actually reject; nevertheless, what I would term its "subtractive" logic is indeed that of our academic culture, a culture of demolition and dispute. Still, the idealist in me cannot help asking: is not the production of knowledge actually more of an "additive" process in which everyone gains? In the research and teaching sweepstakes, if some "win," does that necessarily mean that others have to lose? Of course, subtractions do occur—through corrections, newly convincing arguments, changes of fashion in methodology—but often those subtractions involve some degree of synthesis as well.

Clearly, what is at stake here is not simply the quality of our communal life; it is a matter of what it is we see ourselves doing as academics. Whatever our disciplines, we regard ourselves as critical thinkers. But cannot rigorous critical thinking be rescued from its present reduction to attack and opposition? Cannot the ideal of a community of learning replace individual success (success at all costs) as the goal of the profession? Some would argue that such a change is not likely to be possible while the present institutional ideology prevails: the current reward system values the work of the solo scholar in ways that bear the marks of both capitalism (the idea of ownership of ideas) and Romanticism (the concept of the individual genius). Will new models of collaborative teams doing interdisciplinary scholarship together change this ideology? Perhaps, but only with time. The current system deploys a powerful ideological weapon (the individual), one that will have to be eased out by action, not only by time. As Gerald Graff has shown, we handle conflict badly because we stress divisions when, in reality, we share much.[17] Instead of destructive disputation—which (as we know from political life) does not necessarily require serious and careful listening, reading, or thinking—should we put more effort into finding more constructive ways of detecting and using strengths as well as weaknesses in the work of others? Should we look for what we share as well as how we differ from one another? Should we make fewer assertions and ask more questions?

In short—to ask another one—why should the creative and the integrative not ideally become a part of the "critical" in critical thinking, replacing demoli-

16. See, on this topic, David Damrosch, *We Scholars: Changing the Culture of the University* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 104.

17. Gerald Graff, "Other Voices, Other Rooms: Organizing and Teaching the Humanities Conflict," *New Literary History* 21 (1990): 823–24.

tion and enmity as key elements? Andrea Lunsford suggests that a look at our citational practices is enough to reveal "some patterns of sharing, borrowing, and building on the good work of others. Even those citations that register strong disagreement, after all, mark a dialogic relationship to the work criticized. . . . the scholarly work we do is social, dialogic, highly collaborative—even when we appear to be flying completely solo."[18] We need to learn how to feel more comfortable entertaining other than our own position on any given topic, to learn to accept (and promote) a "climate of positive copresence."[19] For me, the larger lesson of postmodernism has been the inclusive and additive logic of *both/and* (in contrast to the subtractive diminution of *either/or*). An *either/or* repeats what Catharine Stimpson evocatively calls "the dance of polarization in slow-brained motion."[20] A greater tolerance for variety and diversity has arguably not accompanied all of our theorizing over the last decades about difference and otherness. On the contrary. But do we not, therefore, need a new kind of critical thinking that will obviate the complacency and self-contradiction involved in postmodernists finding "sides" to "take"?

In the interests of full disclosure, I must admit to being congenitally nonconfrontational. It seems natural to me that critical thinking mean other than and more than confrontation. I naturally suspect that intellectual (or social) backstabbing has never been as productive as encouragement and cooperation—or, to cite Jeffrey Perl's reinaugural editorial in this journal: "Knocking our heads together seems an unobvious route to enlightenment."[21] Critique—conceived without contentiousness—need not, however, lose its valuable role as provocation. Peter Elbow began his book *Embracing Contraries* with William Blake's words, "Without contraries is no progression."[22] But surely there are different ways of conceiving of the possible relationships between contraries. Need those ways always be freighted with issues of emotional response and personal worth? True intellectual debate is not a matter of protecting vested interests and must involve better than search-and-destroy missions.

To the diverse readers of *Common Knowledge*, then, I would like to issue a kind of friendly challenge: can we collectively explore ways to return to the notion of *agon* as a gathering place, not a place of contest and conflict? Like many of you, I suspect, I have been searching for such possibilities within the academy's institutions and discourses, and I offer here (to begin the discussion) an exam-

18. Lunsford's remarks are made in the context of her contribution to Hutcheon, "She Do the President in Different Voices," 535–36.

19. Mary Ann Caws, "Realizing Fictions," 1983 MLA Centennial Presidential Address, *PMLA* 99 (1984): 319.

20. Catherine Stimpson, "On Differences," 1990 MLA Presidential Address, *PMLA* 106 (1991): 409.

21. Jeffrey M. Perl, "Civilian Scholarship," *Common Knowledge* 8.1 (winter 2002): 1–6.

22. Peter Elbow, *Embracing Contraries: Explorations in Learning and Teaching* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

ple of how to reread in nonagonistic terms an existing theory that is articulated as totally adversarial: Richard Terdiman's productive notion of *counter-discourse*. Developed initially as a way to think through the complexities of class in nine-teenth-century bourgeois France, Terdiman's theory has proved to have the potential to resonate well beyond that period and that culture.[23] Indeed, post-colonial theorists have found it particulary congenial to their theorizing of resis-tance to empire. But Terdiman's desire to "model difference" is premised on the notion of culture as "a field of struggle,"[24] and therefore on the belief that conflict is needed for any change to occur. He describes counter-discourses as "discourses of resistance ceaselessly interrupt[ing] what would otherwise be the seamless serenity of the dominant, its obliviousness to any contestation."[25] In summary: "for every discourse, a contrary and transgressive counter-discourse."[26] But I believe he misses the opportunity to articulate the same urge in more construc-tive and additive terms. I would rephrase Terdiman's formula: for every discourse, a *complementary and inclusive* counter-discourse.

I see counter-discourses as, by definition, *both/and* (not *either/or*): both resistant to and dependent upon those dominant discourses that develop out of the normalized order of shared values. Counter-discourses are both disruptive of and, paradoxically, still defined by the dominant. They are thus additive in a simultaneously constructive and critical way. Examples of this phenomenon or process can be found in many recent interventions in the field of postcolonial theory. Moving away from the contentiousness and polemic of its early founda-tional moments, postcolonial theory has increasingly focused on the additive complexities of the *inter*relationships of colonies and empires. To pick a delib-erately controversial example, but one that makes my point all the more strongly because of its provocation of controversy: even the "contrapuntal" postcolonial (or perhaps, more accurately, postimperial) discourse of Edward Said in *Culture and Imperialism* can be read as an instance of this inclusive yet still critical kind of counter-discourse.[27] In a shift both from his early work *Orientalism* (which in a sense founded the field of colonial-discourse studies)[28] and his more openly polemical writings on Palestine, *Culture and Imperialism* argues that the colonizer and the colonized are mutually implicated at all times, rather than being simple antagonists.[29] Said's later work focuses, in other words, on the complex entan-glements and indeed interdependencies of discourse and counter-discourse. For

23. Richard Terdiman, *Discourse/Counter-Discourse: The Theory and Practice of Symbolic Resistance in Nineteenth-Cen-tury France* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985).

24. Terdiman, *Discourse/Counter-Discourse*, 25.

25. Terdiman, *Discourse/Counter-Discourse*, 39.

26. Terdiman, *Discourse/Counter-Discourse*, 65.

27. Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Knopf, 1993).

28. See Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (New York and London: Routledge, 1998), 47.

29. For more on this aspect of Said's work, see Hutcheon, "'Orientalism' as Post-Imperial Witnessing," in *"Oriental-ism" Revisited*, ed. Hussein Kadhim (forthcoming).

Said, the one is not "complicit" or "parasitic" upon the other, as Terdiman and others feel it is.

In this less oppositional kind of thinking, related to that of writers as diverse as Homi K. Bhabha and Balachandra Rajan, counter-discourses are appropriative and incorporating, but through the very acts of appropriation and incorporation (often performed with irony) they provoke the kind of critical thinking that reveals gaps, fissures, fragilities, and vulnerabilities within dominant discourses that insist on presenting themselves as whole and coherent.[30] In other words, counter-discourses can be seen as working critically and constructively *within* the doxa, creatively transcending the limits of *either/or*, binary, and oppositional thinking. Likewise, when Terdiman reads Bakhtinian dialogism as proving the "inherently adversarial character of discourse,"[31] I want to answer with the possibility of rereading Bakhtin not in terms of competition but in terms of inclusivity and plurality—and I would not be alone, since many feminist theorists over the years have clearly wanted to do the same.[32] Even Terdiman's interpretation of the trope of irony as a kind of oppositional, if minimal, counter-discourse ignores the fact that irony relies on a discursive community to be understood at all: we need to share cultural codes and contexts for irony to be deployed and attributed.[33]

Less complicitous than collaborative, less singularizing than syncretic, less agonistic than accretive, a rethinking of the idea of counter-discourses may have the potential to offer a new model for our academic ways of thinking and writing—and even acting. But surely there are other possibilities too, and my brief contribution to this symposium on dispute is intended as a plea to our academic community to seek and begin to articulate those alternatives—before the academy becomes an even more wolfish place.

30. See, respectively, Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), and Balachandra Rajan, *Under Western Eyes: India from Milton to Macaulay* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000).

31. Terdiman, *Theory and Practice*, 37.

32. E.g., Dale M. Bauer and Susan Jaret McKinstry, eds., *Feminism, Bakhtin, and the Dialogic* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991).

33. See Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony* (London: Routledge, 1995), 89–115.