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Between the Drafts

Nancy Sommers

I cannot think of my childhood without hearing voices, deep, heavily-accented, instructive German voices.

I hear the voice of my father reading to me from *Struvelpater*, the German children's tale about a messy boy who refuses to cut his hair or his fingernails. *Struvelpater's* hair grows so long that birds nest in it, and his fingernails grow so long that his hands become useless. He fares better, though, than the other characters in the book who don't listen to their parents. Augustus, for instance, refuses to eat his soup for four days, becomes as thin as a thread, and on the fifth day he is dead. Fidgety Philip tilts his dinner chair like a rocking horse until his chair falls backwards; the hot food falls on top of him, and suffocates him under the weight of the table cloth. The worst story by far for me is that of Conrad, an incorrigible thumb-sucker, who couldn't stop sucking his thumb and whose mother warned him that a great, long, red-legged scissor-man would—and, yes, did—snip both his thumbs off.

As a child, I hated these horrid stories with their clear moral lessons, exhorting me to listen to my parents: do the right thing, they said; obey authority, or else catastrophic things—dissipation, suffocation, loss of thumbs—will follow. It never occurred to me as a child to wonder why my parents, who had escaped Nazi Germany in 1939, were so deferential to authority, so beholden to sanctioned sources of power. I guess it never occurred to them to reflect or to make any connections between generations of German children reading *Struvelpater*, being instructed from early childhood to honor and defer to the parental authority of the state, and the Nazis' easy rise to power.

When I hear my mother's voice, it is usually reading to me from some kind of guide book showing me how different *They*, the Americans, were from us, the German Jews of Terre Haute. My parents never left home without their

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passports; we had roots somewhere else. When we traveled westward every summer from our home in Indiana, our bible was the AAA tour guide, giving us the officially sanctioned version of America. We attempted to "see" America from the windows of our 1958 two-tone green Oldsmobile. We were literally the tourists from Terre Haute, those whom Walker Percy describes in "The Loss of the Creature," people who could never experience the Grand Canyon because it had already been formulated for us by picture postcards, tourist folders, guide books, and the words *Grand Canyon*.

Percy suggests that tourists never see the progressive movement of depths, patterns, colors, and shadows of the Grand Canyon, but rather measure their satisfaction by the degree to which the canyon conforms to the expectations in their minds. My mother's AAA guide book directed us, told us what to see, how to see it, and how long it should take us to see it. We never stopped anywhere serendipitously, never lingered, never attempted to know a place.

As I look now at the black-and-white photographs of our trips, seeing myself in pony-tail and pedal pushers, I am struck by how many of the photos were taken against the car or, at least, with the car close enough to be included in the photograph. I am not sure we really saw the Grand Canyon or the Painted Desert or the Petrified Forest except from the security of a parking lot. We were travelling on a self-imposed visa that kept us close to our parked car; we lacked the freedom of our own authority and stuck close to each other and to the book itself.

My parents' belief that there was a right and a wrong way to do everything extended to the way they decided to teach us German. Wanting us to learn the correct way, not trusting their own native voices, they bought language-learning records with an officially sanctioned voice of an expert language teacher; never mind that they spoke fluent German.

It is 1959; I am 8 years old. We sit in the olive-drab living room with the drapes closed so the neighbors won't see in. What the neighbors would have seen strikes me now as a scene out of a *Saturday Night Live* skit about the Coneheads. The children and their parental-unit sitting in stiff, good-for-your-posture chairs that my brother and I call the electric chairs. Those chairs are at odd angles to each other so we all face the fireplace; we don't look at each other. I guess my parents never considered pulling the chairs around, facing each other, so we could just talk in German. My father's investment was in the best 1959 technology he could find; he was proud of the time and money he had spent, so that we could be instructed in the right way. I can still see him there in that room removing the record from its purple package, placing it on the hi-fi:

Guten Tag.

Wie geht es Dir?

Wie geht es Werner/Helmut/Dieter?

Werner ist heute krank.

Oh, das tut mir Leid.
Gute Besserung.

We are disconnected voices worrying over the health of Werner, Dieter, and Helmut, foreign characters, names, who have no place in our own family. We go on and on for an eternity with that dialogue until my brother passes gas, or commits some other unspeakable offense, something that sets my father's German sensibility on edge, and he finally says, "We will continue another time." He releases us back into another life, where we speak English, forgetting for yet another week about the health of Werner, Helmut, or Dieter.

I thought I had the issue of authority all settled in my mind when I was in college. My favorite T-shirt, the one I took the greatest pleasure in wearing, was one with the bold words *Question Authority* inscribed across my chest. It seemed that easy. As we said then, either you were part of the problem or you were part of the solution; either you deferred to authority or you resisted it by questioning. Twenty years later, it doesn't seem that simple. I am beginning to get a better sense of my legacy, beginning to see just how complicated and how far-reaching is this business of authority. It extends into my life and touches my student's lives, reminding me again and again of the delicate relationship between language and authority.

In 1989, 30 years after my German lessons at home, I'm having dinner with my daughters in an Italian restaurant. The waiter is flirting with 8-year-old Rachel, telling her she has the most beautiful name, that she is *una ragazza bellissima*. Intoxicated with this affectionate attention, she turns to me passionately and says, "Oh, Momma, Momma, can't we learn Italian?" I, too, for the moment am caught up in the brio of my daughter's passion. I say, "Yes, yes, we must learn Italian." We rush to our favorite bookstore where we find Italian language-learning tapes packaged in 30-, 60-, and 90-day lessons, and in our modesty buy the promise of fluent Italian in 30 lessons. Driving home together, we put the tape in our car tape player, and begin lesson number 1:

Buon giorno.
Come stai?
Come stai Monica?

As we wind our way home, our Italian lessons quickly move beyond preliminaries. We stop worrying over the health of Monica, and suddenly we are in the midst of a dialogue about Signor Fellini who lives at 21 Broadway Street. We cannot follow the dialogue. Rachel, in great despair, betrayed by the promise of being a beautiful girl with a beautiful name speaking Italian in 30 lessons, begins to scream at me: "This isn't the way to learn a language. This isn't language at all. These are just words and sentences; this isn't about us; we don't live at 21 Broadway Street."

And I am back home in Indiana, hearing the disembodied voices of my family, teaching a language out of the context of life.

In 1987, I gave a talk at CCCC entitled "New Directions for Researching Revision." At the time, I liked the talk very much because it gave me an opportunity to illustrate how revision, once a subject as interesting to our profession as an autopsy, had received new body and soul, almost celebrity status, in our time. Yet as interesting as revision had become, it seemed to me that our pedagogies and research methods were resting on some shaky, unquestioned assumptions.

I had begun to see how students often sabotage their own best interests when they revise, searching for errors and assuming, like the eighteenth-century theory of words parodied in *Gulliver's Travels*, that words are a load of things to be carried around and exchanged. It seemed to me that despite all those multiple drafts, all the peer workshops that we were encouraging, we had left unexamined the most important fact of all: revision does not always guarantee improvement; successive drafts do not always lead to a clearer vision. You can't just change the words around and get the ideas right.

Here I am four years later, looking back on that abandoned talk, thinking of myself as a student writer, and seeing that successive drafts have not led me to a clearer vision. I have been under the influence of a voice other than my own.

I live by the lyrical dream of change, of being made anew, always believing that a new vision is possible. I have been gripped, probably obsessed, with the subject of revision since graduate school. I have spent hundreds of hours studying manuscripts, looking for clues in the drafts of professional and student writers, looking for the figure in the carpet. The pleasures of this kind of literary detective work, this literary voyeurism, are the peeps behind the scenes, the glimpses of the process revealed in all its nakedness, of what Edgar Allan Poe called "the elaborate and vacillating crudities of thought, the true purposes seized only at the last moment, the cautious selections and rejections, the painful erasures."

My decision to study revision was not an innocent choice. It is deeply satisfying to believe that we are not locked into our original statements, that we might start and stop, erase, use the delete key in life, and be saved from the roughness of our early drafts. Words can be retracted; souls can be reincarnated. Such beliefs have informed my study of revision, and yet, in my own writing, I have always treated revising as an academic subject, not a personal one. Every time I have written about revision, I have set out to argue a thesis, present my research, accumulate my footnotes. By treating revision as an academic subject, by suggesting that I could learn something only by studying the drafts of other experienced writers, I kept myself clean and distant from any kind of scrutiny. No Struvelpater was I; no birds could nest in my hair; I kept my thumbs intact. I have been the bloodless academic creating tax-

onomies, creating a hierarchy of student writers and experienced writers, and never asking myself how I was being displaced from my own work. I never asked, “What does my absence *signify*?”

In that unrevised talk from CCCC, I had let Wayne Booth replace my father. Here are my words:

Revision presents a unique opportunity to study what writers know. By studying writers’ revisions we can learn how writers locate themselves within a discourse tradition by developing a persona—a fictionalized self. Creating a persona involves placing the self in a textual community, seeing oneself within a discourse, and positing a self that shares or antagonizes the beliefs that a community of readers shares. As Wayne Booth has written, ‘Every speaker makes a self with every word uttered. Even the most sincere statement implies a self that is at best a radical selection from many possible roles. No one comes on in exactly the same way with parents, teachers, classmates, lovers, and IRS inspectors.’

What strikes me now, in this paragraph from my own talk, is that fictionalized self I invented, that anemic researcher, who set herself apart from her most passionate convictions. In that paragraph, I am a distant, imponderable, impersonal voice—inaccessible, humorless, and disguised like the packaged voice of Signor Fellini giving lessons as if absolutely nothing depends on my work. I speak in an inherited academic voice; it isn’t mine.

I simply wasn’t there for my own talk. Just as my father hid behind his language-learning records and my mother behind her guide books, I disguised myself behind the authority of “the researcher,” attempting to bring in the weighty authority of Wayne Booth to justify my own statements, never gazing inward, never trusting my own authority as a writer.

Looking back on that talk, I know how deeply I was under the influence of a way of seeing: Foucault’s “Discourse on Language,” Barthes’ *S/Z*, Scholes’ *Textual Power*, and Bartholomae’s “Inventing the University” had become my tourist guides. I was so much under their influence that I remember standing in a parking lot of a supermarket, holding two heavy bags of groceries, talking with a colleague who was telling me about his teaching. Without any reference, except to locate my own authority somewhere else, I felt compelled to suggest to him that he read Foucault. My daughter Alexandra, waiting impatiently for me, eating chocolate while pounding on the hood of the car with her new black patent-leather party shoes, spoke with her own authority. She reminded me that I, too, had bumped on cars, eaten Hershey Bars, worn party shoes without straps, never read Foucault, and knew, nevertheless, what to say on most occasions.

One of my colleague’s put a telling cartoon on the wall of our Xerox room. It reads “Breakfast Theory: A morning methodology.” The cartoon describes two new cereals: Foucault Flakes and Post-Modern Toasties. The slogan for Foucault Flakes reads: “It’s French so it must be good for you. A breakfast commodity so complex that you need a theoretical apparatus to digest it. You

don't want to eat it; you'll just want to read it. Breakfast as text." And Post-Modern Toasties: "More than just a cereal, it's a commentary on the nature of cereal-ness, cerealism, and the theory of cerealtivity. Free decoding ring inside."

I had swallowed the whole flake, undigested, as my morning methodology, but, alas, I never found the decoding ring. I was lost in the box. Or, to use the metaphor of revision, I was stuck in a way of seeing: reproducing the thoughts of others, using them as my guides, letting the post-structuralist vocabulary give authority to my text.

Successive drafts of my own talk did not lead to a clearer vision because it simply was not my vision. I, like so many of my students, was reproducing acceptable truths, imitating the gestures and rituals of the academy, not having confidence enough in my own ideas, nor trusting the native language I had learned. I had surrendered my own authority to someone else, to those other authorial voices.

Three years later, I am still wondering: Where does revision come from? Or, as I think about it now, what happens between the drafts? Something has to happen or else we are stuck doing mop and broom work, the janitorial work of polishing, cleaning, and fixing what is and always has been. What happens between drafts seems to be one of the great secrets of our profession.

Between drafts, I take lots of showers, hot showers, talking to myself as I watch the water play against the gestures of my hands. In the shower, I get lost in the steam. There I stand without my badges of authority. I begin an imagined conversation with my colleague, the one whom I told in the parking lot of the grocery store, "Oh, but you must read Foucault." I revise our conversation. This time I listen.

I understand why he showed so much disdain when I began to pay homage to Foucault. He had his own sources aplenty that nourished him. Yet he hadn't felt the need to speak through his sources or interject their names into our conversation. His teaching stories and experiences are his own; they give him the authority to speak.

As I get lost in the steam, I listen to his stories, and I begin to tell him mine. I tell him about my father not trusting his native voice to teach me German, about my mother not trusting her own eyes and reading to us from guide books, about my own claustrophobia in not being able to revise a talk about revision, about being drowned out by a chorus of authorial voices. And I surprise myself. I say, Yes, these stories of mine provide powerful evidence; they belong to me; I can use them to say what I must about revision.

I begin at last to have a conversation with all the voices I embody, and I wonder why so many issues are posed as either/or propositions. Either I suck my thumb *or* the great long-legged scissor-man will cut it off. Either I cook two chickens *or* my guests will go away hungry. Either I accept authority *or* I question it. Either I have babies and be in service of the species *or* I write books and be in service of the academy. Either I be personal *or* I be academic.

These either/or ways of seeing exclude life and real revision by pushing us to safe positions, to what is known. They are safe positions that exclude each other and don't allow for any ambiguity, uncertainty. Only when I suspend myself between either *and* or can I move away from conventional boundaries and begin to see shapes and shadows and contours—ambiguity, uncertainty, and discontinuity, moments when the seams of life just don't want to hold; days when I wake up to find, once again, that I don't have enough bread for the children's sandwiches or that there are no shoelaces for their gym shoes. My life is full of uncertainty; negotiating that uncertainty day to day gives me authority.

Maybe this is a woman's journey, maybe not. Maybe it is just my own, but the journey between home and work, between being personal and being authoritative, between the drafts of my life, is a journey of learning how to be both personal and authoritative, both scholarly *and* reflective. It is a journey that leads me to embrace the experiences of my life, and gives me the insight to transform these experiences into evidence. I begin to see discontinuous moments as sources of strength and knowledge. When my writing and my life actually come together, the safe positions of either/or will no longer pacify me, no longer contain me and hem me in.

In that unrevised talk, I had actually misused my sources. What they were saying to me, if I had listened, was pretty simple: don't follow us, don't reproduce what we have produced, don't live life from secondary sources like us, don't disappear. I hear Bob Scholes' and David Bartholomae's voices telling me to answer them, to speak back to them, to use them and make them anew. In a word, they say: revise me. The language lesson starts to make sense, finally: by confronting these authorial voices, I find the power to understand and gain access to my own ideas. Against all the voices I embody—the voices heard, read, whispered to me from off-stage—I must bring a voice of my own. I must enter the dialogue on my own authority, knowing that other voices have enabled mine, but no longer can I subordinate mine to theirs.

The voices I embody encourage me to show up as a writer and to bring the courage of my own authority into my classroom. I have also learned about the dangers of submission from observing the struggles of my own students. When they write about their lives, they write with confidence. As soon as they begin to turn their attention toward outside sources, they too lose confidence, defer to the voice of the academy, and write in the voice of Everystudent to an audience they think of as Everyteacher. They disguise themselves in the weighty, imponderable voice of acquired authority: "In today's society," for instance, or "Since the beginning of civilization mankind has . . ." Or, as one student wrote about authority itself, "In attempting to investigate the origins of authority of the group, we must first decide exactly what we mean by authority."

In my workshops with teachers, the issue of authority, or deciding exactly what we mean by authority, always seems to be at the center of many heated

conversations. Some colleagues are convinced that our writing programs should be about teaching academic writing. They see such programs as the welcome wagon of the academy, the Holiday Inn where students lodge as they take holy orders. Some colleagues fear that if we don't control what students learn, don't teach them to write as scholars write, we aren't doing our job and some great red-legged scissor-man will cut off our thumbs. Again it is one of those either/or propositions: either we teach students to write academic essays or we teach them to write personal essays—and then who knows what might happen? The world might become uncontrollable: Students might start writing about their grandmother's death in an essay for a sociology course. Or even worse, something more uncontrollable, they might just write essays and publish them in professional journals claiming the authority to tell stories about their families and their colleagues. The uncontrollable world of ambiguity and uncertainty opens up, my colleagues imagine, as soon as the academic embraces the personal.

But, of course, our students are not empty vessels waiting to be filled with authorial intent. Given the opportunity to speak their own authority as writers, given a turn in the conversation, students can claim their stories as primary source material and transform their experiences into evidence. They might, if given enough encouragement, be empowered not to serve the academy and accommodate it, not to write in the persona of Everystudent, but rather to write essays that will change the academy. When we create opportunities for something to happen between the drafts, when we create writing exercises that allow students to work with sources of their own that can complicate and enrich their primary sources, they will find new ways to write scholarly essays that are exploratory, thoughtful, and reflective.

I want my students to know what writers know—to know something no researchers could ever find out no matter how many times they pin my students to the table, no matter how many protocols they tape. I want my students to know how to bring their life and their writing together.

Sometimes when I cook a chicken and my children scuffle over the one wishbone, I wish I had listened to my grandmother and cooked two. Usually, the child who gets the short end of the wishbone dissolves into tears of frustration and failure. Interjecting my own authority as the earth mother from central casting, I try to make their life better by asking: On whose authority is it that the short end can't get her wish? Why can't both of you, the long and the short ends, get your wishes?

My children, on cue, as if they too were brought in from central casting, roll their eyes as children are supposed to do when their mothers attempt to impose a way of seeing. They won't let me control the situation by interpreting it for them. My interpretation serves my needs, temporarily, for sibling compromise and resolution. They don't buy my story because they know something about the sheer thrill of the pull that they are not going to let *me*

deny *them*. They will have to revise my self-serving story about compromise, just as they will have to revise the other stories I tell them. Between the drafts, as they get outside my authority, they too will have to question, and begin to see for themselves their own complicated legacy, their own trail of authority.

It *is* in the thrill of the pull between someone else's authority and our own, between submission and independence that we must discover how to define ourselves. In the uncertainty of that struggle, we have a chance of finding the voice of our own authority. Finding it, we can speak convincingly . . . at long last.

Announcement

The National Writing Centers Association is pleased to announce the publication of its *National Directory of Writing Centers*. The directory may be purchased for \$15 by sending a check made out to NWCA to: Nancy Grimm, NWCA Executive Secretary, Michigan Tech University, Humanities Department, 1400 Townsend Drive, Houghton, Michigan 49931. Please include your complete name and mailing address.

Announcement and Call for Proposals 1992 Penn State Conference on Rhetoric and Composition

Donald McCloskey, Anne Ruggles Gere, Steven Mailloux, Jeanne Fahnestock, Richard Larson, Carolyn Miller, Christine Neuwirth, Gary Schumacher, and Bill Smith will be among the featured speakers at the 11th annual Penn State Conference on Rhetoric and Composition, July 8–11, 1992 in State College, Pennsylvania.

We invite scholars, researchers, and teachers of rhetoric and writing to participate in the conference by presenting papers or workshops on any relevant topic—rhetorical history or theory, the composing process, basic writing, writing in academic and non-academic contexts, advanced composition, the rhetoric of science, writing across the curriculum, rhetorical criticism, writing pedagogy, computers and writing, technical and business writing, and so on. One-page proposals will be accepted through APRIL 6, 1992.

To submit a proposal, to volunteer to chair a session, or to find out more about attending the conference, contact Davida Charney, Department of English, Penn State University, University Park, PA 16802. (BITNET: IRJ at PSUVM)