

Preface/Metapreface

I would really like to have slipped imperceptibly into this lecture, as into all the others I shall be delivering, perhaps over the years ahead. I would have preferred to be enveloped in words, borne away beyond all possible beginnings. At the moment of speaking, I would like to have perceived a nameless voice, long preceding me, leaving me merely to enmesh myself in it, taking up its cadence, and to lodge myself, when no one was looking, in its interstices as if it had paused an instant, in suspense, to beckon to me. There would have been no beginnings: instead, speech would proceed from me, while I stood in its path—a slender gap—the point of its possible disappearance. . . . A good many people, I imagine harbour a similar desire to be freed from the obligation to begin, a similar desire to find themselves, right from the outside, on the other side of discourse, without having to stand outside it, pondering its particular, fearsome, and even devilish features.

—Michel Foucault (*Archeology of Knowledge* 215)

We would “really like to have slipped imperceptibly into” this special issue, to have eluded uneasy occupation of the space constituted by the preface, a liminal space between inside and outside, between text and reader. We are not alone in this; the literature of the preface is replete with varying expressions of such uneasiness: Here is Karl Marx’s stoic observation in the preface to the first edition of *Capital*: “That every beginning is difficult holds in all sciences” (x, our translation). And Roland Barthes’s more contestatory plaint: “The retrospective is never anything but a category of bad faith. Writing must go hand in hand with silence” (xi). The institutional reply to the anxiety of beginnings, however, is “ironic”; that is, it “solemnizes beginnings” (Foucault, *Archeology of Knowledge* 235). Thus, in Jacques Derrida’s wry observation, “the preface is ruled out but it must be written” (35). So Barthes and Derrida write their prefaces, and we write ours. But while submitting to the tyranny of the beginning solemnized by the disciplinary institution, we will indulge in a topos common to many of those who experience anxiety before beginnings—the topos of the “preface on the preface” (Schaeffer 38). Ours, then, is a *metadiscursive* preface—metadiscursive in that it draws

attention to the rules, norms, and conventions of the preface itself. At the same time, on a higher level, ours is an *ironic* preface, because conjunctive with the metadiscursive commentary on prefatory conventions are materials instantiating those conventions. In the context of this special issue on power and professional communication, it is especially notable that such irony is the very essence of the politics of postmodern representation—a politics whose distinctive character, according to Linda Hutcheon,

lies in this kind of wholesale “nudging” commitment to doubleness, or duplicity. In many ways it is an even-handed process because postmodernism ultimately manages to install and reinforce as much as undermine and subvert the conventions and presuppositions it appears to challenge. (1-2)

Our “Preface/Metapreface” manifests, then, the ambivalent politics of postmodern representation—a double-coded politics of complicity and critique, of legitimation and subversion.

Derrida’s “Outwork, Prefacing” is clearly seminal for any critic of the preface. For Derrida, the preface is “ruled out” because of

the impossibility of reducing a text as such to its effects of meaning, content, thesis, or theme. Not the impossibility, perhaps, since *it is commonly done*, but the resistance . . . of a sort of writing that can neither adapt nor adopt such a reduction. (7-8)

The preface represents, then, a trap to the extent that it rests on the idea of adequation between text and meaning; Derrida talks, rather, of the “incommensurability of signifier and signified” (18). In short, his reservations about the preface are on *epistemological* grounds. There is much truth in this. On the other hand, *our* reservations—especially given the focus of this special issue—are on *ideological* grounds. For the disciplinary apparatus inevitably incorporates numerous technologies of power—the editor’s preface being notable among these. We would like, then, to explore the politics of the preface, that is, to explore the relation between power and the preface. In such an exploration, the preface is not viewed as a neutral, objective stage for the articles it situates but rather as the site of a complex interplay of strategies of power. Recast in functional terms, the preface serves not as a transparent medium for the neutral transmission of information but rather as a complicit vehicle for enlisting and retaining allies through the exercise of control over both the reader and the artifact.

The connection between the preface and control over the reader has not escaped notice in the critical literature of the preface. Philippe

Lejeune speaks of the preface as a "fringe of printed text which, in reality, controls the entire reading" (45, our translation). For Gérard Genette, the control function exercised by the preface is twofold: to assure a reading and to assure that the reading is good. This twofold function leads, respectively, to a double thematic focus in the preface: a "*pourquoi lire* [why read]" theme and a "*comment lire* [how to read]" theme (183). These two themes, in turn, have associated *topoi*.

First, the *topoi* of the "*pourquoi lire*" theme. One can enlist allies by legitimating the topic, specifically by showing its importance and novelty. Here, for example, is the sort of thing the editors, in a less self-conscious moment, might say of this special issue:

*In an era when political correctness is a cultural buzzword, power as a topic is patently important, but the choice can hardly support claims of novelty. Nor does the novelty of this collection of essays lie in the unexpectedness of the juxtaposition of power and professional communication. Characterized by its historical link with the workplace and industry, professional communication has long been associated with power attendant to a capitalist economy and its institutions. What is new is the reexamination of their relation in the light of theorizations of power emergent in the literature. Revisionist studies of power and scientific communication are, in fact, already well underway: Witness such titles as *Picturing Power* (Fyfe and Law; see also Latour; Law). It is clearly time for such revisionist studies of power and professional communication. The panel on "Power and Politics in Rhetorics of Business and Technical Communication" included in the 1992 Conference on College Composition and Communication was a welcome announcement of this special issue and, in fact, the source of several contributions to it.*

But valorization of the subject by establishing its importance and novelty is rarely enough to legitimate a collection of articles such as this. When dealing with a collection of relatively discrete artifacts that risk appearing as a factitious and contingent heap, the authors of the preface need also give evidence of an underlying, unifying rhetoric. Traditionally, this means demonstration of a thematic unity in the collection (Genette 186). A postmodern politics of the preface would, however, view with skepticism the valorization of a homogenizing unity—a unity that threatens to suppress difference. Not surprisingly, then, the authors of many contemporary prefaces celebrate heterogeneity while still carefully documenting cohesion. Here is how such Janus-faced editors might treat the "valorization of unity" *topos* in this special issue:

This collection of essays incorporates heterogeneous perspectives on the issue of power and professional communication, for we have deliberately invited contributions that employ a variety of approaches and cover a wide range of research interests. All the approaches are revisionist in nature but draw inspiration from a variety of theoretical founts: feminist (Sauer), Foucauldian (Barton and Barton; Slack, Miller, and Doak), Aristotelian (Katz), mass communication (Slack, Miller, and Doak), pedagogical (Russell), and organizational management (Richardson and Liggett). Similarly, all have empowerment as an important goal but vary in the primary site targeted: technical communicators (Slack, Miller, and Doak), professionals in organizations (Richardson and Liggett), technical students (Russell), women (Sauer), the public at large (Katz), and designers as well as viewers of visuals (Barton and Barton). Again, all mount challenges to technical communication lore but differ in their primary targets: the privileging in the textbooks and literature of the superior-subordinate model of power in organizations (Richardson and Liggett), traditional notions of the nature of technical discourse and expertise (Katz; Sauer), traditional notions of the technical communicator as transmitter or translator (Slack, Miller, and Doak), fashionable pedagogical views that would empower technical students by having them critique the ethics of their chosen professions (Russell), and the privileging of the synoptic mode in visual design (Barton and Barton).

Moreover, the preface attempts to control readers by answering not only the question, *Why read?* but also the question, *How to read?* In Novalis's words: "The preface furnishes the mode of using the book" (qtd. in Genette 194). The most overtly imperialistic expression of the rhetoric of how to read, or "*comment lire*," is Max Frisch's directive: "Read this book as it is written" (qtd. in Genette 203). Most editors are, of course, less brutal; they provide a rationale for the (dis)order of the assembled texts. Here is ours:

We have chosen an ordering characterized by a juxtaposition, rather than a progression, of articles. In metaphoric terms, the ordering is that of a collage. As a spatial, rather than temporal, form, the collage seems more appropriate for the colocation, in this special issue, of voices that simultaneously annunciate and affirm, challenge and reaffirm, endorse and disclaim, amplify and limit. . . . As such, readers are licensed to enter where they will.

Finally, the editorial preface is expected to control not only the readers but also the *text* (Compagnon 328). As Barbara Johnson points out, the traditional preface is a structure of "unification and totalization," a "recuperative gesture of mastery" (xxxii). The editor of the traditional preface can be understood, in turn, as the kind of intellec-

tual projected by the "depth model," that is, as an "informed but dispassionate observer/custodian of a 'field of enquiry' armed with 'penetrating insights' and 'authoritative overviews' " (Hebdige 191). Not surprisingly, then, the dominant code of the preface for a collection such as this is a summary of the articles.

But enough deferral. We turn, then, to that obligatory, and most forceful, instance of prefatorial appropriation of "the Other"—the editorial summary.

Jennifer Daryl Slack, David James Miller, and Jeffrey Doak open the special issue by presenting a model for the changing role of the technical communicator and the attendant sites of professional power. They observe that power in communication has been theorized to either reside with the sender, be negotiated between sender and receiver, or be socially and processually determined. Corresponding to these power sitings are three progressively more powerful roles for the technical communicator: the classical role as purveyor, the transitional role as mediator, and the emerging collaborative role as articulator and rearticulator of meanings. The technical communicator serves, in the respective roles, as the neutral vehicle facilitating the exercise of authorial power, as the negotiator of differential power relations between sender and receiver, and as an author. The practical implications of extending authorship to technical communicators are significant: Contributions that were never transparent, but only rendered transparent in relations of power, carry responsibility—responsibility for meaning and for the ethical implications of those meanings. The implications for pedagogy of this extended notion of authorship are also significant. Slack, Miller, and Doak observe that the "politics of organizations and organizational politics" often have as their goals hiding or obscuring the way organizations work (33)—thus their concluding call for an educational focus on better understanding the relations between power and knowledge in organizations.

Steven B. Katz observes that "although the epistemic nature of language as a symbolization of perception and thought accounts for the rhetorical basis of subjective knowledge, the social nature of language as a rhetorical medium of cooperation and persuasion accounts for how that knowledge is validated and used within the discourse community" (41). From this perspective, he considers two ostensibly socioepistemic rhetorics—that is, rhetorics that would offer critiques of economic, political, and social arrangements and therefore empower by situating rhetoric in ideology rather than ideology within a rhetoric. The rhetoric of Adolf Hitler, in particular, made propaganda the discursive basis of a political movement that combined an ethic grounded in political expediency with a misbegotten science of racial biology, hatred,

and bigotry and, in doing so, supported an ideology that empowered the Nazi regime and rationalized the holocaust. More broadly, the rhetorical practices of modern technological societies generally yield deliberative discourses based on an "ideology of expediency" for determining their political agenda—thus what exists, what is possible, and what is right to do. In illustration, Katz recounts the story of efforts in North Carolina to pick a regional site for a low-level nuclear-waste storage unit, a process that in fact recognized only technical criteria and answers based on scientific and technical values. Small wonder, then, that advocates of citizen concerns were disempowered as their practical reasoning was vitiated in a climate of technical rationality. Katz argues that ideologies based on technology cannot be hegemonic insofar as social consensus about technological issues is infeasible, so competing groups are forced to reaffirm an ideology of expediency based on a technical rationality deeply embedded in Western culture, thus reaffirming the underlying ideological power of the technology they would oppose. His analysis suggests that fundamental difficulties confront a growing movement—the movement that would empower technical communicators by making their concern not merely skill or amoral art but rather the virtue of practical wisdom or prudence, that is, concern with reasoning about ends, not means.

Like Katz, Beverly A. Sauer challenges traditional notions of the nature of technical discourse and expertise, although her theoretical lens differs. Seen through a feminist optic, the canons of technical discourse—in this case, of postaccident investigative reports in the mining industry—are viewed as androcentric, ranging from the format (data, presentation, rather than problem-solving, reports) through tone (impersonal, objective, rational) to diction (specialized). Such discourse, observes Sauer, serves to divert blame from self-serving organizations to individuals and to discourage effective remedial action. Moreover, in challenging the androcentric canons of technical discourse, she reminds us of an axiom of modern theories of power: The silences of a discourse are as important as its statements. Addressing issues of power in technical discourse means, therefore, addressing those gaps or silences. The resistance toward authorizing women's experiences as sources of knowledge is, of course, especially strong in science and technology, and the discourse associated with the Adkins No. 11 mining accident proves no exception. Thus Sauer reports co-optation of the women's testimony in the congressional hearings, suppression of their voices in industry investigative reports, and general devaluation of their discourse—a discourse that represents danger in experiential, domestic terms (the number of wash cycles needed to remove the coal dust deposits from a spouse's work clothes) rather than in technical terms (ppm's, i.e., parts per million). Sauer concludes that the privileging of

rational objective viewpoints and the concomitant devaluing of direct, experiential knowledge compromise the health, safety, and general welfare of all those dependent on technology.

In reminding us most forcibly that power is not without ethical responsibility, David R. Russell invites us to reconsider the question of how we can most empower our students "to enter and transform their professions" (84, Abstract). Russell feels that professional communication instructors disserve their technical students in asking them to critique the ethical basis of science, business, and industry from the perspective of the instructor's own training, typically literary studies. In illustration, he turns the tables and imagines that English majors were required to discover the hidden agendas and attendant ethical lapses in the texts of literary critics. Indeed, students could "discover how professors of literature enrich themselves (private interest) by publishing Marxist critiques of society while ignoring the growing illiteracy of the nation's young (public good)" (94), and so on. Denying that literary criticism is a fount of an overarching ethics, Russell argues that it is appropriate to withhold ethical critiques of the professions in order that students, in quest of social identity and empowerment from collective action, be socialized into professional and disciplinary communities. He describes a program with this goal conducted at MIT that brought in 42 industry representatives during the 1920-1921 school year. Anticipating that the students would become good company men, the courses prepared them, for example, to deal with labor unrest, to assume " 'executive control of the enterprises in production or construction that an Institute graduate would naturally enter' " (102). In the search for a *kairos*—a ripe moment—for critiquing the structures and values of the disciplinary community students are about to enter, Russell calls for professional communication instructors to explore the discipline in its historical, professional, and curricular contexts.

In one response to Russell's call, Malcolm Richardson and Sarah Liggett consider the investment of power in the forms of the medieval professional letter and of contemporary reports of large organizations subject to heavy government regulation (e.g., nuclear-power producers). The format of the dictamen, the sole authorized manner of written medieval communication—whether professional, business, or personal—was predicated exclusively on the relative social positions of writer and recipient; absorption in maintaining power relations in society was so complete that the letter writer was totally " 'authored by language' " (120). Similarly, the reports of contemporary organizations subject to heavy regulation are rigidly and highly structured, with both form and content closely controlled from above; the suppression of both writer and recipients is so strong that ghostwriting is

common, and the audience may well be known only as "Gentlemen." Above all, these communication conventions both reflect and sustain power vested in organizations. Richardson and Liggett speculate that much theory in professional communication—for example, the privileging of the supervisor-subordinate relation and the romantic view of the "individual writer negotiating with a known audience and generally free to decide on matters of style, organization, and so on" (112, Abstract)—may disserve writers in organizational contexts.

Ben F. Barton and Marthalee S. Barton extend the purview of the special issue to encompass the visual mode of representation. Thus, like language, visuals—that last bastion of positivistic views of power—are seen not merely as instruments of communication and knowledge but also as sites of power inscription. The Bartons advocate the design of visuals based on the Panopticon, Bentham's late-eighteenth-century architectural figure—with its bimodal surveillance, the synoptic and the analytic—deemed by Foucault to epitomize the exercise of power in modern society. They show that either the synoptic or the analytic mode may dominate in visual representation but that the most powerful visuals foster bimodal viewing. The Bartons then illustrate that the panoptic model provides a compelling theoretical warrant for various privilegings in the literature of visual design, privilegings that hitherto appear scattered, ad hoc, and undertheorized and whose relations to one another are masked by the disparate terminologies employed. Ultimately, their article takes a post-Foucauldian turn by offering a critique of the panoptic model of power based on the counterproject of Michel de Certeau—his "heterology," or science of the "Other." The associated study of resistance, or oppositional practices, is viewed as the most compelling research horizon for students of the issue of power and technical and professional visuals.

Like the Bartons as writers, the Bartons as editors choose to end on the note of resistance. Appropriately so, because, as Foucault so eloquently notes, "where there is power there is resistance," a resistance that is "never in a position of exteriority in relation to power" (*History of Sexuality* 95). And resistance is, in effect, what we have been expressing all along in our dichologic preface. But our resistance to editorially co-opting the readers and the texts may, in the last analysis, be little more than misplaced paternalism. Readers, for instance, are fully capable of offering their own resistance to the controlling mechanisms provided by the preface. As de Certeau has pointed out, readers are not passive, docile absorbers of text; they are also "poachers," who read with particular agendas, interests, needs, backgrounds, and motivations foreign to the discursive system they inhabit (xii).

And then, of course, there is the resistance to editorial co-optation embodied in the "ponderous, awesome materiality" (*Archeology of Knowledge* 216)—to use Foucault's phrase—of the articles themselves.

Let their resistance begin. . . .¹

— Ben F. Barton

— Marthalee S. Barton

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NOTE

1. But not before deferring to other paratextual technologies of power imposed by the disciplinary regime—this note, the subsequent references, and both the abstract and the title of the lead article.

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