Roland Barthes, Reading, and Roleplay: Composition’s Misguided Rejection of Fragmentary Texts

In fact, what I tried to begin in S/Z is an identification between the notions of writing and reading: I wanted to ‘crush’ them into each other. . . . Once again, the problem is not to pass from writing to reading, or from literature to reading, or from author to reader; the problem is one of a change in object, as has been said, a change in the level of perception: both writing and reading should be conceived, worked, defined, and redefined together.

—Roland Barthes

“‘Reader response.’”
“‘Textual exchange.’”
“‘The role of the reader.’”
“‘Dialogic interaction.’”
“‘Interpretive communities.’”

And so on. Terminology which recognizes reading—its various maneuvers, effects, transformations. In the field of composition, this recognition has long been implicit in its connection with rhetoric, whose very premise calls for investigation of the reception of discourse. Furthermore, teachers of composition have the burden and privilege of responding to numerous student papers: extensive, attentive, critical reading becomes the inevitable result of all that writing. Part of our dailiness, our participation in the ordinary. Reading writings. Reading as writing. Reading/writing.

And yet: upon examination of the writing tasks suggested by textbook assignments; or of the responses to student papers which we are fond of exhibiting in articles; or of the highly restricted forms of writing we ourselves attempt as we (re)present our inquiries; I am forced to wonder: is the field of composition really committed to the contingencies of reading, with all of their unpredictable, un-controllable, problematic implications? Do we really seek to acknowledge our personal, political, cultural transformations of student texts? Or do we want simply to speak an alluring vocabulary while retaining our position before students as so-called masters of discourse?

James Seitz teaches writing and literature at Long Island University—Brooklyn. He is currently working on a book about various metaphors for reading in literary studies and composition.

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One significant characteristic shared by virtually all of composition’s various pedagogical approaches suggests that much of the talk about reading may be superficial: disenchantment with the fragment. Despite rhetoric that stresses the need for “liberating” and “empowering” student writers, we teachers of writing nevertheless continue to request only the most familiar forms of the coherent essay—or, worse still, the so-called “modes”—and to disregard or even actively discourage the rupture and dislocation created by fragmentary texts. Model texts in composition anthologies are praised by editors for their “coherent structure”—as if that were not a redundancy—and students are asked to produce texts which, however novel the ideas they contain (and writing teachers know how rarely new ideas appear), make sure not to depart from vaguely conventional notions of organization and clarity. In other words, regardless of how various pedagogies might promote “critical thinking,” the form of student writing still encounters a composition establishment that aims to normalize, to recuperate, to turn writing away from the vicissitudes of reading and toward dominant versions of discursive stability. Yet until writing instruction begins to explore the possibilities of the fragment in addition to the security offered by the “complete” text, our students will be denied access to the full range of rhetorical effects with which they might experiment.

But what, one might ask, does the fragmentary text have to offer? It has become such a basic assumption of writing classes that each part of the student text should be integrated into the whole that we criticize the fragmentary at all levels—sentence, paragraph, and discourse. Within this framework, fragments are usually permitted only in students’ journals, which often count for little, if at all, in our final evaluation of students’ work. It is also interesting to note that while we usually feel obligated to comment on the form of an essay’s final draft, we tend to read journals without rendering commentary or with mere content-related encouragement. The same is true of our response to “freewriting”—whatever of an oxymoron in any case, given the internal constraints that attend all acts of composition. While freewriting may stimulate students who have trouble getting started, the fact that it is relegated to an initial stage, often called “pre-writing,” reflects its low status even when practiced. The assumption seems to be, with these sanctioned uses of the fragmentary, that form is not an issue, since these are “informal” texts; form is supposedly what comes later.

What this approach to writing neglects is that not only the unified text but also the fragmentary text constitutes a valid form. We recognize this claim, of course, in regard to literature, but not when it is applied to students’ texts. Writing teachers commonly contend that what works for James Joyce does not work for their students—that is, only when students have learned the so-called basic skills can they proceed to more creative writing. Or, to use another familiar axiom: “They need to know the rules before they can go about breaking them.” The problem with such slogans is that they institute a faulty opposition between texts of “clarity,” from which the reader simply receives an unadorned message (or thesis, as it is often called), and texts of ambiguity, from which the reader is unable to extract any absolute recognition of authorial intent. In such a scheme,
one which leads teachers to evaluate student texts on the basis of their untroubled channeling of information, clarity will always be privileged over ambiguity, whose value cannot be recognized when the ideal reader is presumed to be a passive receptacle. But if we teachers of composition truly mean to take seriously the insights of contemporary reading theory—which has long since abandoned the notion of reading as mere reception—we cannot continue to depend on such an obsolete model of textual transmission.

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Clarity, after all, is a metaphor. An approximation. It draws our sense of sight into our sense of meaning. Texts are to become transparent, so that we can see through to their underside: everything uncovered. Or to become luminous: everything enlightened.

Yet we are drawn as well to the shadows, the borders of the obscure. We seek the edges of reading, realms just beyond understanding. Writers of the elliptical. The fragmentary. If we turn our act of reading inside out, if we read about reading—this is to read Roland Barthes. Particularly his final phase, criticized by many as a departure from his early overt political concerns (Lentricchia 141-45).

Is the last decade of Barthes’s writings an abandonment of politics? A regression into hedonism? What I find instead is an exploration of the aesthetic, rhetorical, and political implications of the fragment. The decisive change, acknowledged by Barthes in his interviews (Grain of the Voice 135), arrives with S/Z, wherein his fragmentary commentary on and fragmentation of Balzac’s Sarrasine asserts the fundamental creativity of criticism. Criticism would normally place itself above the object of scrutiny, that is, in an advantageous site; but Barthes contends that such a positioning is impossible:

this is in fact the function of writing: to make ridiculous, to annul the power (the intimidation) of one language over another, to dissolve any metalanguage as soon as it is constituted. (S/Z 98)

To enter into writing is to join other writings; one cannot dominate another language precisely because one’s own language, which must begin with particular assumptions and must proceed under particular constraints, ultimately has no more claim to a pure objectivity or transcendence than any other. Criticism is therefore as creative, as rooted in the imagination, as the primary text of its focus. To write criticism, Barthes claims, is in effect to present a reading—and reading cannot be wholly brought under control:

Thus begins a process of nomination which is the essence of the reader’s activity: to read is to struggle to name, to subject the sentences of the text to a semantic transformation. This transformation is erratic; it consists in hesitating among several names: if we are told that Sarrasine had “one of those strong wills that know no obstacle,” what are we to read? will, energy, obstinacy, stubbornness, etc? (S/Z 92)

Reading, then, even of a simple line from a “realist” text like Balzac’s, produces any number of variations—and hence the notion of clarity becomes increasingly suspect.
But to say that we cannot move ourselves above or beyond language—that we cannot remove ourselves from our own predicaments, from the rhetoricty of our "commentary"—is not to say that we cannot move ourselves within language. One of the pleasures of reading Barthes lies in the multiple forms of his linguistic mobility, particularly his use of the fragment as an enactment of reflexive discourse. Unlike texts that claim to be unitary, the fragmentary text acknowledges the gaps which inevitably characterize its reading—or any reading, for that matter, given that the act of reading even the most seamless text consists of interruptions, anticipations, predictions, retracings, and so forth. If texts and their readings are always already fragmentary, the difference between intentionally fragmentary texts on the one hand and ostensibly non-fragmentary texts on the other is that the latter attempt to pass themselves off as naturally fit for smooth, untroubled access. According to Barthes, such texts are duplicitous in that they present no awareness of the conventional, cultural basis of their writing and reading. In short, clarity in writing is nothing more than discourse shaped by "a community of stereotypes" (Criticism and Truth 48); the accessible text depends on what we might call a plagiarism of form.

By contrast, the openly fragmentary text foregrounds its own reading. The fragment challenges a reading that would subject it, make a mere "subject" out of it; through its textual motion—the "skid" of meaning, as Barthes calls it (S/Z 92)—the fragment resists the static structure imposed by culture's attempts to establish and seize hold of meaning. In other words, the fragment is a refusal of a particular kind of rhetoric—which Barthes would call "classical"—but not of rhetoric itself. In a fragment in Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes, he writes of himself:

Speaking of a text, he credits its author with not manipulating the reader. But he found this compliment by discovering that he himself does all he can to manipulate the reader, and that in fact he will never renounce an art of effects. (102)

Effects are inevitable; at issue are the kinds of effects that writing makes available. The fragmented text does not divorce itself from effect but instead sets out to invoke another realm of effect, one wherein the disparity of elements paradoxically manipulates readers toward their own choices. Barthes recognizes his desire to lead his readers in a certain direction; but the direction he leads is toward a space in which readers are left to their own devices among disparate pieces of text. While all readers must discern structure in order for the text to make sense—and it is true that in our compulsion for sense, we eventually find some structure in any text—fragmentary texts make the recuperation of sense, the passage from what Samuel Levin terms a provisional "conception" to an assured "concept" (62), more circuitous and thus more self-conscious: the fragment will not let us forget that there is nothing natural about reading.

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Surprising, then, that the field of composition has had such disdain for the fragmentary in student writing—except, as indicated earlier, when the fragment can assist in an early stage of the process toward a purportedly unified text. The fragment, composition seems to be claiming, is what comes easy; our job as
teachers of writing is to help our students attain the more challenging goal of sharply defining and sticking to their projects without wavering. From this perspective, the fragmentary becomes a sign of failure, something to be corrected, like a digression that has gone astray. Indeed, student writers do go astray, and it would be absurd for me to contend, caught up in an excessive rhetoric of “absence” or of “the free play of signs” championed by a good deal of recent literary theory, that we regard our students’ failures to integrate pieces of their writing as successfully rendered examples of fragmentary prose. “Congratulations,” we can humorously imagine a teacher writing to a student, “on your brilliant display of the abyss over which all readers hang! No part of your text has any connection to any other part—a marvelously ingenious enactment of the fragmentation which constitutes the textual exchange!”

My proposal is not that we celebrate the scattered pieces of a student essay as an example of postmodern heroics, but that we broaden the range of texts we elicit from our students to include the fragmentary as a legitimate means to rhetorical and aesthetic effects. What composition must do is to make more of the tension between the unified and the fragmentary, for in this tension lies a useful way to characterize texts so that students may gain access to a language for discussing their own acts of language. We know how difficult such a language can be simply by attending to our conventional written commentary about discursive structure on student texts: “Your paper doesn’t flow . . .”; “You need better organization . . .”; “Your writing lacks transitions . . .” Aside from the fact that such comments ignore the considerable flexibility of terms like “flow,” “organization,” and “transition”—and thereby fail to give the student anything with which to work—the paucity of vocabulary for textual analysis is striking. And it is hard to see that a process revolution—if indeed such a thing has occurred (see North 318–36)—has helped much, especially since process has been largely defined in opposition to, rather than in conjunction with, the product or text (see Phelps 160–62). Even certain rhetorically informed pedagogies that call for students to “analyze your audience” before writing offer little beyond worn-out clichés such as: “Imagine how your readers would react to your essay . . .”—an injunction which completely begs the question as to how different strategies induce different effects in readers.

A pedagogy concerned with the whole spectrum of discourse, however, would very early on seek to expand students’ capacities for naming linguistic events. A rudimentary comprehension of syntactical possibilities, for instance, seems an inviting place to begin; students can start to discuss potential rhetorical strategies simply by recognizing various patterns of subordination, such as the distinction between loose and periodic sentences (or whatever name one wants to give to these structures so that students can identify them). The point here is not to instruct students vaguely, as we find in even the latest handbooks, on “using subordination to distinguish main ideas” (Lunsford and Connors 310), but to encourage a sense of the reader’s experience of alternative syntactic structures. After all, subordination is a matter not only of authorial emphasis but also of readerly anticipation. Our apparent reluctance, then, to investigate at any length such issues of expectation in regard to syntax—as if to do so would nec-
essarily signal a return to the days of dull workbook assignments and perfunctory exercises—suggests yet again that the theoretical dimensions of reading play a smaller role in the composition class than we would hope.

Of course, even in the brief sections of handbooks or textbooks where syntax does receive attention, the fragment is not viewed as part of legitimate usage. The sentence fragment, we are told, like the larger fragment composed of sentences, constitutes an error, something to avoid. The possibility that the fragment on either level might represent a realm of discourse with its own advantages and values is never considered in these discussions of syntax, perhaps because they exist within a larger context, determined by publishers of composition textbooks and handbooks that clearly thrive on an equation of good writing with mere decorum. A successful text, these guides in effect propose, is a kind of etiquette, a submission to rules for conduct, just as reading is nothing more than submission to what the text obviously "says." Even process pedagogies, as indicated earlier, almost always want the process, however it begins, to lead finally to fully integrated writing, complete with the orderliness, transitional devices, and "development of ideas" necessary for the reader's untroubled consumption of form (however troublesome the content). But while these goals should certainly form part of the endeavors of a maturing writer, I must re-emphasize that they do not describe the entire field. If acts of writing and reading consist at times of the attempt to bring pieces of language together into a harmonious whole, and at other times of the attempt to arrange pieces of language so that the gaps between them leave more for readers themselves to construct, then composition by and large attends to only half the game.

Louise Phelps correctly admonishes us to avoid replacing "process" with another lone term "to carry the whole weight of developing a framework" for composition (46). Nevertheless, some of the most exciting possibilities for reconceiving the field lie in the alternative metaphor of writing as roleplay—a term which establishes references both to social action (we speak of our role as teacher, student, administrator, parent, and so on) and to reading (theorists commonly note "the role of the reader"). The idea that various acts of composing require us to enter certain roles might thus amend a predicament in which students conceive of their writing as simply personal—set off against the world of cultural interaction and of readers who transform texts. Barthes is always highly instructive in this regard:

The writer does not "wrest" speech from silence, as we are told in pious literary hagiographies, but inversely, and how much more arduously, more cruelly and less ingloriously, detaches a secondary language from the slime of primary languages afforded him by the world, history, his existence, in short by an intelligibility which preexists him. . . . We often hear it said that it is the task of art to express the inexpressible; it is the contrary which must be said (with no intention of paradox): the whole task of art is to unexpress the expressible, to kidnap from the world's language, which is the poor and powerful language of the passions, another speech, an exact speech. (Critical Essays xvii--xviii)

One of the benefits of writing-in-role is its recognition of this preexistent "intelligibility" which confronts each individual who arrives, so to speak, on the scene;
for roles take shape, are played and identified, within a social dynamic. This is not to say that the individual has no influence—one may still "kidnap," as Barthes contends, another, more precise speech from that already expressed—but it is to say that one can hardly conceive of roleplay apart from cultural conventions, from anticipation of reader reactions, in short from the rhetorical dimension of language. Even our most private reflection, our inner speech, as Vygotsky teaches us, derives from and adopts the social roles we observe around us.

The virtues of approaching student writing as a struggle to enact various roles has not been lost on several of the most influential theorists in composition, such as David Bartholomae, whose reading of Barthes clearly informs his work. Bartholomae reminds us that roleplay in writing is not simply a matter of imitation. Writers must not only imitate, that is, incorporate the conventions of the particular discourse in which they wish to converse, but they must also engage in resistance: "The writer continually audits and pushes against a language that would render him 'like everyone else' and mimics the language and interpretive systems of the privileged community" ("Inventing the University" 157; emphasis added). We must emphasize the metaphor of opposition in order to stress the danger in assuming that the discourse of an "interpretive community" has a unified, accessible system of conventions and that we need only to help our students find admission to these communities (especially the academic ones) for purposes of assimilation. The first assumption ignores the fragmentary status of "communities," however much the term suggests an undivided body of thought; and the second assumption sanctions, without question, the recuperative function of culture. Barthes, to the contrary, envisioned the writer as one who resists recuperation at every turn, one who notes the current state of affairs only to distinguish oneself from it:

An apparently expletive expression ("as we know," "it is well known that...") is put at the start of certain developments: he ascribes to current opinion, to common knowledge, the proposition from which he will start out: his endeavor is to react against a banality. And often what he must oppose is not the banality of common opinion but his own; the discourse which comes to him initially is banal, and it is only by struggling against that original banality that, gradually, he writes. *(Roland Barthes 137)*

Composition as a disciplinary endeavor may help to produce a certain proficiency (that is, students who can "pass" a "proficiency exam") by inducting students into "academic discourse," whatever monolith *that* may be; but unless we also explore agonistic possibilities, our teaching will simply participate in the mass production of banality, of writing that creates boredom rather than pleasure (as any of us can note from a few minutes in the faculty lounge listening to ourselves lament the boredom we experience reading student texts). Role without *play*, without the expansion of boundaries, is merely a reinforcement of the status quo.

In a more recent essay which serves as an introduction to their collection *Facts, Artifacts and Counterfacts*, Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky note some of the institutional ways in which composition indoctrinates consensus at the expense of difference and opposition. Mistakenly informing students that
writers begin with a "controlling idea," teachers often require students to locate "topic sentences" in the texts they read and write:

As a consequence, it frustrates students who either do not feel the "controlling" force of an idea or who are dissatisfied with it. And it frustrates teachers, who complain of well-formed essays that "do nothing" or "go nowhere." (10)

In other words, the very discourse of the classroom may grossly limit the diversity of readings and writings that students might perform. Furthermore, students come to believe that difficulty in reading is a sign of a problem, either theirs or the book's, and not a sign that there is some work for a reader to do. They are unable, that is, to see difficulty as a condition of adult reading, a gift that makes reading possible. (18)

Bartholomae and Petrosky are well aware of the way in which this problem is exacerbated by most "readers" published for writing courses, anthologies consisting of "short, straightforward, simple essays—the sort of essays that announce their own meanings and seem to solve all the problems they raise" (18). Thus, the fragmentary is again sacrificed for the sake of the unified; writing becomes "communicating your point" and reading "getting the point"—though the term "point," from a Latin root meaning puncture, suggests not only a concentration of meaning but also its opposite: a puncturing of meaning, a detailing or cutting ("detail" from the Old French to cut). In other words, a fragmentation. To acknowledge and pursue this art of severing and arranging discursive acts—alongside the more familiar task of forming connections through subordination and coordination—might create a broader landscape in which to explore the rhetorical possibilities of language.

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The paradox of role: production by way of constraint. The caged bird sings. Judith Summerfield and Geoffrey Summerfield call it the "enabling constraint" (Texts and Contexts 6), a limit or restriction that serves, in Ted Hughes' words, to "create a crisis, which rouses the brain's resources" (qtd. in Texts 23). In a field which often assumes any limit to "freedom" in writing must, by definition, be negative, it is not too much to claim that the future of composition depends on its understanding of this relationship between writers and constraints. What the Summerfields suggest is that constraints are not only an inevitable result of our being "placed" in bodies, families, classrooms, institutions, regions, and cultures—but that constraints are also necessary for the construction of meaningful actions and texts:

What interests us is the distinction to be made between constraints that disable and constraints that enable. Young tomato plants are firmly tied to wooden stakes— constraints that serve to support the plant when the fruits ripen. (7)

Constraints not only restrict but also allow for forms of growth not possible without them.

Roleplay in the classroom, then, might begin with the teacher's construction of an enabling constraint that lays out the terrain, so to speak, in which students will write. In other words, the teacher produces a "generative frame" (Texts
33)—usually by way of a text that might stimulate various reactions. In *Frames of Mind*, for example, the Summerfields share a striking letter that F. Scott Fitzgerald sent to his daughter, Scottie, upbraiding her for being in trouble at boarding school (50–53). Students are asked to reply to Fitzgerald in the role of Scottie, whose reactive letter clearly might assume any number of postures, from dutiful acquiescence to blind rage. The constraint of roleplay thus manages paradoxically both to discipline and to loosen the range of student writers’ expressiveness, for they begin, in a sense, with “nothing to lose” by way of emotional investment—after all, the roleplay is but a fiction—yet they often find themselves projecting their own experiences and values into the role as they might not if asked to write from what we call the “true self.” Role-enactment seems to create something analogous to what D. W. Winnicott called “transitional space,” a protected realm wherein the developing child fantasizes and negotiates “the perpetual task of keeping inner and outer reality separate yet interrelated” (qtd. in Phillips 119).

Reversing what we might ordinarily assume, the text does not proceed from but rather *produces* honesty and commitment. Here, then, is “the writing process” in the best sense of process—that of rehearsing, unfolding, becoming.

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Texts that defamiliarize. Texts that disturb. Texts that upset the reader’s (and the teacher-as-reader’s) security. Why should we not share with our students of composition explicitly fragmentary narratives and essays? Such texts—by Joyce, Beckett, Woolf, Faulkner, Barthelme, Paley, indeed by Barthes himself and many others—reveal the rhetorical and aesthetic power generated by disruption, discontinuity, and disorder, as writers enter roles whose constraints demand unconventional perspectives and representations. (Faulkner’s Benjy is an obvious example.) In one of their most important observations, the Summerfields detect that these fragmentary texts, characterized by the illusion of a close, immediate “participation” rather than distant “spectatorship” on the part of the writer, may usually be identified by their paratactic, non-subordinating syntax (*Texts* 140). This is a crucial insight that provides a means for discussing the forms of connection established by conventional texts both within and between sentences—and for exploring the absence of such connections in fragmentary writing. What might happen, for instance, if students were instructed to compose a perfectly *ambiguous* narrative (or essay, for that matter), one which places the onus of interpretation entirely on the reader? Such a task would demand that student writers anticipate their readers just as astutely as in a more conventional assignment. The fragmentary, in this scheme, becomes more than mere deviation; it is deviation that attempts to design its own patterns of communication. Unlike discourse which covers gaps with the studied turns of phrase that pass for transitions, the fragmentary text establishes an extremely subtle tension between the familiar and the strange. After all, if the writing is *too* strange, the reader will be unable, quite simply, to read. How is it, for instance, that we come to recognize what is happening in the opening episode of *The Sound and the Fury*? Clearly, parataxis has its own ways of conveying informa-
tion—just enough, we might say, to keep the reader following the prose without ever “catching up” to it and thereby terminating its powerfully suggestive quality.

Attending to the challenging rhetoric of fragmentary texts would also open new paths for the discourses through which composition represents itself. Twenty years after Barthes, with his openly fragmented analyses, shattered assumptions about how academics must compose their “readings” of texts, of culture, or of themselves, we in composition continue to write journal articles that take very few risks by way of form. We write as we ask our students to write: in the predictable, polite, well-organized manner of the expository essay. But for Barthes, “to write is already to organize the world, it is already to think...” (Criticism 51); the assumption that certain forms of writing are “poorly organized” reflects a limited, often linear, sense of what constitutes organization. Furthermore, while ex-position has the virtue of implying a text written from a particular place, a rhetorical positioning—com-position contains the additional implication of variegated writings together positioned—an arrangement of multiple rhetorical maneuvers, turns, masks. If composition is to take its name seriously, then it must reevaluate the text that “loses its way,”’ the text that splinters into heterogeneity. Again, I am suggesting not that we treat failures in coherence as if they were successes—but that we renew and extend our forms of writing and reading so that fragmentation or “lack of control” becomes a site for exploring a characteristic rather than simply an abuse of language.

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Because of its intimacy with the act of writing, composition could create a field of richly surprising, experimental, supple forms of written discourse, both in the classroom and in its own commentary. What the field must go on to explore, alongside texts which necessarily attempt to unify their strategies, are the possibilities of more mobile, heteroglot, polyphonic forms of writing. Asking students—and ourselves—to attempt, to essay, roles that produce fragmentary texts might lead us to approach the challenges of composing unified texts from a more enlivening perspective. In this view, writing that would stabilize its meaning represents the centripetal, ordering forces of language, while writing that would revel in textual dislocations represents the centrifugal, fragmentary forces. Surely in its more mature form, composition will attend both to the concentration and to the dispersion effected by writing—their respective rhetorics, aesthetics, and politics.

Works Cited


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