traditional ethic of error, and focuses instead on the *appropriateness* of language choices. Such an approach is much more amenable to social-rhetorical adjustment than is the debilitating judgment of error. He thus gives students and instructors a set of explanatory tools for elucidating strategies of coherence as more or less functionally appropriate, instead of as simply (and finally) right or wrong.

Textual Carnivals: The Politics of Composition. Susan Miller, Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991, 273 pages.

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Contradictions beset the teaching of writing at colleges and universities. On the one hand, administrators, public commentators, and other dignitaries express respect for writing instruction: good communication skills are at the centre of a good education. Teachers of writing, on the other hand, are not at the centre of this enterprise. Their influence is instead marginalized by temporary contracts, by low pay, and by exclusion from the prestige of research. The material conditions of the job belie the words of lofty patrons.

Writing teachers live these contradictions, and the servility and embarrassments that attend them. And they live other perplexities, such as the oddly unresolved outcomes of the last decades of professionalization of writing instruction. Despite the scholarly values which "composition" has cultivated and tended in its recent history, and despite the born-again enthusiasms which have recruited students to new graduate programmes in rhetoric and composition, something at the heart of the project has remained unchanged: something lurking in those countless classrooms to which students are assigned, and in which writing is elicited from them and then fixed. And, despite composition's self-declared independence and status, it is still haunted by the dominance of the literary text on the one hand and, on the other, by the

elitist definition of students—conveyed by literature departments—as people with "writing problems."

In *Textual Carnivals: The Politics of Composition* (issued in paperback in 1993), Susan Miller argues that "composition studies are *necessarily* embedded in contradictory conditions" (p. 179, emphasis in original). To demonstrate this claim, she retells the story of composition, its origins and development, through the frame of what she calls "interpretive theory," a conceptual device needed, she says, to answer political questions posed by those conditions (pp. 119-20). Her retelling illuminates the larger context of attitudes towards student writing in post-secondary institutions—a context which constitutes the work environment of teachers of technical writing; and also sheds some indirect light on the history and destiny of instruction in public and workplace genres.

Going over ground which has been made familiar to us by others, Miller revises received versions of the history of nineteenth and twentieth century composition. She characterizes the "neo-classical" account as an attempt to "establish a legitimate past and identify the new field of composition as a revived child of a father who acknowledges it" (p. 36), and finds this account inadequate. First, the epic celebration of ancestral origins excludes the experience of most who teach and take composition courses (which bear little family resemblance to the ancient father). Second and more importantly, the neo-classical story of composition cannot account for the enduring, "tenacious" bond between literature and composition, a bond which holds "despite traditional silence about [composition] in literary history, criticism, and theory" (p. 46).

Neither can the reform history of composition—the story which portrays the struggle between "current-traditional," product-centred practice and "process" approaches—explain this immutable bond between literature and composition. Moreover, Miller questions whether the process revolution—including latter-day "social process" models—has really made much difference to the central conditions of the teaching of writing (p. 106). Reform has only reinstated those conditions: composition is "in many ways a ritualistic performance that does not change except by substituting new rituals and codes for old ones" (p. 12). These substitutions, it seems to me, serve paradoxically to excite among writing teachers energies which renew and redouble their contributions to the systems they support. Certainly, Miller's account of process-approach outcome—objectless writing promoting elaborate "process for its own sake" (p. 94) and an aimless "intransitivity" that confines meaning to the classroom, cultivation of a "'personal voice' that speaks to no

one in particular, in no particular settings, and to no particular purposes" (p. 103)—suggests that this reform confirmed the destiny of composition in ways no other programme for change could have done so thoroughly.

For it is this intransitivity, this production of forms and procedures alien to the public domain and peculiar to the schoolroom, that Miller's own history of composition identifies as the definitive circumstance of the teaching of writing. As she tells it, the story of composition reveals two crucial tendencies. The first, appearing in the nineteenth century but gathering momentum in the middle of this century, is the tendency to simplification. The wide range of genres recognizable in the workplace and public life and once named in curricula gradually contracted, leaving a focus on the "modes" and on the "theme." Those themes, which often exposed students' personal lives, are logically related to the second tendency. As one response to the "ambivalence about how to assimilate unentitled, newly admitted students in the late nineteenth century 'new university'" (p. 79), writing instruction developed into a site for "winnowing and indoctrination" (p. 63), at once "stratifying" (p. 54) and absorbing an undifferentiated crowd. Most telling in support of these claims is Miller's observation that the institution of freshman composition shifted the focus of writing instruction from advanced to lower levels, to the gate where the crowd waited, and still waits. With its themes and correction apparatus, freshman writing instruction controlled and refined the crowd, even through devices for selecting certain kinds of students and "excusing" (p. 73) them from its obligations, and directing other kinds of students to, for example, engineering versions of composition. Together, these two tendencies, simplification and "winnowing" indoctrination, produced a "national course in silence" (p. 55), alienating students from the rhetorical forms of public discourse and establishing schemes of screening and surveillance.

Others—Tony Crowley *(Standard English and the Politics of Language, 1989)* and Pierre Bourdieu *(Language and Symbolic Power*, 1991), for example—have also suggested that language education is a stratifying operation. Although the idea of indoctrination is not a surprise, we might still ask, even as we accept the spirit of the idea, *what*, exactly, the details of doctrine are, beyond general discipline and moral punctuality, and how they get *in* composition students. What is new is Miller's brave idea of composition as "carnival" (in Bakhtin's sense, but received principally from Stallybrass and White's *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, 1986). Composition is the site of "'illegitimate'" writing, and "'low'" forms (p. 4), cavorting but contained, ridiculous transformations of the respectable. The carnival interpretation of

composition is a coup—for, in one inspired gesture, it exposes to our gaze the bond between literature and composition, even as literature studies are fastidiously silent about their own debased duplicate: composition is "the travelling sideshow stationed beside 'great' texts" (p. 36) of literature . Composition is a "carnival . . . simultaneously regulated and disowned" (p. 81). The regulation of the "low" fortifies the "high" in its elevations, sustaining "quasi-religious" (p. 13) devotions to literary perfection.

While "carnival" exposes the bond between literature and writing instruction, and its necessity, I am not sure it fully explains or illuminates it. What, for example, are the discursive relations between commentary on "'great' texts" and commentary on student writing? How, exactly, does one genre enable the other? What is the role of reading in each venue? What is the route between the reading of "perfect" literature and the reading of "imperfect" themes?

While such questions may linger in the shadow of Miller's forceful claims, the central insights of this book do however perform just as she promises: they politicize composition in new and important ways. Miller's portrait of the typical "Director of Composition," for example, provides means for understanding—or, at least, intuiting or suspecting—the political realities of all the new "programmes" in composition, and the funding of these programmes which, even as they increase in girth, seem to reduce the status of the teaching of writing. The very existence of the Director (unnecessary in other fields) is evidence of the presence of people who have to be "observed, supervised and assimilated into a unit in whose survival and prospering they can have no stake" (p. 152). In his or her supervisory capacity, the Director of Composition is "responsible for pleasing . . . many constituencies" (p. 159), and the Director fulfills this wide responsibility by "[conveying] the belief that 'good writing' can be recognized for qualities apart from its actual outcomes" (p. 167). (Performing his or her duties, the Director can become "over-involved" [p. 169], and get carried away with the kind of zeal some of us may have witnessed in our working lives.) Fulfilling these responsibilities, the Director becomes himself or herself an object of interpretation and anxious regard in English departments: even as he or she manages and administers the carnival, its marginal workers, and its unruly writers, "the director also figuratively represents vivid possibilities that unregulated texts, unlicensed writers, and literary discourse will unaccountably merge" (p. 172).

Despite the necessities and inevitabilities Miller observes, she has, in the best tradition of composition studies, some ideas for improvement. She

suggests that composition has always had available to it the means to transform itself (p. 186). Although I am not entirely sure what she has in mind, I suggest, in turn, that as the study of "language," composition does indeed possess this self-transforming potential. Since it interprets and defines a symbolic system which encodes the social order, the study of language can, at any moment, go either way—towards compliance, stratification and silence, or towards reflection (what Giddens [*The Constitution of Society,* 1984] would call "penetration"), diversity and outspokenness. So far, it has tended to follow the first path.

For Miller, improvement lies in adopting research intentions that examine the social and political consequences of writing, its contexts of power, of advantage or deference, and in regarding teaching not as something to get away from by doing research (p. 193), but as something intimate to the profession. Along these lines, Miller recommends inquiry into the "'student tradition'" (p. 200). These proposals seem to mean instituting the classroom in research, and instituting in the classroom the results of research into political meanings, not just in classroom practice but in course content as well. Moreover, although Miller's use of "carnival" steers away from other aspects of Bakhtin's thought, it could be redirected towards them, for it is continuous with his analysis of language itself, and the imprint of power and stratification in the word, in the style and contour of utterance. Perhaps Miller's vision of change could be partly realized by more detailed attention to these fine-grain textures of language, so prominent in Bakhtin's reasoning about speech genres. Even politically enlightened commentary on writing instruction has tended to ignore these conditions, or obscure them by resorting to traditional or impressionistic generalizations about writing, many of which are borrowed from literary study. Unless research is directed towards understanding the pragmatics of utterance, we may be in for a decade of hearing others repeat Miller's charismatic insights into the "dirt" of the "travelling sideshow," without advancing those insights or showing how language itself can stylize such meanings.

Miller's claims are strong, and abstract, and sometimes rushed (my slower mind often limped behind). But they are finally acceptable, and welcome, for their sturdiest evidence comes from felt experience: teachers of writing live the conditions Miller interprets. (An appendix presents results of a questionnaire asking writing teachers about aspects of their working conditions. Even without this appendix, I expect that most readers could provide equivalent evidence from their own experience as writing teachers.) And, even though her argument inhabits an American universe, it would

survive transfer to Canadian contexts, and perhaps adapt in revealing ways.

Composition teachers should read this book. Teachers of technical writing should consider its application to pedagogy which, while it earnestly avoids "objectless" or instituted writing, for the most part fails to examine the social and political outcomes of the genres it teaches, or the outcomes of teaching those genres.