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A Kind Word for Bullshit: The Problem of Academic Writing

The phrase "academic bullshit" presents compositionists with a special dilemma. Because compositionists study, teach, and produce academic writing, they are open to the accusation that they both tolerate and perpetuate academic bullshit. We argue that confronting this problem must begin with a careful definition of "bullshit" and "academic bullshit." In contrast to Harry Frankfurt's checklist method of definition, we examine "bullshit" as a graded category. We suggest that some varieties of academic bullshit may be both unavoidable and beneficial.

In 2005, Princeton University Press republished, in book form, Harry Frankfurt's classic essay "On Bullshit." Perhaps predictably, since most academic titles are not nearly so earthy, the book received more than the usual amount of public interest. *On Bullshit* garnered flattering attention in the *New York Times* and on *60 Minutes,* Frankfurt appeared on *The Daily Show*, and the book sold briskly. But for all the fanfare and commercial success, Frankfurt's essay is rather modest. He notes that bullshit is all around us, and yet "we have no clear understanding of what bullshit is, why there is so much of it, and what functions it serves" (1). Therefore, he proposes to "give a rough account of what bullshit is and how it differs from what it is not," and he cautions that he can-

not offer anything "decisive" (2–3). This article proposes to take up where Frankfurt left off and to address the question of bullshit in a way that is especially pertinent to academics, even more pertinent to people in the humanities and social sciences, and most pertinent of all to those who specialize in rhetoric and writing.

Frankfurt is right that all of us are familiar with bullshit. We are also conflicted about it. In the United States, few words signal the same kind of ambivalence. Bullshit can be a bitter epithet: *the bullshit job*, words that are *a bunch of bullshit*, and people who are *nothing but bullshitters*. Yet the same word can be uttered with sly affection or charming self-deprecation. Think of the standard phrases: *I was just bullshitting. Never bullshit a bullshitter. If you can't dazzle 'em with brilliance, baffle 'em with bullshit.* Similar words don't allow for such playfulness. You cannot use *kidding* as a bitter epithet. You cannot say *I was just lying* and keep your self-respect.

In academe, we are if anything more conflicted than the public at large because of the scathing quality of the phrase *academic bullshit*. The most apt examples of academic bullshit come from the social sciences and humanities—not that anyone who produces this work is happy about it. After all, our work is serious, and we naturally take offense at critiques that call our writing and scholarship pretentious (which impugns our character) or nonrigorous (which impugns our minds). The flipside of that taking of offense is fear—fear that the critiques are right.

If you doubt that, try not to laugh at Dave Barry's advice to prospective English majors, advice "reprinted" on countless websites:

> Suppose you are studying *Moby-Dick*. Anybody with any common sense would say that Moby-Dick is a big white whale, since the characters in the book refer to it as a big white whale roughly eleven thousand times. So in your paper, you say Moby-Dick is actually the Republic of Ireland. . . . If you can regularly come up with lunatic interpretations of simple stories, you should major in English. (I14)

Or abandon all restraint and become an English professor. Who more likely than a preeminent literary critic would provoke this scornful remark from a graduate student: "He's a total fraud—a complete *bullshitter*." Barry is just as dead-on in his parody of sociologists, who "spend most of their time translating simple, obvious observations into scientific-sounding code." You should be a sociologist, he says, if you can dress up the fact that children cry when they fall down in words like these: "Methodological observation of the sociometrical behavior tendencies of prematurated isolates indicates that a

causal relationship exists between groundward tropism and lachrymatory, or 'crying,' behavior forms." And Barry is perhaps no more derisive than Richard Weaver, who observed decades ago that because of its overblown style social science "fails to convince us that it deals clearly with reality" (187). In other words, it sounded then, and sounds now, like bullshit.

Academics are thus in a peculiar spot with regard to bullshit. For us, it is not sufficient to observe, as Frankfurt does, that bullshit is "one of the most salient features of our culture" (1). Rather, we have to confront the fact that our culture often singles out academe as the mother lode of bullshit. Compositionists may be in the most peculiar and complicated spot of all—for at least three reasons. First, the writing style of composition research risks being called bullshit because it often has the timbre of abstruse literary criticism or of social science. Second, composition has taken up disciplinary writing as an important area of study and thus implicitly endorses it. It probably does not help that writing studies has often focused its attention on the rhetoric of science; that simply enlarges the number of suspect academic texts. Third, one major consequence of studying disciplinary writing has been the abandonment of the abstract ideal once called "good writing." The current mainstream of composition studies not only takes up academic writing as an object of study, but it also sees writing instruction as at least partly a matter of introducing undergraduates to the established practices of expert academic writers. Even though some composition scholars have critiqued academic discourse as a form of Enlightenment-inspired hegemony, almost no one advocates completely abandoning academic styles and standards. If academic writing is bullshit, then bullshit is what we teach.

Some or all of those reasons may seem profoundly unfair, but they nonetheless call for some reflection. The first part of that reflection ought to confront the problem of defining bullshit more usefully than Frankfurt has. As careful a job as Frankfurt does, he is right to say that he does not offer anything decisive. In fact, a major problem with Frankfurt's essay is that he assumes that lack of decisiveness is a shortcoming. But decisiveness is not the appropriate standard. There are better ways to wrestle with a word—ways that do not involve retreating into claims of indeterminacy, either. The second part of the reflection ought to confront how bullshit is and is not a part of the practice of composing academic arguments. It may well be that much academic rhetoric is, in fact, bullshit. But it may also be so that bullshit, in at least some senses, animates what is best in academic rhetoric. At least, that is the suggestion that will be made in this essay.

Method of Definition

Frankfurt makes it his project to say what bullshit means ("what bullshit is and how it differs from what it is not"), but he immediately finds that goal elusive. Bullshit is "often employed quite loosely," he says. But rather than accept that as a fundamental characteristic of the word, he attempts a tight definition that lays out the word's "essential" characteristics—a method that Charles Fillmore once called, not flatteringly, the "checklist" theory of definition (quoted in Coleman and Kay 26). Within the limitations of his method, though, Frankfurt's discussion is often illuminating. According to Frankfurt, bullshit does not *necessarily* involve a misrepresentation of facts but *must* involve a misrepresentation of the self—one's feelings, thoughts, or attitudes. In that way, a Fourth of July speaker may commit an act of bullshitting by exaggeratedly extolling the virtues of American history. American history may or may not be just as the speaker claims. But that is incidental. What matters to the speaker is the hyperbolic impression given of his or her own patriotism (16–18).

In that sense, bullshit is disconnected from the truth in a way that lying never is. Frankfurt argues,

> It is impossible for someone to lie unless he thinks he knows the truth. Producing bullshit requires no such conviction. A person who lies is thereby responding to the truth, and he is to that extent respectful of it. When an honest man speaks, he says only what he believes to be true; and for the liar, it is correspondingly indispensable that he consider his statements to be false. For the bullshitter, however, all these bets are off: he is neither on the side of the true nor on the side of the false. His eye is not on the facts at all . . . except insofar as they may be pertinent to his interest in getting away with what he says. (55–56)

In other words, bullshit may be false, and it may, by accident or by design, be true. But either way what really matters is that the bullshitter gets away with something, chiefly a misrepresentation of self and intention. That is the main reason, says Frankfurt, that we are generally more tolerant of bullshit than of lies. Unlike a lie, bullshit is not "a personal affront" (50) and yet is a greater enemy of truth than lies are (61).

The phrase *academic bullshit* thus presents a double insult to academics. It can mean academic writing that shows a reckless disregard for the truth—that it is almost certainly full of things that are false. That accusation stings. After all, the traditional aim of the university is to seek the truth without interference of politics or other loyalties. To what degree truth is objective or know-

able has come under much scrutiny in the past few decades. But even that debate is a question of the truth about the Truth. If academic writing is seen as unconcerned about getting things right, that is problem enough. Yet an even worse problem may be that, as Frankfurt says, bullshit is not seen as a personal affront. Academic bullshit may bear no relationship to what is true or false, correct or incorrect. But no one is offended by academic irrelevancies anyway.

A tempting response to this might be to identify academic bullshitters and drum them out of the journals and academic presses, but that will not help. Some academic writing may stand out as bullshit. But—to many inside and outside of the academic world—almost all academic writing, and surely that produced in the humanities and social sciences, stands accused. What might help, though, would be to grapple with the meaning of bullshit differently than Frankfurt has.

Frankfurt himself nearly happens upon a better approach. He recounts a story about Wittgenstein in which a sick friend says, "I feel like a dog that has been run over." Wittgenstein responds, "You don't know what a dog that's been run over feels like." From that, Frankfurt draws the lesson that Wittgenstein was intolerant of anything that smelled of bullshit, no matter how faintly. But the lesson he should have drawn was that Wittgenstein was, at least in his later life, intolerant of unfounded speculations. Recall his dictum: "Don't think, but look!" (31). That was especially true when it came to definitions of words. For instance, Wittgenstein explains at some length that the word *game* refers to a set of loosely affiliated activities—board games, card games, ball games, Ring around the Rosy—that are not called by the same name because they share a fixed set of essential features but rather because they share in varying degrees *some* of the features typical of games. They are related by "family resemblances": "a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing" (32). Like *game*, *bullshit* groups together acts that can be quite varied.

A similar approach to word definition is prototype semantics, which is based on a cognitive science view of categorization that says (1) that category members do not necessarily share a single set of distinguishing features and may exhibit features to greater or lesser degrees and (2) that some category members are more typical—that is, cognitively salient—than others. Linda Coleman and Paul Kay use prototype semantics to define the word *lie*. They demonstrate that, although lies may have identifiable features such as misrepresentation of belief, intent to deceive, falseness, and reprehensible motives, not all features are always present and not all features are equally prominent in every instance. In other words, *lie* is a graded category in which some ex-

amples are more easily and certainly recognized than others. In prototypical instances of *lie*, someone makes a false statement that he or she believes to be false for the purpose of deceiving another person. But other statements can also be called lies—such as when someone makes a statement that is factually true but is intended to conceal his or her motives or intentions. For instance, if your spouse asks you where you are going and you respond "to the store," he or she will very likely assume that you are going to the grocery store. If your intention is to go to the guitar shop, then you have—in a sense—lied. But it is not a *prototypical* lie.

Likewise, there are prototypical and nonprototypical instances of bullshit. So in defining *bullshit*, one task at hand is not to say what is bullshit and what is not but to distinguish what is prototypical bullshit from what is not. Another important task is to gain some sense of how the bullshit prototype rhetorically influences our attitudes about even very peripheral category members.

Prototypical Bullshit

Although Frankfurt makes no distinction between prototypical and nonprototypical cases, his discussion can be helpful in understanding what makes up the bullshit prototype. According to Frankfurt, the bullshitter attempts to misrepresent himself or herself, that is, to create an ethos that implies a character that the speaker does not possess. Furthermore, the misrepresentation aims to deceive; intentionality (the intention to misrepresent) is an essential part of bullshit. Both traits do seem to be especially characteristic of bullshit.

Once intentionality enters the definition, however, the difficulties begin because intentions are seldom if ever pure, seldom if ever entirely conscious. Nor is this a modern phenomenon. Isocrates, for example, urged his students to adopt a virtuous persona and offered to teach them how to do it, not merely because they might become successful pleaders, but because he thought they would soon see that the only way to persuade with a virtuous ethos was to actually have one. In short, acting virtuous would lead them to act virtuously. The case could be framed in modern terms: Is it deceptive to represent oneself as one actually aspires to be; to create an ethos one doesn't have yet but wants to have? Is such representation really misrepresentation? If so, what is the "sincere" alternative? Can one never speak out of a "better self" until one has a better self? And if so, when will one ever know that he or she has it? This difficulty requires refining the notion of misrepresentation.

First, Frankfurt's notion obviously runs afoul of current scholarship about rhetoric and the "constructed self." Some contemporary scholars might deny

that there is a pre-existing self to which the bullshitter is not true. They might say that the self *is* bullshit. It is constructed out of bullshit and to believe that it exists independently of bullshit is, well, bullshit. The bullshitter thus could not misrepresent a self that does not exist outside of bullshit. A prototypical example might be sales representatives. Their goal is to sell the product, yet they are required to present themselves as benefactors of their potential customers, as persons with only the good of the client at heart. Is their sales pitch bullshit if they sincerely believe that their product really is what's best for their customers? Or does their biased position render them bullshitters no matter what their beliefs are? Actually, how a salesperson represents him or herself is suspect per se. The complexities described above indicate one of the serious limitations of Frankfurt's definition; namely, bullshit may be a defining aspect of rhetorical situations.

Bullshit may be essential to the kind of rhetorical situation that Walter Ong calls "ludic," that is, a situation in which certain rules and expectations permit behavior that would not be appropriate in "real life" situations (132–33); to prescind from the Latinate "ludic," these situations could be called "games" and the behavior appropriate to them called "gamesmanship." To continue with the salesman example: the client knows that the sales representative has his own agenda, that the salesman may be exaggerating the product's advantages and minimizing its shortcomings, but the client should expect nothing else. Likewise the salesman knows the client will ask questions and voice objections that he, the salesman, is expected to answer, not merely to demonstrate his knowledge of the product, but to demonstrate his knowledge of the client's problems, his sympathy with the client's situation—in short, to ingratiate himself with the client and establish his ethos as a knowledgeable and trustworthy colleague. The salesman/client situation clearly involves bullshit according to Frankfurt's definition, but the rhetorical situation, the game, makes bullshit far more complex than in Frankfurt's account.

The sales situation exemplifies bullshitting to convince someone, but bullshit can also aim to create an ethos for its own sake, to misrepresent the speaker simply for the pleasure of doing so. This activity is perhaps the most frequent kind of bullshitting, and it too participates in gamesmanship. The two prototypical examples of this kind of bullshit are the fish story and the sex story. The former usually concerns the one that got away; the latter the one that didn't. This bullshit aims to enhance the speaker's reputation as a sportsman or a lover and in the process entertain the auditors. It differs, however, from tall tales or fairy stories (although it may be as true) in that it purports to

be the truth; it aims at belief, not the suspension of disbelief. Part of the game is to speak so convincingly that the auditors believe the bullshit and thus not only enhance the speaker's reputation as a fisherman or ladies' man, but also enhance his reputation as a skilled bullshitter. The truth of the account is secondary to the credibility that the speaker wins. The highest compliment, and most derogatory insult, that can be given to such a person is that he is "*full* of shit."

The above part of this essay slipped into the masculine pronoun—and with good reason. According to Ong, this ludic quality of bullshit is gender specific—it is almost exclusively a male game. Ong lists a variety of such games: medieval disputants insulting or "flitting" their opponents, African Americans playing the dozens, primitive peoples engaging in ritual boasting, etc. (124–25). All these may be described as bullshitting insofar as they use language to establish an ethos of aggression and masculine superiority. This ethos can be highlighted by comparing it to the opposite of bullshit; not to "truth" or "sincerity" as Frankfurt would have it, but to "chicken shit."

The *locus classicus* for the use of this term is President Lyndon Johnson. When Johnson was in the Senate, he reputedly called Richard Nixon "chicken shit," implying that he was weak, petty, and untrustworthy, not because he was a bullshitter (Johnson himself had no equals) but because he was a liar. Later Nixon, while vice president, scored a public relations coup by standing up to an angry mob in Venezuela; Johnson embraced Nixon upon his return. When reminded by a reporter that he had called Nixon chicken shit, Johnson replied, "Son, you've got to learn that overnight chicken shit can turn to chicken salad" (Morgan 109). Finally, when Johnson was president, Charles Mohr asked him how pay raises to his staff were being distributed. Johnson replied, "Here you are, alone with the President of the United States and Leader of the Free World, and you ask a chicken-shit question like that" (Mohr). In each instance, "chicken shit" connotes unmanliness, weakness, and pettiness. In Johnson's eyes, if Nixon had been a bullshitter, he would have been a far better man.

So "chicken shit" illustrates by contrast the masculine, aggressive, ludic qualities of "bullshit." These qualities are particularly important in light of Ong's insights into the nature of argument. He claims that argument, verbal conflict, was and is essentially a masculine endeavor fraught with ludic qualities. It is ritual combat in which the establishing of reputation is critical. Seen in that light, it is surely no accident that so many influential critiques of academic argument have come from a feminist perspective.

To sum up, prototypical bullshit has to do with a purposeful misrepresentation of self, has the quality of gamesmanship, and—contrary to what Frankfurt says—is at least potentially a lie. Frankfurt may be right to point out that some bullshit may possibly be true (e.g., the Fourth of July speech or the sales pitch), but it is not recognizable as bullshit because it may be truthful but rather because it is likely to be a lie. Most Fourth of July speeches are, in fact, chock-full of dubious historical claims, and sales pitches are all too often both biased *and* false. Moreover, Frankfurt's understanding of *lie* is too narrow ("It is impossible for someone to lie unless he thinks he knows the truth"). As Cole and Kay point out, the prototypical case of *lie* includes not just actual falsehoods but also statements made when there is an insufficient basis for knowing the truth.

One way to notice when bullshit is most bullshit-like is to look at the difference between the noun *bullshitter* versus the verb *to bullshit*. Consider Frankfurt's example in which Wittgenstein challenges the statement "I feel like a dog that has been run over." Someone who makes that statement may be bullshitting, but it is not the statement of a bullshitter. That is, it is not a statement to which a competent interlocutor can respond, "Bullshit!" Indeed, in the anecdote, apocryphal or not, Wittgenstein does not respond with anything like that but rather with a hyper-empirical rejoinder that demonstrates his meticulous cast of mind.

Prototypical bullshit is what a bullshitter tries to pull off—something that should provoke "Bullshit!" That may not always be "high-quality" bullshit. Frankfurt says that we are more tolerant of bullshit than of lies, citing the fatherly advice, "Never tell a lie when you can bullshit your way through" (48). That seems to be a recommendation not just to bullshit but to be very good at it. But we often grow weary of bullshit when it is both prototypical and of poor quality.

As good an example as any of prototypical and unsuccessful bullshit is found in the title of Laura Penny's book about corporate bullshit: *Your Call Is Important to Us*. The statement "Your call is important to us" has the usual qualities of self-misrepresentation (if corporations can be said to have a collective self). It is likely to be a lie because it greatly exaggerates the company's sincerity. And it is gamesmanship (or, to use Frankfurt's phrase, an "attempt to get away" with saying something). But it fails to play the game with skill or elegance. Part of gamesmanship in successful bullshit is that it is at once grandiose and difficult to be sure of: it gets away with something audacious while also putting it plainly on display. "Your call is important to us" is hardly auda-

cious, and nobody believes it. So it grates. That is also true of the brand of bullshit sometimes called governmentese, which misrepresents intentions, is likely to be deceptive, and perpetrates, rather than plays, a game.

Of course, the ordinary defense for "Your call is important to us" and similar corporate banalities is that they are matters of politeness. But as many discourse analysts have pointed out, politeness is not without its complications. Norman Fairclough writes, "[P]articular politeness conventions embody, and their use implicitly acknowledges, particular social and power relations" (163). No doubt, part of the irritation people feel toward false politeness from corporations is that consumers are, all too apparently, powerless to avoid it or even respond to it—trapped on hold, with no choice but to be mollified again and again by a prerecorded "Your call is important to us." But it is not just a feeling of helplessness that bothers people; it is the bullshit quality of the corporate language. Its insincerity. Its smugness. The feebleness of its attempt to get away with something.

Both successful and unsuccessful bullshit can be found everywhere. But this essay is particularly concerned with the way bullshit is perceived and the way it operates in academe. Accordingly, the problem that will concern the remainder of this essay is this: What kinds of prototypical and nonprototypical bullshit characterize academic writing? And what difference does it make?

Academic Bullshit among Professors

For many non-academics, academic writing is not just bullshit but bullshit of the worst kind. That is a stinging condemnation, but one that would be easily dismissed if academics did not have their own reservations about academic discourse. The fact is: both non-academics and academics sometimes judge academic writing to be bullshit, but for reasons that are very different. At play in making these judgments are multiple prototypes and their contending rhetorical forces. Just as bullshit is a graded category centered on a prototype, some kinds of academic writing are more typical than others. Because of that, we have to investigate not whether academic writing is considered to be bullshit but whether or not *prototypical* academic writing is considered to be *prototypical* bullshit—and in whose estimation.

When non-academics call academic writing bullshit, they mean that it uses jargon, words whose meanings are so abstract and vague as to seem unrelated to anyone's experience. Such jargon seems to contribute nothing to the reader except confusion and serves only to enhance the ethos of the speaker, a strategy that the general public dislikes precisely because they suspect that

academics are taken in by it. Academics, it is said, believe their own bullshit: They hide behind language that may be as slight, or exaggerated, or obfuscatory as any sales pitch or fish story.

Joseph Williams and Richard Lanham are perhaps the best-known commentators on the topic of overblown prose style. In *Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace*, Williams writes, "Generations of students have struggled with dense writing, many thinking they were not smart enough to grasp the writer's deep ideas. Some have been right about that, but more could have blamed the writer's inability (or refusal) to write clearly" (8). The key word here is "refusal." Often academic writers could be clearer but prefer to serve up something that sounds like bullshit. So begins a vicious cycle. As Lanham describes it, professors write prolix books and articles, students imitate their professors' style, and professors reward them for it—because professors often think that abstruse academic writing "sounds just right; it sounds professional" (17). Both Williams and Lanham point out the grammatical characteristics of unclear style: chiefly, agentless sentences and an overabundance of nominalizations. Or to put it more in academic-sounding words: The absence of agents in sentences and a corresponding abundance of abstract nominalizations characteristic of stylistic opaqueness figure prominently in Williams and Lanham's commentary.

But though we can surely identify typical grammatical features of unclear prose, the problem ultimately comes down to audience: When people consider writing to be not plain enough or deliberately obscure, what they really mean is that the writing does not appropriately address *them*. When discussing the essence of bullshit, Frankfurt does not specify an audience's character or expectations beyond those of the "average reader." Academic writing, however, is seldom meant for an average audience; it addresses an audience of specialists. Indeed, much academic publication, especially by young scholars, aims to qualify the author for membership in a group of specialists. When it comes to identifying what counts as prototypical academic writing, it matters who is making the judgment.

For the general public, the apotheosis of academic bullshit seems to be the interpretive paper in the humanities. Among those papers none suffers so much opprobrium as the ones delivered at the annual meeting of the Modern Language Association. Every year the daily press of the host city ridicules the conference papers. Titles such as "The Odor of Male Solitude," "Margaret Cavendish as Giant Cucumber," "Obviating the State by Stating the Obvious: Discourse-Analytical Linguistics and Anarchism, " and "Bestio-Scatological Politics in 'Go Dog, Go'" (actual titles) are reprinted gleefully in the mainstream

press as evidence that the eggheads at our universities are not just loons but absolute bullshitters.

These egregious examples have the characteristics of prototypical bullshit. They apparently disregard the truth by delving wildly into the realm of interpretation. They use odd language in the service of building a false ethos. And they do both as a form of gamesmanship. Perhaps no one, including most academics, finds these titles bullshit-free. But they are irksomely bullshit-like *for a general audience*. Indeed, the general public takes them to be the prototype of academic writing in the humanities. Such writing is seen as gamesmanship in a game that is rigged. In the public mind, there is no admirable art or craft to bullshitting an audience of fellow academics who suspend disbelief so willingly.

However, what academics consider to be prototypical academic writing is far different from what the general public has in mind. In turn, academics have much different misgivings about it. They surely do not consider all academic writing to be bullshit but suspect that some of it—even some that they value—may not be entirely free of it. Consider here that gradedness of both categories: academic writing and bullshit. For academic insiders, the academic work that receives public scorn is recognizable as academic work but is not typical of it: the academic prototype is not characterized by outrageousness but rather by earnestness (indeed, by earnest tedium). Similarly, when insiders worry that academic writing may be bullshit, they are not concerned with prototypical bullshit: braggadocio or, worse, a pretense of gamesmanship in a rigged contest. Rather, they worry that even good academic writing, especially in the humanities and social sciences, is *something like* bullshit.

In other words, it is nonprototypical bullshit—in at least these ways: Academic writing very seldom aims to deceive the reader about its content, but it certainly is meant to enhance the reputation, the ethos, of the writer. Frequently academic publication aims to create an ethos that will result in tangible rewards for the academic: tenure, promotion, grants, etc. The academic knows that such rewards are distributed on the basis of reputation. Such a reputation is gained by publishing books and articles that have been peer reviewed before publication and positively reviewed afterward. Hence professional rewards come from academic reputation, and academic reputation comes from publication. This system seems to make academic publication a particularly rich field for bullshit. At least to some degree, the reward system encourages the academic writer to misrepresent him- or herself by emphasizing if not exaggerating the influence of what he or she has written. Yet there is nothing espe-

cially deceptive about this construction of ethos. Within the academic community, it is fully on display. Indeed, it is entirely conventional.

Academic publication is also coy about its argumentative—ludic—character. It generally aims to refute, qualify, or expand the positions taken in other academic publications, whether about the meaning of the white whale or the existence of a sub-atomic particle that lasts for billionths of a millisecond. But academics frequently describe publication as "entering the conversation" or with some other irenic descriptor. That turns successful academic writing into a complex game indeed—an art or craft in which arguments are forwarded, but more than just argumentative imperatives must be attended to. It follows the conventions of rhetorical argument familiar since the time of Aristotle. Yet it also follows certain discipline-specific conventions.

Consider the plethora of constraints to which the academic writer must conform. The academic writer must make claims and prove them according to the conventions of the discipline. The writer must marshal supporting information and arguments and present them in an approved format. The level of writing must be congruent with that of other publications in the field. Even if the writer profoundly disagrees with another position, it is an implicit rule that the opponent's professional reputation be respected. Abiding by these conventions creates a certain tone, the tone of the competent, often dispassionate, expert who is attempting to expand a fund of knowledge. Someone who can create this tone may indeed be playing the game of academic publication. This academic gamesmanship is liable to the charge of bullshit insofar as the persona or ethos created by that tone may be completely different from the "actual" disposition of the writer. In short, what academics would call *prototypical academic writing* may be bullshit, but it is not *prototypical bullshit.* It may, however, be a variant sort of bullshit—bullshit on the edge of the category.

Yet even peripheral sorts of bullshit suffer by association with the prototype. The prototype of bullshit is not just at the center of the category; it is the category's center of gravity. As Amos Tversky and Itamar Gati have shown, prototypes are the standard against which nonprototypes are unconsciously measured. In their experiments, participants in the United States consistently saw Mexico as more similar to the United States than the United States to Mexico. Once this phenomenon is pointed out, it seems obvious. We recognize ospreys as birds because they are something like robins; we do not recognize robins as birds because they are something like ospreys. Because of this unconscious phenomenon and the rhetoric it entails, academic writing may

be nonprototypical bullshit, but all bullshit suffers from the gravitational pull of the prototype.

Moreover, part of academics' ambivalence derives from the feeling that *some* academic writing *is* prototypical. "Bullshit" within academia is an expletive that asserts loyalty and conviction about one's own ideological commitments while disvaluing those of others. While the academy constitutes a kind of specialized group, it is a group with subgroups and subspecialties organized according to a myriad of criteria: disciplines, historical periods, theoretical frameworks, etc. This latter criterion seems particularly vulnerable to accusations of bullshit both within and without the academy. Theoretical frameworks probably provoke more cries of "Bullshit!" than any other academic praxis: new criticism bullshit, Marxist bullshit, feminist bullshit, Marxist-feminist bullshit, deconstructionist bullshit, statistical bullshit, and the list goes on—and on. These epithets signify a final judgment of unintelligibility or bad faith leveled at the practitioners of one theory or discipline by practitioners of another, who not only disagree with the other theory or discipline but who, in some ultimate way, deny that it yields knowledge and assert that the whole discipline or theory qualifies as a prototypical case of bullshit. In the academy, to call something "Bullshit!" argues that the text does not merit a place in the academy, and it implies that its author does not deserve one either. It is an *argumentum ad hominem* that aims to excommunicate. And to a certain extent, the "average reader" may make a similar judgment about all our houses.

Academic Bullshit among Students

Compositionists will, of course, have already observed that composition theory explicitly advocates that students do just what makes academic writing seem to many like bullshit: to develop an identity within a community of discourse—that is, to gain "genre knowledge." This social understanding of writing and self is too familiar to rehearse at length here. Suffice it to say that whether we liken today's students to those of Isocrates, who were encouraged to create a persona that they wanted to inhabit, or whether we think of student writers along the lines of Lave and Wenger's apprentices, good writing is inseparable from the context in which it arises—and thus from the manipulations of self that contexts foist upon us all. Along the way to professional writing competence, there is bound to be some bullshit.

Yet, although it is easy enough to recognize apprentice writing as a peripheral type of bullshit, that's not what the word "bullshit" typically singles out in student writing. Rather, student bullshit is often brazenly prototypical.

This problem is discussed well by William Perry in his essay "Examsmanship and the Liberal Arts." In the delicate language of 1963, Perry refers only to "bull" and to the practitioners of it as "bullsters." He defines bull as "relevancies, however relevant, without data" (65). That is to say, when a student can write intelligibly and intelligently about a book the student has not read, that is bull. It is interpretation by guesswork. Perry contrasts bull favorably with what he calls "cow": facts without interpretation. His point, charmingly made, is that becoming "a member of the community of scholars" depends at least as much on the ability to discuss matters about which one possesses few facts as upon knowledge of facts themselves.

Yet he also acknowledges that "bullsters" are usually seen as cynical. That is a key point. Perry's chief example—a student who receives an A- for an essay on a book that he has not read—is cynical, even if many, like Perry, are not overly offended by the achievement. Students are rewarded with grades, and everyone understands the temptation to subvert the system by means of bullshit. No one, not even the "bullster," would contend that bullshit can really substitute for well-informed and thoughtful writing. In that sense, the problem of prototypical student bullshit contains the seeds of its own solution.

Another kind of student bullshit constitutes a bigger problem. This bullshit subverts academic writing through competent but insincere cooperation. Jasper Neel calls this "anti-writing," writing that follows the conventions of academic writing but that conveys the sentiment "I care nothing about the truth" (85). Combine disregard for the truth with the inevitable classroom pretense that the writer truly cares about his or her academic development, and an insidious variety of bullshit is fashioned. The student has done all that is asked, except to be sincere—about the content of the writing and about his or her presentation of self. Just as bullshit is a greater threat to the truth than a lie, this docile form of bullshit is a greater threat to student writing than the cynical work of the bullster. The bullster is akin to the hoaxer, whose reward is in revealing (though probably just to peers) the successful exploit (compare Secor and Walsh). The cooperative bullshitter presents a "false" self but fails to recognize that the contingent self can lead to self-transformation. It is bullshit that aims to get by with something worse than a lie: disengagement.

A Brief Conclusion

At this point, convention would have us offer possible solutions to the problem of academic bullshit. But—taking a page from Frankfurt's essay—we will demur. Not because we do not want to be useful. As Frankfurt says, we operate

in a world in which bullshit seems to be all around us. None of us can put an end to bullshit in the world, not even in our little corner of it. As scholars of rhetoric and writing, the most we can hope for is to avoid making the problem of academic bullshit larger than it is.

To do that, we need a more sophisticated understanding of *what bullshit is*—or, better yet, a more precise understanding of how *what bullshit is* varies. That will have more to do with acknowledging the graded category of bullshit. Most of what composition theory has advocated in recent years aims toward a pedagogy of bullshit—but not prototypical, masculinist ludic bullshit. And certainly not the cynical hoaxing of the bullster. Rather, most of us have in mind—for our students and for ourselves—a productive sort of bullshit: bullshit that ultimately produces better thought and better selves. We must acknowledge that benign bullshit is inevitable when people are attempting to write well.

But the category is graded, and the grade can be steep and slippery. The benign bullshit that is part of entry into the academic community comes conceptually bundled with the cynical gamesmanship of the bullster, the anti-writer, and the academic fraud. The structure of the category may encourage action that moves us closer to the prototype. Thus it is incumbent on us, the writing teachers, to be ever aware of the grades within the category and to move within and around those benign forms that are inescapable and even helpful, while resisting the gravitational pull of the prototypical. In doing so, we remain true to our discipline and to ourselves.

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