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Bourgeois Realism or Working Class Kitsch?: The Aesthetics of Class in Composition

TO SAY THAT WRITING INSTRUCTION HAS FOCUSED IN LARGE PART ON THE DEVELOPMENT of the writing agent is perhaps to state the obvious. But it is precisely this connection that William Irmscher highlights in his 1979 assertion that writing is “a process of growing and maturing . . . a way of promoting the higher intellectual development of the individual” (241-42). Nearly a decade later, Robert Brooke reiterates, with the benefit of hindsight, “The entire ‘process, not product’ revolution can be seen as a change of focus from results to behaviors, from texts to people—in its best forms, the goal is to teach people to be writers, not to produce good texts in the course of a semester” (38). We might conclude that composition, even in current-traditional mode, has been concerned not merely with the composing of texts but the composing of lives—and thus the ethics of that composition. Indeed the molding of subjectivity has been at the core of composition’s process movement. As Lester Faigley maintains, historically in the United States “writing teachers were as much or more interested in *whom* they want their students to be as in *what* they want their students to write” (113 emphasis his).

That class is a component of this focus on subjectivity is evident in Lynn Bloom’s claim that freshman composition is a “middle-class enterprise,” a vehicle for inculcating the characteristics of industry, reasonableness, and earnest politeness. Bloom’s analysis makes explicit what others have hinted at in their discussions of the “bold moral and civic claims” made in the name of writing instruction (Newkirk 70). When Ken Bruffee tells us, for example, “mature, effective interdependence—social maturity integrated with intellectual maturity—is the most important lesson we should expect students to learn” (xiii), he expresses views congenial to Bloom’s notions of middle-class responsibility.

But this mission of middle-class subjectivity does not go unchallenged. In his discussion of Coles’s and Vopat’s collection of best student writing, Lester Faigley implicitly critiques the assumed middle-class aesthetic that governs our reception of student texts. Faigley singles out one student’s reflectively lyrical essay about writing letters home from Paris, an

essay that is praised by the instructor for its honesty and courage, to comment that "From Vivaldi at Notre Dame to the value of writing, the truths 'exposed' and 'revealed' in the essay are a series of recognitions for a college English teacher" (125). Put another way, the essay conforms to middle-class "teachers' unstated assumptions about subjectivity" (128), which Faigley sees revealed in instructors' responses to student writing:

The teachers' commentaries on the narratives of past experience imply that success in teaching depends on making a student aware of the desired subject position she will occupy . . . It is this notion of the student writer as a developing rational consciousness that makes most talk of empowerment so confused . . . what is very little explored in the teachers' commentaries on the narratives is the institutional setting of student writing about the self and how that setting is implicated in the production of "honest" and "truthful" writing. (129)

In his examination of what constitutes the honest and truthful in student writing, Faigley is implicitly calling for a class-based interrogation of our enlightenment/romantic conceptions of authorship as well as a revaluation of what are ultimately the *aesthetic* judgments that we make about student texts. I emphasize aesthetic because in our turn toward the rhetorical in writing studies, discussions of aesthetic concerns may seem insufficiently critical or anachronistically belletristic. My contention is that a consideration of aesthetics, specifically theories of kitsch, can help us understand the rhetoric of student texts (and our reactions to them) as products of a conflicted academic terrain, one that we as institutional players must all negotiate. In particular, this negotiation takes place around the questions of subjectivity and development that figure so prominently in the praxis of writing instruction. It is this interest in the developing subjectivity of the student writer—not just an interest in texts but in lives—that has cultivated what I consider an aesthetic of kitsch.

Kitsch: Not Just Knickknacks

Kitsch is a slippery aesthetic category, but most typically, it is defined as bad or fake art that lacks a critical dimension. According to Dorfles, it is:

a problem of individuals who believe that art should produce pleasant, sugary feelings; or even that art should form a kind of "condiment," a kind of background music, a decoration, a status symbol even, as a way of shining in one's social circle; in no case should it [art] be a serious matter, a tiring exercise, an involved and critical activity. (15-16)

With the exception of Tomas Kulka, who attempts a definition based on formalist principles, most theorists see the aesthetic deficiency of kitsch, its "badness," as an ethical and political failure linked to conditions of modernity and reproduction, loss of authenticity and individ-

uality. Hermann Broch paired kitsch and romanticism, seeing in them a common impulse of obfuscating sentimentality: "The kitsch system requires its followers to 'work beautifully,' while the art system issues the ethical order: 'Work well.' Kitsch is the element of evil in the value system of art" (63). Milan Kundera also locates the beginnings of kitsch in the "sentimental" nineteenth century as the metaphysical "absolute denial of shit, in both literal and figurative senses of the word" (*Lightness* 248). Kundera presents kitsch as a politicized aesthetic, linking it to totalitarian regimes and the elimination of dissent through perpetuation of the idyll:

People have always aspired to an idyll, a garden where nightingales sing, a realm of harmony where the world does not rise up as a stranger against man nor man against other men; where the world and all its people are molded from a single stock and the fire lighting up the heavens is the fire burning in the hearts of men, where every man is a note in a magnificent Bach fugue and anyone who refuses his note is a mere black dot, useless and meaningless, easily caught and squashed between the fingers like an insect. (*Laughter and Forgetting* 8)

The connection between totalitarianism and kitsch was established by the Nazis themselves in their "decadent" art exhibit, which banned work at odds with the "beautiful" ideal of fascism. Clement Greenberg's 1939 essay "The Avant Garde and Kitsch" obliquely attempts to situate the appeal of kitsch within a context of rising fascism and heroic art. Recently, Catherine Lugg has stressed kitsch as a system of manipulation, defining it as the avoidance of "complex, painful realities" (106) in favor of "syrupy emotionalism" that "shape(s) the direction of the political environment" (119). Kitsch, then, far from being merely a harmless obsession with tacky knickknacks, is often understood as a dangerous phenomenon steeped in mass appeal.

Kitsch and Class

This connection between kitsch and the masses implies a class-based understanding of the aesthetic. Greenberg is explicit on this point:

There has always been on one side the minority of the powerful and therefore the cultivated and on the other the great mass of the exploited and poor and therefore the ignorant. Formal culture has always belonged to the first, while the last have had to content themselves with folk or rudimentary culture, or kitsch. (16)

Greenberg's rhetoric here of an exploited, impoverished, ignorant "great mass" connects kitsch unmistakably to the working class. In so doing, he offers a materialist analysis of the low/high brow distinction, yet even as he establishes it, he, perhaps inadvertently, problematizes it:

the peasant soon finds that the necessity of working hard all day for his living and the rude, uncomfortable circumstances in which he lives do not allow him enough leisure, energy and comfort to train for the enjoyment of Picasso. This needs, after all, a considerable amount of "conditioning."

Superior culture is one of the most artificial of all human creations, and the peasant finds no "natural" urgency within himself that will drive him towards Picasso in spite of all difficulties. In the end the peasant will go back to kitsch when he feels like looking at pictures, for he can enjoy kitsch without effort. (18)

While Greenberg's emphasis on the "easy" aspect of kitsch is consistent with most definitions, his naturalizing of the phenomenon is unusual, as it is kitsch that is most often identified with the artificial and inauthentic. Instead Greenberg cites artificiality as the cultural achievement of the avant garde and the leisured classes (although elsewhere he does express the "genuineness" of high culture in contrast to the ersatz quality of urban mass culture, thus too connecting kitsch with "false art"). Nonetheless his recognition of the constructed nature of "superior culture" is an important one, precisely because it complicates the romantic elision of "real" art (high brow) with truth. But his failure to extend the same analysis to kitsch and the "peasant" ends in an undertheorization of the aesthetic's class dimension.

Is kitsch indeed the aesthetic of the working class, as Greenberg's analysis suggests? While this may square with most common conceptions, Aleksa Celebonovict moves in a different direction in her coinage of the uniquely non-pejorative term "bourgeois realism" to mark kitsch as the province of the middle class: "In the Bourgeois Realist period, art . . . tended to support a certain way of life which was subject to the moral code of the middle classes . . . artistic works bore witness to the excellence of middle-class morality" (25). Her analysis is concerned with the sentimental depictions of nineteenth-century academic painters (often designated as exemplifying kitsch) whose legacy was overtaken and ultimately discredited by the trajectory of modern art. Of such work, Celebonovict states:

The subjects treated by . . . [these] painters, no less than the style of their works, show quite unambiguously that their art was completely bound up with the preoccupations of one or more clearly defined social groups. In the course of their daily life, these groups made such a flagrant display of their conception of the world that their moral values became in a very real way the hallmark of the painting they supported. The direction and importance of this painting was therefore closely linked to its social role; and it is not difficult to understand why it was so highly appreciated by the people of the time, for it provided them with a clearly recognizable picture of themselves. (13)

This "recognizable picture" is a flattering one and linked to kitsch as I have been discussing

it. The Bourgeois Realist movement “set out . . . to interpret visible and palpable reality, with the firm intention of adapting it to the ideal image conditioning public and private life” (Celebonovict 46). Many of the works in question are sentimental depictions of family life, exotic orientalist themes, or clichéd mythological narratives. Their treatment is skillfully realistic at the same time that it is conditioned by a desire to render such realism in accordance with middle-class ideology. Bourgeois Realism, as Celebonovict describes it, is a conservative attempt to deny that which is inconsistent with the middle-class ideal.

The confusion over whether kitsch belongs to the working or middle classes derives in part from the contradictory connotations of the word “bourgeois” as well as the slipperiness

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of the terms “middle class” and “working class” as cultural rather than exclusively economic categories. The contradictions are relevant to a discussion of elite versus non-elite aesthetics, or the question of “taste.” What lifestyle characteristics do we associate with middle- and working-class ontologies respectively that would connect them to particular aesthetic valuations?

Immanuel Wallerstein, in his consideration of the evolving concepts of the bourgeoisie and the middle classes, points out that the bourgeois lifestyle has been associated with leisured, “aristocratic” tastes. In speaking of the twentieth century “new middle classes,” Wallerstein says that “their often quite hedonistic style of life de-emphasized the puritanical strain associated with bourgeois culture; to that extent they were ‘aristocratic’” (96-97). Yet at the same time the middle classes are connected to “a certain absence of true luxury and a certain awkwardness of social behavior” (92). The latter associations suggest that the industrious bourgeois is as susceptible to the “easy” appeal of kitsch as Greenberg’s tired “peasant” and as potentially unable to appreciate the “artificiality” of the Picasso:

when urban life became richer and more complex, the style of life of a bourgeois could also be set against that of an artist or an intellectual, representing order, social convention, sobriety and dullness in contrast to all that was seen as spontaneous, freer, gayer, more intelligent. (Wallerstein 92)

Celebonovict’s idea that kitsch upholds middle-class values in a mirror-like fashion resonates with Faigley’s criticisms of expressivism, where the rendering of middle class subjectivity in an essay typically involves “characterizing former selves as objects for analysis” (129). The often wistful tone of the personal essay is indicative of a particular aspect of the kitsch aesthetic and its connection to loss. In order to understand this relationship and its applicability

ty to the writing classroom, I rely on Celeste Olalquiaga, whose study of kitsch as a nineteenth-century development relies on Benjamin's understanding of commodity fetishism and the relationship among authenticity, reproduction, collection, and voyeurism. Olalquiaga's kitsch "is these scattered fragments of the aura, traces of dream images turned loose from their matrix, multiplied by the incessant beat of industrialization, covering the emptiness left by both the aura's demise and modernity's failure to deliver its promise of a radiant future" (84). Like Kundera, she invokes the idyll and argues that there

reigns an illusion of completeness, a universe devoid of past and future, a moment whose sheer intensity is to a large degree predicated on its very inexistence. This desperately sought moment . . . taints all waking experience with a deep-felt longing, as if one lived but to encounter once again this primal, archaic pleasure of total connection. (28-29)

What is of particular interest to me for the purposes of understanding the aesthetics of the writing classroom is Olalquiaga's discussion of the idea of the souvenir, in which she problematizes the concept of the idyll. Here Olalquiaga makes a distinction between two kinds of kitsch: melancholic and nostalgic. This echoes Broch, who hints at two types of kitsch, declaring that Hitler "liked the full-bodied type of kitsch and the saccharine type" and that "modern kitsch . . . is impregnated both with blood and saccharine" (65). The melancholic and nostalgic, I hope to show, are linked to class values and inflect writing instruction precisely because of composition's investment in discursive subjectivity. Nostalgic and melancholic kitsch are both present in the writing classroom and students often write in the former mode to be countered by the teacher's interest in the latter. Yet the distinction is not always so clear cut, in part due to the ambiguity of what constitutes middle-class and working-class cultures.

Nostalgia and Melancholy

According to Olalquiaga, nostalgic and melancholic kitsch both have a connection to memory, loss, and death, but nostalgic kitsch is based on the erasure of loss and death while melancholic kitsch fetishizes it. In her words, "Melancholic kitsch revels in memories because their feeling of loss nurtures its underlying rootlessness. Nostalgic kitsch evokes memories in order to dispel any such feelings" (296). The nostalgic variety also "yearns after an experience whose lack is precisely glossed over by the desire for a utopian origin, producing a perfect memory of something that never really happened" (293). Nostalgic kitsch is perhaps what we are most familiar with and certainly, it would seem, the sort of kitsch referenced in relation to political manipulation and the masses. Nostalgic kitsch creates feelings of belonging through clichés that *deny* loss or imperfection. According to this schema, the kitsch of the plastic flower bouquet or the fluffy kitten greeting card lies in its defiance of decay and its

erasure of the accompanying loss and disorder. Melancholic kitsch romanticizes and often essentializes that loss, as in a coming of age or loss of innocence tale, for example.

Olalquiaga illustrates both types of kitsch by outlining possible cognitive and emotional responses in relation to one novelty store object: a silicon cube that contains a petrified hermit crab, whose name is Rodney. If one looks at this object as an existential prompt and sees a perpetual reminder of the demise of Rodney, one is in the realm of melancholic kitsch. If on the other hand the silicon preservation of Rodney inspires obliviousness to the crab's death and instead creates an ever-present Rodney, we have nostalgic kitsch. "Nostalgic kitsch is static . . . it just oscillates back and forth between the glorified experience and its subject, without any transformation. In melancholic kitsch . . . the passage of time is fundamental precisely because it is the transitoriness of all things, the continual flight into death that seduces this sensibility" (122).

This last statement is evocative of the personal essay with its melancholic, bitter-sweet "truths" and "revelations" and often ironic, controlled emotional responses. This is the type of personal writing frequently cited as "mature." But often student writing does not exhibit this type of "maturity." To the dissatisfaction of many writing teachers, students frequently provide personal accounts that are judged as sentimental and overly-generalized. Rather than *melancholic* kitsch, student narration of personal experience, much to the consternation of instructors who are looking for something "deeper," may contain platitudes and optimistic clichés typical of *nostalgic* kitsch.

David Bartholomae and Thomas Newkirk have discussed encountering the "problem" of unsophisticated emotion, cliché, and "commonplaces" in student writing and the need for adjustment. While Bartholomae sees deficit—lack of critical thinking—in "common sense," Newkirk attempts a more empathetic reading. Newkirk attributes the disjunction between teacher and student expectations to a variety of causes, ranging from what he sees as Aristotle's deprecation of emotion to literary modernism's elevation of irony. He acknowledges, citing Bourdieu, the connection between class and aesthetics, suggesting that "discomfort with emotional appeals is a feature of the 'aesthetic disposition' assumed by those who belong (or seek to belong) to a cultural aristocracy" with writing teachers being part of that milieu (27).

Building on Newkirk's and Olalquiaga's distinctions, I am suggesting that the more sophisticated handling of emotion is no less kitsch than the unsophisticated "common sense" deplored in some student writing. The sophisticated kitsch preferred by teachers is melancholic in nature and perhaps more typical of the elite sensibilities of the middle class. The nostalgic kitsch of the student narratives, rather than merely symptomatic of "immaturity," may instead be part of a non-elite aesthetic. The cultural values of each group are reflected,

respectively, in the “realism” of the two types of kitsch, similar to the way the academic painting of the nineteenth century reflected, in Celebonovict's view, middle-class ideals.

Kitsch and Culture Clash in the Classroom

In the *Bedford Introduction to Literature*, an invidious comparison is set up between two works of fiction: an excerpt from a Harlequin romance novel, Karen Vanderzee's *A Secret Sorrow*, and a “literary” short story, Gail Godwin's “A Sorrowful Woman.” The novel takes up the dilemma of Faye, who has an internal injury affecting her fertility. She breaks off a relationship because she knows her boyfriend wants children. He tells Faye that he still loves her and that they can adopt. By contrast the Godwin story describes a woman whose perfect life—understanding husband, beautiful child, comfortable home—causes her to have angst and commit suicide. The editor attempts to elicit a distinction between literary and formulaic fiction through an introduction that grapples with the difference between the two genres and a series of questions that illustrate this difference as it plays out in the examples.

While the editor tries not to come across as a snob, paying lip service to the legitimate “entertainment” function of formula fiction, the effect of the exercise is to assert the artistic merit of the short story and to steer students away from genre fiction. The textbook poses questions like: “How is the woman's problem in ‘A Sorrowful Woman’ made more complex than Faye's in *A Secret Sorrow*?” and, “Can both stories be read a second or third time and still be interesting? Why or why not?” That *A Secret Sorrow* is formulaic is true enough. That it is kitsch is true enough, too. It certainly seems to conform to the fake art idea where a happy ending inspires sentiment devoid of complexity. Politically and socially, the formula supports a conservative ideology in its portrait of a happily married wife and mother. The Harlequin romance has the features of neo-right-wing social realism. With its neat resolution as an effacement of loss and death, these novels can be located in the camp of nostalgic kitsch as described above. But while the romance is kitsch, so too, I would argue, is the story that Bedford editor Michael Meyer identifies as literary. Meyer doesn't stress the generic features of Godwin's story, focusing instead on its “complexity” as a key component of its literariness. But that “complexity” may be seen as part of the formula that underlies what Meyer and others are calling “literary.” While the romance novel's formula is understandable from the perspective of nostalgic kitsch, the “complexity” of the literary story may be explained in terms of a melancholic kitsch that revels in feelings of existential loss. The “literary” story, in its melancholic kitsch, is part of an elite aesthetic that is often privileged in writing and literature classes.

The melancholic tone is established in the opening lines of Godwin's “A Sorrowful Woman”: “One winter evening she looked at them: the husband durable, receptive, gentle;

the child a tender golden three. The sight of them made her so sad and sick she did not want to see them ever again (30)." The story proceeds to chart the woman's withdrawal from the roles of wife and mother, which culminates in the image of her suicide: "'Look, Mommy is sleeping,' said the boy. 'She's tired from doing all our things again.' He dawdled in a stream of the last sun for that day and watched his father roll tenderly back her eyelids, lay his ear softly to her breast, test the delicate bones of her wrist. The father put down his face into her fresh-washed hair" (34). What is the nature of the "complexity" here that distinguishes this story from the kitsch of the romance novel? The lyricism of the opening paragraph is connected immediately to loss that is sustained throughout the narrative as Godwin explores the *ennui* that afflicts the character. It is this relationship to loss, as defined by Olalquiaga, that marks the story as melancholic kitsch. For while the nostalgic kitsch of the romance novel resolves and eliminates loss in its unbearably happy ending, Godwin's story crystallizes that loss in its unhappy one. The aestheticized and fetishized loss (essentially romantic in nature) is, I would argue, fundamental to the design of the story's "complexity."

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While I, too, prefer Godwin's story to the Harlequin novel—that is to say, I prefer the sentimentalization of loss to the sentimentalization of wifedom and motherhood—I have found that many students do not. The elite aesthetic may privilege loss, but students often prefer the nostalgic to the melancholic. A "developmental" explanation would suggest that such students need to be disabused of their "commonplace" notions as they enter into university discourse. But when I consider student response, the scenario becomes complicated by class and gender. Often students who prefer the romance novel—usually women (the target audience)—identify with how terrible the heroine must feel about not being able to have children. They are impressed with and envious of the understanding husband who loves her anyway. They find the stability of the couple's life gratifying, often remarking how wonderful it would be to find such a man.

While students' ready acceptance of the novel's definition of wife and mother might be galling to a feminist and perhaps frequently read as a lack of perspicacity, such acceptance is perhaps understandable and functional within the context of working-class lives, just as Gail Godwin's melancholic critique of wifedom and motherhood, deemed "literary," is useful

to the middle-class feminist who seeks to dismantle the trappings of middle-class life. The romance novel, however, depicts an idealized portrait of middle-class life that can be appealing to those who do not have, yet aspire to, that status (or, as Celebonovict suggests with regard to bourgeois realism, accept that status uncritically). Such a reading of student response is suggested by the bewilderment that the same students often express over the Godwin story. While the angst may be immediately recognizable for someone who can afford to deconstruct middle-class ideals, working-class students who lack a sense of entitlement have often been baffled by the woman's behavior. How on earth could she be unhappy when she has a wonderful husband, a beautiful child, a lovely home and apparently no financial worries? Why would anybody in such circumstances want to kill herself? And why would anybody want to read such a story or find it interesting? Rather than intellectually deficient, this response can be understood as a class-based rhetoric that makes visible the middle-class assumptions contained within the literary reception of texts. Just as working-class students may be unable to appreciate the "literary" merit of "A Sorrowful Woman," middle-class teachers may be unable to see just how steeped the story is in its invisible middle-class values, even as the text attempts an interrogation of the same.

While Godwin's story is precisely an exploration of those questions, it is instructive to think about the direction that exploration takes, particularly as it relates to sentimentality. For the story certainly has its own sort of sentimentality even as it cynically parodies the middle-class family (the epigraph reads: "Once upon a time there was a wife and mother one too many times") (Godwin 30). In his discussion of belief and sentimentality in student writing, Newkirk effectively points to this divide between nostalgic and melancholic kitsch. Newkirk sees the "eulogies" and "testimonials" of freshman writing that "show loyalty . . . draw a lesson . . . affirm traditional values" and are "very one-dimensional, sometimes sentimental," even "maudlin and dishonest" as serving a positive function for students' sense of development (56). Teachers prefer narratives that disrupt the cultural shorthand of such kitsch, that "free us from the weight of nostalgia" and "liberate us from conventional expectations that age brings a form of wisdom, that nature provides solace, that motherhood is holy" (63). But the teacher's "aesthetic that values irony, complexity, and ambiguity" can constitute its own predictable paradigm (56). Dawn Skorczewski wonders whether

teacher preference for multiple meanings and critical thought over cliché reflects our resistance to authority figures who have urged us towards the same clichés that our students have benefited from. How many of us, for example, have felt belittled by gendered codes of behavior? How often do we speak of having been bound by silence to painful "family values"? If so, critical thought is a kind of safe house for us in the same way that cliché can be for our students. (234)

Such “critical thought” may itself become an elitist cliché, anchored in an aesthetic of melancholic kitsch that privileges and crystallizes skepticism and irony. Like a snake eating its own tail, this aesthetic of melancholy, in an ironic affirming of its own value, tears down what nostalgic kitsch seeks to uphold.

Is it accurate to say that teachers prefer “multiple meanings” and “critical thought”? To what extent does this elitist or literary aesthetic coincide with a middle-class sensibility? Where do middle-class college writing instructors fall on Wallerstein’s divide of bourgeois versus artist/intellectual and which cultural definition of bourgeois best represents them? What about working-class students who may be encountering academic culture for the first time? Class affiliations are dynamic and over-determined as are the values associated with those affiliations. These ambiguities have bearing on what counts as “good writing” in the college classroom and, consequently, the goal of subjectivity engendered there. Recasting the conflicts in terms of nostalgia and melancholy offer another means of mapping these cultural terrains.

To further illustrate the difficulties of defining class culture, I return to Lynn Bloom’s characterization of what she asserts are middle-class values and their relevance to composition. Bloom lists what she argues are characteristics of the American middle classes: respectability, decorum/propriety, moderation/temperance, thrift, efficiency, order, cleanliness, punctuality, delayed gratification, and critical thinking. She suggests that such features saturate writing theory and pedagogy and are based in American eighteenth- and nineteenth-century rhetorical and social practices. While this battery of adjectives certainly seems suggestive of the bourgeois emphasis on industry (excluding, maybe, the nebulous “critical thinking”), questions still arise as to what extent these characteristics are indeed “middle class” or exclusively so. Some of the features seem inconsistent with the hedonism and aristocratic dimensions of contemporary middle-class life. Many of Bloom’s categories characterize values associated with the stable working class. I wonder if these qualities are not more accurately viewed as values the American middle classes desire the working classes to possess to ensure the latter’s usefulness.

The term “critical thinking” strikes a note of intellectualism whereas the other traits have a moralistic flavor. Skorczewski’s observation that teachers have a penchant for “critical thought” begs a question about the nature of this “critical thought” and its connection to a class perspective. In the context of Bloom’s list, “critical thinking” is undergirded by concerns such as propriety, temperance, and thrift. Just how critical is such thinking, and where is the room for entertaining “multiple meanings”? In fact the schema that Bloom identifies sounds more like a prescription for sticking to a straight and narrow that would exclude a wide range of inquiry. While Bloom’s list is, at least in part, descriptive of the composition enterprise, the

cataloguing of puritanical, middle-class values ignores the aristocratic and intellectual aspects of the middle class. What is important for my discussion here is that her view of the nature and purpose of the composition class would place it in the realm of nostalgic kitsch rather than the melancholic kitsch that I have associated with an elitist aesthetic of complexity.

These complications suggest that the first-year writing course is caught somewhere between the two types of kitsch, the vacillation attributable in part to the complexities of social class perspectives, as I've suggested above, and also to composition's abiding concern with subjectivity and development. In the case of the latter factor, the collapsing of the distance between text and writer matters. For it is easy enough to celebrate loss and irony in a text we consider literary and impersonal but far more difficult to rail against sentimentality in a text we read as a representation of a student's life. Further, as Bloom identifies, composition promotes the production of texts that mirror the values it seeks to inculcate in its students. Thus instructors, whose sensibilities are located in the competing discourses of middle-class aesthetics, might have a soft spot for writing that reveals an aesthetic of earnest industriousness even as they are disappointed in its "commonplaces." Conversely, an English professor might find rebelliousness and irreverence interesting in literature while taking a dim view of these qualities when they show up in student work (and, even more so, in behavior).

Embodiments of Nostalgic and Melancholic Kitsch

These complexities can be illustrated through a review of two sample student essays that are used as grade exemplars at an urban community college. These essays, along with the grades they received, show some of the intricate contradictions bound up in expectations of student writing. I read these texts as embodiments of the nostalgic and melancholic kitsch that vie in the institutional discourses about "good writing" in a non-elite college where the student population is largely working class and minority. My reading will indicate not only the contradictions within the elite aesthetic of middle-class writing instructors but also the ways in which nostalgia and melancholy conflict within student writing and our interpretation of that writing.

What follows are two essays from a norming packet that represent an "A" and a "C" grade, respectively. In the packet the essays are accompanied by rationale for the assigned grade. While these rationales couch their critiques in craft-based issues of development, organization, and style, I contend that they also illustrate Bloom's thesis about the normative, and what she calls middle-class, nature of freshman composition. Consequently, the essays illustrate the tensions between melancholic and nostalgic kitsch as these aesthetics interweave themselves in the ideological landscape of the classroom.

The "A" Essay

In the article "Getting Involved" the author makes a statement about the extent to which Americans are concerned about other people's problems. She points out the thought very often encountered in our society, today. The truth is, she says, that people are indifferent about what happens around them. It does not really matter if a person is being robbed right in front of us, as long as that person is not us. It is none of our business, or it should be none of our business according to Quindlen. Why should we get involved, she asks. Reading the article, one can deduce that individualism has become a basic style of life in today's society.

Often, people tend to turn to outside agencies such as police, rather than acting themselves. However, sometimes not even professionals such as police are called upon, because people are afraid to get involved. The case of Kitty Genovese supports this argument the best. The young woman was stabbed to death while her neighbors were watching and listening. Nobody did anything. Now, I wonder where are the responsibilities one human being has towards his neighbor. If those neighbors had a bit of morality Kitty Genovese should not have been dead. They were morally obliged to call the police and thus, at least attempt to save the life of their neighbor.

Traditional ethics, which implied duties of one human being towards another have been replaced with the "New Morality". The new set of ethics is emerging in society today, which in its foundation has an impenetrable individualism. Mind your own business says on the faces of today's generation. As long as we are not affected in any way, we should not take any steps towards stopping or at least attempting to stop, let's say a robber or an abuser. This is justified by saying that interference may get us involved and put us in a conflicting situation, where we do not want to be. However, as a result of such indifference victims are falling everyday. Many of them would have been alive if people had listened to their moral consciousness at all.

This brings in my mind another case, in which a young man named Joey Levick was left to die in a ditch near a busy highway. It all happened in Seattle when three young men headed for a party after getting heavily intoxicated in a Seattle nightclub. On their way to a party, the car stopped and something was wrong with the engine, apparently. The three young fellows pulled over and got into a fight. Joey Levick was beaten up by his pals so severely that he suffered multiple brain damage, doctors said later. Joey was left unconscious in a ditch almost beaten to death by his friends who ran away. One of the youngsters whose name was Jason I think stopped by his sister's and brother-in-law's house and told them what had happened. They did not respond because they did not want to get involved they claimed when interviewed on 20/20. Eventually, the third young man told the entire story to his mother but she did not do anything either. When Joey Levick was found he was pronounced dead. However, the death came about as a result of his inability to lift his head out of the ditch which caused him to suffocate. If anyone were there to help him lift his head,

he would have survived, the physicians declared. In spite of being informed of what had occurred people did not react. I recall Joey's mother saying in tears "They are monsters. They let my son die just because they didn't want to get involved."

Cases such as these occur everyday and people die everyday as a result of other people's irresponsibility. Individualism has lead to a pluralistic society in which everyone cares only for themselves. "No man is an island" Johnne Donne once said and people should stop being isolated individuals who are blind to see others' burdens.

The "C" Essay

One modern example of how America views "getting involved" is to go back to World War II and look at how long it took America to get involved in the war. America was forced into war with the attack on Pearl Harbor. All the while Hitler was committing genocide in Europe.

This is Anna Quindlens America, stiff lipped and cold. I can't say I subscribe to Ms. Quindlens views on "getting involved," however her view may stem from "sucker phobia". What I mean is she is afraid of being used or worst becoming a victim while trying to help a supposed victim.

Though I can comprehend her view I can't agree. My reasons are as follows; In a situation where a stranger approaches you for help you only seconds to decide if you are going to help or turn away. My first instinct is to help and the next moment say "wait, asses the situation. Take a moment and ask for more information on their situation. Look for clues to see if their plea is legitimate. Use common sense! For example a plea to use your phone is bull. "Heres a quarter or call collect," works for me.

Armed with common sense we can all help to prevent a horrible crime or stop one in progress.

This common sense can be applied all over the world and not just here in New York. Helping one and other is a basic human function. We have to sustain it order for there to be a "kindler gentler" world for us and our children. There will be animals who will try to "play" us but with common sense we can't be played.

We have to rememeber these animals will try to play us in a slick way. They won't just run up to us and take our stuff and run they want to make us drop our guard to come in for the kill. If we stay sharp we will be safe almost every time. I say almost because there are crazy people out there.

I will teach my children to help others and to discriminate with much common sense. No one should decide ahead of time to not help anyone at anytime. Use your common sense to take your time and the decide to offer help or say "I can't get involved"

As a former teacher of the freshman composition course at this college, I tried to help students understand grades by showing them these two essays and asking them to guess the

grade that each received. I also asked students to say which one they liked better and why. While some students unequivocally like the "A" paper, it was not uncommon for many to recognize the first paper as an "A" while actually preferring the "C" paper. These same students were often surprised to find out that the "C" paper was graded as low as it was (often they feel it should merit a "B"). As one student once explained it, she liked the "C" paper, but she guessed it was graded down because of the way it used "ebonics." As she elaborated, I understood the student to be referring to rhetorical style. Some students like the straightforward character of the "C" essay (this is especially true when the essays are read out loud) and become impatient with the circumlocution and belabored quality of the "A" essay. I'm interested in a comparison of these two papers particularly because I too, along with some of my students, like the "C" paper better than the "A," although I am able to understand what was appealing to the grading committee about that latter paper. While the "A" paper, to my mind, has a tedious and predictable quality that makes paying attention to it difficult, I also am aware that (along, no doubt, with its surface correctness) its detached, polite, deferential tone gives it the desired air of "maturity" that I imagine the grading committee found laudable. Below I reproduce the grading committees' comments on both essays in their entirety, and I will refer back to them as I proceed with my analysis:

The grade is A. This is a strong, effective essay.

The writer orients the reader by referencing the Quindlen article being analyzed.

The writer briefly states and discusses one of the main ideas in the article.

The writer presents a thesis-centered essay that focuses on the issue of "individualism in modern society."

The ideas are nicely organized into paragraphs which have topic sentences that are developed.

The writer uses examples from the text and from personal resources to support the thesis.

The writer moves smoothly from the general to the specific, and the ideas seem to follow a logical development.

Ideas are presented fluently in sentences that are varied and linked with transitions. The vocabulary is well suited to the topic and there is a good command of grammar and general mechanics (punctuation and spelling), despite a few problems with punctuation, word choice, and word omissions.

Here are comments about the "C" essay:

The grade is C.

The essay gets off to a good start as the writer attempts to orient the reader by referring to the Quindlen article, but the discussion of the text is too brief.

There seems to be a passionate voice in the essay.

Even though a thesis is not stated clearly, the essay focuses on a main idea.

The writer uses examples to support a position.

The paper becomes weak as the writer makes unsubstantiated generalizations.

The language is uneven, lapsing into informal/conversational speech.

As the essay progresses, there are increasing problems with mechanics (spelling, punctuation).

What I find most striking in the "A" paper is its *indirectness*, the way it beats around the bush, in contrast to the "in-your-face" quality of the "C" essay. This indirectness probably accounts for the difficulty I have sticking with the "A" paper, but it is also responsible for the

"says what it has to say with an abruptness that is unpalatable, even impolite, from the perspective of the grading committee."

sense of decorum that pervades the piece.

Indeed in the rationale that accompanies the essays in the grading packet, the "A" essay is praised for the way it "moves smoothly" and uses "*well-suited*" vocabulary and is "*nicely* organized" (emphasis added). The measured tone of the "A" paper, then, is in direct contrast to the aggressiveness of the "C" paper, which is described in the rationale as "passionate," a term that has historically been connected with descriptions of mob activity and the "lower orders."

The "C" essay is also denigrated for "lapsing

into informal/conversational speech," which is, I think, a key component of said "passion." In short, the writer of the "C" essay does not dance the slow, elaborate dance of the "A" essay. The "C" essay says what it has to say with an abruptness that is unpalatable, even impolite, from the perspective of the grading committee. Certainly the very first paragraph of that essay, with its reference to America's involvement in World War II, has a pithy, "what more is there to say?" quality to it. And this economy almost ends the essay before it has a chance to begin, a fatal error in the realm of the timed essay exam.

While there are clearly more surface errors in the "C" essay (which may be a bigger part of its "C"-ness than the grading committee is willing to let on), I wonder how much more substantive the "A" essay is. Does it contain those "complexities" and "ambiguities" that writing teachers purportedly like to see? Its message (and that does seem to be the right term to use) is a simple condemnation of an ethic of self-interest. There are few areas of gray in the moral schema that the essay outlines. Interestingly, the "C" essay seems to grapple with the question in a more complex way, attempting a position of mediation between self-interest and social responsibility. And while the "C" essay in the grading criteria is accused of making "unsubstantiated generalizations," it's clear that the "A" essay makes its share of the same.

The statements, "as a result of such indifference victims are falling everyday" and "cases such as these occur everyday" and "individualism has lead to a pluralistic society in which everyone cares only for themselves" serve their purpose within the "A" writer's argument (they constitute the argument), yet how well would these assertions bear up under scrutiny?

My point here is not to criticize the writer but rather to understand the grading criteria and the underlying values. While the "A" essay is praised for elaboration, the "C" essay is penalized for its reliance on unstated assumptions about the reader's ability to connect the dots, a feature Ong would associate with orality or, in this case, as the grading committee observed, the "conversational" quality of the language. Newkirk has observed a similar reluctance on the part of his students to expatiate in accordance with teacher's expectations. He finds that other students, on hearing their classmates' texts, often don't have the same problem with student minimalism that the instructor has: "I speculate that students are often readier to elaborate from their own experiences, to fill in gaps; they sometimes resist the call for a greater density of detail by saying it bogs the paper down and doesn't leave enough room for the reader's imagination" (Newkirk 33). Newkirk is sympathetic to this alternative student aesthetic, which he sees as a developmental issue related to his students' youth.

But regardless of student age, perhaps class enters into the equation along the lines suggested in an analysis such as Basil Bernstein's restricted and elaborated linguistic codes. Ohmann, for example, building on and critiquing the Bernsteinian school, acknowledges the correlation between physical work and restricted language codes and mental work and elaborated codes. "Physical workers," for example, "must learn to take orders without asking why" and thus rely on restricted codes in communication that are heavily tied to assumptions of context (Ohmann 10). In this light, I find it interesting that the "C" paper is so concerned with the issue of "common sense," that same "common sense" that Bartholomae has seen fit for the university to eradicate from the student repertoire. If what the writer is arguing is common sense—an enthymeme, a trope that the writer can count on the audience understanding—then there is no need to elaborate further. As attested to in my students' appreciation of the essay, the writer has achieved some degree of success in this reliance on "common sense."

Is essay "A" being rewarded for its appeal to middle-class sensibilities and is essay "C" being penalized for its failure to transcend a restricted working-class code? I am in part suggesting this possibility, but I also find the situation more complex than that dichotomy. Certainly the charge made against the "C" essay of "unsubstantiated generalizations" points to a dissatisfaction with the restricted code of "common sense" that constitutes the writer's major rhetorical strategy. Likewise it is the strategy of nostalgic kitsch that relies on uninterrogated consensus and effacement of loss as the essay offers pragmatic optimistic solutions of compromise. And yet, as I pointed out, this compromise contains a level of the lauded "com-

plexity" that is missing from the other essay. Despite the "A" essay's elaboration, it does not demonstrate the level of problematizing that we might expect to see validated by middle-class intellectualism. The simple moral drawn from the 20/20 story, for example, that someone should have pulled Joey Levick from the ditch, ignores the "problem" of how he got into the ditch in the first place; alcohol abuse and unchecked violence (and no doubt poverty) are a big part of the Joey Levick story and certainly societal problems worthy of note. To conclude that the tale is an example of America's problem with individualism is the sort of simplification that nostalgic kitsch (like the timed essay exam) elicits.

Applying Bloom's middle-class criteria also points to contradictions. The "A" essay seems to violate the values of thrift and efficiency in its use of language while the "C" essay epitomizes said virtues. Although "A" rates high in the "decorum and propriety" category while "C" is down right rude, "C" in some ways appears to do better with the "moderation" criteria than "A" in as much as "C" takes a more temperate position on the issue of getting involved. What "A" does have in abundance is the wistful tone of melancholic kitsch that embodies loss. This is evident throughout essay "A," in its concluding "no man is an island" and especially in its lament over the loss of the idyll: "Traditional ethics, which implied duties of one human being towards another have been replaced with the 'New Morality.' The new set of ethics is emerging in society today, which in its foundation has an impenetrable individualism."

The difference in tones between the two essays is, of course, very notable, and it's tempting to conclude that essay "A" is being rewarded for its sense of melancholy that appeals to elitist tastes. But it is not only melancholy that is present here. The sense of deference so evident in "A" is notably lacking in "C." I think it is worthwhile to speculate on the place of such deference, not only in college writing courses in general, but particularly in the non-elite community college. Bloom notes how teachers expect student writing "to reflect subordination appropriate to the normative student-teacher relationship" (660). Is this expectation exacerbated in non-elite institutions where the student population is largely working class and minority? At such institutions are teachers particularly pleased by students who write essays "smoothly" and "nicely" because such writing is evidence of the success of the community college's civilizing mission? And conversely, under these circumstances, are teachers particularly offended by displays of "passion" that violate bourgeois notions of politeness? The complicated, ambiguous nature of middle-class culture might present something of a conundrum to working-class students on the outside looking in. What will their middle-class teachers appreciate? The romanticized "passion" of the non-elite that might appeal to the artist/intellectual or the bourgeois politeness of the "smooth" and "nice"? Which aspect of middle-class culture to emulate? What to do?

Such factors complicate the dialectic of nostalgic and melancholic kitsch that I see operating in writing instruction so that the case is not simply a face-off between teachers' melancholy and students' nostalgia, although that may sometimes be in evidence. Teachers might teach a literary aesthetic of melancholic kitsch even as they demand the nostalgic variety in student writing as demonstration of compliant subjectivity. Until they actually get it. Then teachers are likely to complain of clichés and commonplaces. Unlike the study of literature where we can afford to be more clear cut in our aesthetic choices, writing instruction is complicated by a preoccupation with subjectivity and a conflation of writing style with personality—an imperative to consider lives as well as texts. “Like swimmers passing through the chlorine footbath en route to plunging into the pool, students must first be disinfected in Freshman English” so that they and their writing will evince the sense of middle-class propriety the university and the workplace demand (Bloom 656). If Bloom is right, then the goal of freshman composition is to promulgate kitsch that, in effect, eliminates, or at least hides, deviation and uncertainty. Such erasure might also take with it the beginnings of any critical rhetoric inconsistent with the perspective Bloom identifies as middle class. In that case, we have as much to contend with in bourgeois realism as we do in the kitsch of the working class.

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