



“Plerk,” “Plabor,” and a Conventional Caper: Redefining the Work and Play of Poetry Within the Discipline of English

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Despite Wendy Bishop’s call for all writing teachers to investigate “the basic commonalities of writing a poem and writing an essay” (190) few of us within the discipline of English have attempted to transgress current intradisciplinary boundaries to reintegrate the seemingly discrete textual practices we associate with either composition-rhetoric or creative writing. In most cases, we have allocated the responsibility of teaching the production of different forms to different curricular locations. Instruction in the writing of poems is most often reserved for upper- or lower-division creative writing electives; instruction in the writing of essays is usually considered the domain of the first-year composition course. Both these forms and the academic enterprises that have usurped them have lived divided institutional lives with some but little protest. As a result, composition-rhetoric has been allowed to remain the industry of rhetorical and discursive production and creative writing the respite of aesthetic and formalist recreation. Because, in higher education, the poem and the essay have been firmly entrenched within these seemingly incompatible enterprises, their functions have been restricted, their possibilities limited.

Poems, under the fine arts model and extended New Critical paradigm, which have long dominated creative writing pedagogy, continue to be defined as isolated objects of art designed to provide audiences with pleasure and entertainment. Creative writing students are encouraged to use this genre to demonstrate their mastery of craft through formal and stylistic “play.” In other words, they are asked to experiment

with poetic conventions in order to produce an aesthetic object made of words, or what Mary Oliver calls "a well-made thing [that] gives pleasure through the authority and sweetness of the language used" (58). While this "play" or experimentation requires students to concentrate on the formal artistry of the poems they produce (i.e. how they might deploy devices of sound or image), it requires them to pay less attention to the social or persuasive purposes of these texts (i.e. what they might want their poems to do in the world—other than be appreciated for their artistry). In its worst manifestations this kind of "play" appears frivolous, a kind of fun without consequence, without social significance, and without communicative purpose. In *A Poetry Handbook*, for instance, Oliver removes the play of poetry from the realm of interpersonal transaction: "It is no use thinking, however, that the writing of poems can accommodate itself to a social setting...the poem requires of the writer not society or instruction, but a patch of profound and unbroken solitude" (117). And in *The Poet's Companion*, Kim Addonizio and Dorianne Laux define poetry not as a discursive act but as "irreducible art" (22). These and other contemporary poetry handbooks do little to challenge—and often reassert—Archibald MacLeish's famous definition of the poetic function as an exercise in beautiful uselessness: "A poem should not mean / But be" (Lines 23-24).

While the creative writing enterprise has continued to divorce poetry from social activity by recycling MacLeish's "Ars Poetica," composition-rhetoric, since its 1980s "social turn," has displayed a renewed sociological interest in the relationship between academic writing and society. The essay, within this enterprise, is increasingly being valued for its communicative, discursive, and rhetorical functions. The genre is used to demonstrate composition students' performance of academic "work" and, with increasing frequency, it is becoming associated with a slightly different connotation of this term. Often, the essay topics assigned to students require them to investigate how writing "works" to shape subjects and social reality. In "Taking the Social Turn: Teaching Writing Post Process," John Trimbur describes this trend within composition as an effort to represent "composing as a *cultural activity* by which writers position and reposition themselves in relation to their own and others' subjectivities, discourses, practices, and institutions" (109). Increasingly,

the activity of writing essays is being used in an effort to prompt students to self-consciously examine the work their own and others' writing performs within the contexts of various social-discursive communities. Writing within composition-rhetoric often requires students to investigate specific links between language use and the conditions or distributions of power within literate cultures. Composition pedagogy, then, is often defining its work in opposition to stylistic play and moving toward more expansive concepts of cultural literacy, or what John Schilb defines as "true literacy." Within his and others' proposed future for the enterprise of composition-rhetoric, writing an essay means "examining one's society, not simply manipulating surface features of text" (187).

In short, the commonalities between the poem and the essay, as defined by their institutional homes, appear hard to find. Within the culture of the English department, their pronounced differences are not easily reduced to structural conflicts like line vs. sentence or stanza vs. paragraph but rather reflect the functions each writing enterprise within the discipline has assigned to each form. The functional differences between the poem and the essay, then, are less innate or universal and more emblematic of a conflict created by the institutional division between creative writing and composition-rhetoric. This severance has enabled a kind of bifurcated thinking that theorizes writing as either cultural work or stylistic play but rarely encompasses both. Because the two institutional bodies responsible for the production of texts remain severed and because we, as English teachers, are often hired to teach in either one or the other location we have not experimented extensively with using poetic play as a means of encouraging students to perform consequential cultural work. We recognize that the essay has somewhat arbitrarily become the preferred medium for performing sociological analysis or evidencing cultural labor although it is not inherently better suited for this task than any other form, be it a comic strip, short story, or sestina. Nonetheless, while we make it a somewhat standard practice to ask students to investigate constructions of race or sexuality through the writing of essays, on rare occasion do we ask students to investigate the politics of personal or social identity by exploring the conventions of poetry.

The renewed advent of introductory writing-in-the-disciplines courses, however, offers new possibilities for adopting

this very approach to education in English. A course titled neither “creative writing” nor “composition”—one designed to introduce English majors to the kinds of writing they might be expected to perform within their radically variegated discipline—would likely need to represent the forms and genres of both composition-rhetoric and creative writing, the poem and the essay. Within such a course, representations of the two writing enterprises and their key genres could feasibly remain separate, even juxtaposed. We might adopt Gerald Graff’s approach to teaching the conflicts and use the course to identify how and why creative writing and composition have historically defined the writing of poems and essays in such radically different ways, exploring issues of institution and ideology. In a single semester, we might require students to spend five weeks writing poetry according to the formalist strategies outlined in most creative writing handbooks, spend five weeks writing essays according to the rhetorical methods offered by composition readers, and devote the remaining several weeks to examining the underlying differences between writing practices. Recognizing, however, that the “conflict method” would likely sustain the artificial binaries created by the university, we might invent a more radical pedagogy and attempt to deliberately collapse or amalgamate composition-rhetoric’s and creative writing’s seemingly oppositional constructions of writing. Rather than relying on divided units of study within a semester-long class, we might offer a cohesive approach through a kind of intradisciplinary synthesis that presents students with a holistic view of writing as a simultaneously creative and critical activity, a kind of play-work. But how would such a synthesis be achieved? How might we attempt a fusion that combines poetic play and cultural work in a new approach to learning?

Hans Ostrom has offered a synthesis of work and play that presents a useful starting point. In “Grammar J as in Jazzing Around,” Ostrom theorizes the activity of writing by developing the concept of “plerk,” a neologism in which, he states, “work and play are fused.” He argues that writing teachers and students should rely on this deliberately conflated term to redefine their concepts of academic writing, and thus escape the “bored fatigue” often perceived to accompany the process of writing academic essays, which he associates with drudgery: “Though in one sense college consists of little ex-

cept writing, almost no one plays with writing. It's frequently grim work. With grim results. Mostly, college writing is a joyless affair.” He thus suggests that teachers of college composition challenge some of the static regulations that have, historically, defined their enterprise and encourages students to take improvisatory risks with their writing by contesting and altering the conventions of essays. Ostrom's neologism comes mainly in reaction to the perceived “current-traditional” legacy of composition-rhetoric, i.e. what many composition reformers have criticized as the enterprise's rigid definition of academic writing, overriding concern with error-correction, and upholding of inflexible writing rules. Like Winston Weathers before him, Ostrom seeks to provide composition students access to styles or grammars (associated with creative writing) that they might not otherwise encounter in required composition courses. He then encourages them to use their play with “alternate” conventions to enhance their academic prose through “spontaneous performances of language.” In these performances, he suggests that the improvisatory rhythms of jazz, hip-hop, and poetry can be used to construct serious and entertaining essayistic texts. He further suggests that “plerk” can make academic writing less formulaic and foreign. Speaking directly to students, he associates the term with games like hacky-sack, pinball, or “whatever thing you do easily” (77-78).

“Plerk” offers a convenient device for naming the amalgamation of “play” and “work” while at least expanding composition-rhetoric's approach to writing instruction. The term, however, could use further and revised definition, for under Ostrom's treatment, its implications remain limited. Although Ostrom's “plerk” offers an alternative to the rigidity of some forms of writing instruction, it provides a superficial definition of “work” and, by associating play-work only with easy and familiar activities, it risks trivializing the social and communicative complexities of writing. When Ostrom discusses work, he does not conceive of it as valuable labor or cultural practice, for he assumes an audience of resistant students who equate the labor of writing with “loathing,” “dread,” and “confusion” (78). He tries to accommodate these prejudices often by valorizing stylistic play at the expense of cultural work and in this sense risks importing not only the playful conventions of creative writing but also the frivolity sometimes associated with the enterprise. The implicit purpose

underlying the invention of “plerk” is not only to advocate essayistic writing that performs the work of poetry but, more significantly, to make writing appear easier and more fun to potentially resistant writers. While thus appealing to what he perceives as students’ desire to learn through play, Ostrom does not discuss the real purposes or functions that writing (whether of poems, essays, or poetic essays) works to perform in the social sphere. Like many creative writing practitioners, he tames or mutes these functions by leaving them conspicuously absent. In short, he uses the concept of “plerk” to provide students the opportunity to “jazz around” with language and thus make the required task of writing essays appear more pleasurable and interesting; however, his discussion begins and ends with the surface stylistics of jazzing around.

I propose that we develop Ostrom’s concept of “plerk” to elaborate a more thorough and balanced synthesis of play-work, one that encourages students not only to experiment creatively but also to ask themselves what work they are performing when they play with convention-making and -breaking. Thereby, we might prompt them to examine not only the improvisatory art of jazzing around but also the effects and consequences of their jazzing around. In retrieving the notion of work in Ostrom’s “plerk,” I do not mean to suggest, as John Schilb has, that we treat formalist and critical pedagogies as oppositional or abandon stylistic concerns in favor of some kind of rarified sociological and theoretical analysis, but rather that we explore the ways we can encourage students to examine their society and social identities *through* the manipulation of the surface features of text. It is this kind of activist “plerk,” this kind of formal and cultural study, that might become the subject of our in-the-disciplines writing courses and permit us to reevaluate the writing of poetry as something more than merely a playful, formal, or frivolous affair.

I offer here an extended example to explain how I imagine a revised notion of “plerk” affecting our pedagogical treatment of poetry. Bobby Chen, a student in my introductory writing-in-the-disciplines class at SUNY-Albany recently submitted a poem that helped me better understand the relationship between stylistic play and cultural work, or, more specifically, the way that writers perform cultural work by playing with or manipulating stylistic conventions. The text,

as well as the authority I was granted as a meaning-maker. While I wasn't sure that I understood the purpose of the list, I felt responsible to attempt a political reading and reverted to my familiar taxonomies, classifying the poem as an “open text” according to Lyn Hejinian's definition of the term: “The ‘open text’ by definition, is open to the world and particularly to the reader. It invites participation...It speaks for writing that is generative rather than directive. The writer relinquishes total control and challenges authority as a principle and control as a motive” (28). This category provided me a convenient way to make sense of the poem's politics, but because I couldn't help feeling that I was overlooking some structural design, I sought further clarification by engaging in several conversations with the poem's author.

Through discussions with Bobby Chen, I discovered that the work-play here involved much more than randomness and the challenging of the writer's authority as the primary controller of meaning. Within this free-play or more accurately, this jazzing around with the conventions of lists, rested a kind of riddle about reading conventions and social/cultural identity. In several classroom conversations and in a later draft of the poem, the writer included the rather cryptic directions “repeat four times towards the center,” thus revealing more of an intentional strategy at work. I now understood, first, that the list was not generated at random but according to a very specific design, and second, that Chen was challenging my conventional reading practices more profoundly than I had realized. He was asking me to make sense of the items in the list by reading them diagonally. The first text box I was to read from the upper left corner toward the center of the page and the second text box I was to read from the lower right corner toward the center of the page. After struggling with these directions and receiving further guidance from the poem's author, I was able to make more sense of the list's wrap around patterns and generated the following phrases within the first text box:

**watered down O.J.
spongy hot dog
days old chicken soup
sour yellow tuna salad
flat soda.**

The lines of the second text box I read as follows:

**coffee w/tea
chips with shrimp flavor
seafood w/pan fried noodles
sweet soy milk
beef chow fun.**

Having decoded this patterning, I realized that what appeared was a juxtaposition between American and Asian food, a contrast between the sorts of unappealing dishes one might find in an American cafeteria or sub-par deli and those one might find in a Chinese fast-food establishment. “Chow” which I had originally read as a slang term for food, and “fun” which I had assumed signified recreational activity, now functioned as proper nouns, specifying a particular Chinese dish. Accompanying this playful punning and this conflict of cuisine was a more labor-intensive politic.

The poem revealed not only a juxtaposition of cultural appetites but also a juxtaposition of cultural reading practices that called into question the normalcy and ethnocentrism of my everyday reading habits. Written English is arranged to be read horizontally from left to right; most traditional Chinese languages, in contrast, arrange their characters to be read vertically from right to left. Chen, an Chinese-American who moved from Hong Kong to Queens, NY when he was in his early teens, speaks and writes Mandarin, Cantonese, and English; he thus fluctuates between the directional orientations of reading and writing practices, entering texts vertically, horizontally, and from either side of the page. His decision to arrange list-items diagonally might reflect the “in-between” state or reality of an individual who grew up within a flux of Chinese and British cultures in postcolonial Hong Kong and fairly recently moved to the United States. And it certainly reveals a contestation for textual power, for it prompted me to reexamine the ideological assumptions I brought to the text.

As I read and reread this poem, despite my initial presumption of its “openness” and my eventual knowledge of its preferred arrangement, I continually had to fight the tendency to read the lines horizontally. When I did read the lines from left to right, as I ordinarily would, I experienced a sense of unfamiliarity, one that might be considered poetic,

as it combines unlike words such as "noodle milk" or "days yellow," but that might also be considered deliberately disorienting. (Mis)Reading the poem in this direction led me into a kind of mild confusion, making my own native language appear strange to me. In order to make proper sense of the text or solve the riddle of its preferred meaning, I had to abandon the textual practices I took for granted and meet this Chinese-American author on his own terms—or at least halfway across the page. Through his arrangement, Chen reversed the roles of the players in an all-too-familiar scene. Instead of the nonnative English speaker having to decipher and adapt to the sometimes unfamiliar vocabulary and conventions of his second or third language, the native English speaker was made to decode the very language he professed. Otherwise he was to remain ignorant of the more conventional phrases coded within the syntax. Although required to write in English, Chen thus refused easy assimilation and instead forced me, as his reader, to compromise my own position and question my own norms as something other than neutral. In this manner, he performed profound cultural and activist work through what might appear a simple list of items (consisting of the kinds of food he complained he had to eat at the college cafeteria vs. those he ate at home) playfully arranged on the page.

We might call Chen's list-poem a "conventional caper" for it performs this work through what is really a minor manipulation of conventions, and this manipulation keeps readers engaged in the pleasure of a guessing game or riddle while it critically questions how the use of "standard" textual practices supports or challenges distributions of power. While synthesizing the activities of play and work, this caper falls without the boundaries of Ostrom's "plerk," for it not only jazzes around with stylistics but uses this jazzing around to engage in ideology-critique. Furthermore, the challenges undertaken by the writer and presented to the reader are not easy (as Ostrom suggests they should be) and in many ways prompt both reader and writer to carefully reexamine what is taken for granted as easy or familiar. For both parties, the text requires much labor, and we might say that it moves beyond "plerk" to perform a kind of "plabor," a playful and politicized labor that uses stylistic innovation to engage in much more than entertainment. In one sense, it could be argued that Chen's poem, as a finished product, requires too

much labor from its reader, for it assumes that an unsuspecting general audience might readily decode the pattern, which, without extra-textual guidance from its author, would likely remain hidden. Following what has sometimes become a workshop rule, one might further invoke the intentional fallacy and claim that the poem should not have to rely upon the writer to explain the intended meaning. Without getting carried away with the power-dynamics involved in such an assumption, I'd like to suggest just the opposite. Whether or not this poem remains readily accessible to an imagined, mute, general reader in an imagined, mute, general context is, in a way, superfluous to the issue of how the poem functions within its immediate discursive working context. The conversations that Chen's work provoked within my writing classroom were by no means extraneous, for they allowed me and my students to examine the complex power relations between (among other things) readers and writers, teachers and students, majorities and minorities. Such conversations, I argue, lead toward a positive re-imagining of poetry within writing classrooms, for when a poem-in-process provokes questions about how it should be read, it enters a transactional and dialogic space; within this space it becomes neither art object nor polemic but a locus for discussion about the very relationship between not only intention and result but, more significantly, craft and culture. It opens up connections and contestations between the work and the world, and it can be used to make the specific topic of how poets and writers use stylistic play to attempt cultural work the central subject of our classes.

I celebrate Chen's writing here not only because I find it a sophisticated and engaging text that has helped to educate me about the connections between play and work, writing conventions and cultural practices, but mainly because I find it emblematic of the kind of “plabor” that writers continually perform on their own accord and that we might better attempt to talk about and encourage in our in-the-disciplines writing classrooms. Most writers, like Chen, do not engage in their textual experiments solely in an effort to master formal conventions or create functionless *objets d'art*; nor, when writing, do they abandon formal and stylistic concerns in order to perform artless activism or formulaic critique. Such practices anywhere apart from the English department would seem abnormal. Rather, as Chen's conventional capser demonstrates, these concerns remain so fundamentally inter-

twined as to be inseparable. To attempt to read Chen's or others' poems (whether completed or in process) through a lens that separates formal and stylistic features from political intent or effect would be to perform a radical disservice to both text and author. And yet that is what we have made standard practice within the divided discipline of English. I hope that as Chen's caper inspired me to work without my familiar categories and reflect on my own pedagogy, my presenting it to a wider audience might encourage more English teachers to rethink the classroom practices the divided status of composition-rhetoric and creative writing has urged us to adopt. Chen's poem, for me and I hope for others, evidences a need to reinvent the teaching of writing in a way that pays more careful and generous attention to writers' play-work. Whether we continue to name this activity "plerk" or rename it "plabor" or call it something else entirely, we can make the synthesis of terms represented by these neologisms both the subject and practice of our in-the-disciplines writing classes and thereby blur the hard line the academy has drawn not only between the poem and the essay, but also the formal and the cultural, the aesthetic and the ideological.

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