

Of Headaches and Other Illnesses

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[S]ickness is instructive . . . even more instructive than health, *those who make [us] sick [are] even more necessary to us today than any medicine men or "saviors."* We violate ourselves nowadays . . . ever questioning and questionable . . . and thus we are bound to grow day-by-day more questionable, *worthier* of asking questions; perhaps also *worthier*, of living?

Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals* (113)

The essays in *Enculturation's* special issue on Rhetoric/Composition offer insightful and thought-provoking perspectives on rhet/comp relations, highlighting, among other things, that these relations are variously configured and thus play out in different ways in diverse academic "spaces" (e.g., institutions, departments, curricula, scholarly publications, etc.). Put differently, although a number of "constants" are operative in the field of rhet/comp, rhet/comp studies' secondary status in relation to literary studies and its problematic configurations vis-à-vis academic labor are only two examples, one of the lessons to be learned from *Enculturation* 5.1 is that the situations in which we find ourselves vary enough that there can be no programmatic formula for altering and enhancing the conditions of possibility that compose our field. Invoking Lloyd Bitzer, one might say that the audiences and constraints faced by differently situated teacher-scholars in rhet/comp are not homogenous, and therefore "fitting responses" to the exigencies facing us must vary.

However, the fact that our approach to transforming rhet/comp cannot be programmatic does not necessarily imply that a common orientation to the task of transformation is impossible. Victor Vitanza's essay, for instance, attempts to articulate and perform such an orientation, an ethos of transformation that has three primary dimensions. The first involves what Vitanza refers to as radical passivity, which plays itself out in various ways in the thought of Levinas, Blanchot, and Agamben (among others). The second is defined by a *desire* to move *beyond the limits* imposed by "discipline(s)" and institutions. Readers familiar with Vitanza's thought will recognize the Bataille roots of this second dimension. The third, culled from Brian Massumi's work, might be called a tactic of (re)invention, which requires practices of experimentation and an ability to affirm risk, open-endedness, and an absence of control. This third dimension includes, moreover, the aim of provoking others to enact these tactics by afflicting them with problems and questions, that is, "headaches" to which they are invited to respond affirmatively.

As the epigraph above suggests, Massumi's idea of the potential productivity of "illness" participates in a genealogy of thought to which Nietzsche also belongs. Hence, it is no accident that Massumi describes

his project in *Parables for the Virtual* as one that requires "affirmative methods" (12, my emphasis). For Nietzsche, affirmation is a vital part of the art of transformation, involving neither an acceptance nor opposition to or rejection of that which is to be transformed. Affirming an illness therefore entails ways of responding to and living with a "sickness" in an experimental manner, one that tries to learn from the illness, to coax forth capacities for divergent thought and action that it might enable, capacities that also have the potential to transform the illness itself.

Despite the personalization that the image of illness suggests, it is important to note that within this Nietzschean framework illnesses signify compositions of forces and forms of *life*, which organize various ecologies of existence and in-habit(uate) bodies but are not reducible to any-body. Hence in Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals* guilt, *ressentiment*, and asceticism, and their attendant institutions, practices, narratives, and vocabularies, are sicknesses we live with *and* in. And rather than oppose or escape from illnesses, any attempt to "overcome" them must be performed with-*in* the habits and habitats of life they compose, for they are not something separate from us or that we can simply choose to separate ourselves from. Massumi expresses this Nietzschean sensibility when he observes that an inventional tactic of transformation cannot operate as if it were engaging "something outside itself with which it ha[s] no complicity, no unmediated processual involvement, and thus can justifiably oppose" (12). Therefore, giving readers a headache or some other "ailment" intensifies relations of forces with which they are already (potentially or actually) involved, producing a questionable being-with-in-the-world to which the recipient of "the gift" is invited to respond to and learn from.

Sickness, then, can be instructive in that it provides habits and habitats with-in which we might learn to become more question-able. Sickness can teach question-ability, abilities to be attuned to, expose others to, coax forth, respond to, and intensify indeterminate potentials that may enhance possibilities of/for life. In other words, these are abilities to participate with-in and transform conditions of possibility by intensifying potentials always-already immanent to such conditions but not-yet *actually* operative with-in them. We might say that question-ability is the art of intensifying virtual potentials *with-in* actual conditions of possibility, an art of participation/response that aims to (re)invent forms of life *with-in* the ecologies of relations, forces, and processes that compose life.

A commitment to in-habiting the with-in-ness (the immanence) of practices of (re)invention to their ecologies of possibility and enactment is fundamental for an ethos of transformation because it mitigates our tendency to think and act as if we are not complicit and involved with-in that which we seek to "overcome." Otherwise, we quite easily can see ourselves as immune to the very illnesses we seek to transform, or we are filled with a desire to be free from illness (the question-ability of life itself), both render us less response-able, less question-able. Hence Nietzsche's suggestion that those who can make us "sick" (i.e., offer opportunities to learn or intensify our capacities of question-ability)

whether it takes the form of giving the gift of "headaches" or other potential-intensifying practices, are preferred over those who would heal or save us.

I am thus a bit confused by Vitanza's aim of giving his readers headaches and what appears to be his simultaneous antipathy toward discipline(s), institutions, and other forms of "reserved" or "restricted" economy. That is to say, Vitanza seems at once to invite us to in-habit an ethos that involves a commitment to affirming and responding to our complicity (our immanence) with-in that which we seek to transform while he also "refuse[s] to work for [us] and [our] complicity in being disciplined." The latter sensibility appears to presume that discipline(s) are intrinsically "bad," that the forms of life composed by discipline(s), institutions, etc. are simply repressive and controlling, cutting us off from forms of life free from the limits of norms, conventions, regulations, and organizations. Hence Vitanza's appeal to the image of waves and desire "take[s] down . . . the dam that attempts to stop or control the flow of writing." But waves and flows also operate with-in compositions of determination (and their indeterminate potentials). Sticking with Vitanza's fluid imagery, altering the status quo is not a matter of removing or escaping from "dams" (disciplines, institutions, etc.) and their operation as forces of determination (i.e., conditions of possibility), but rather of intensifying the indeterminate potentials with-in compositions of possibilities, so that processes and dynamics of determination, conditions of possibility, generate different flows of activity.

Being complicit with the discipline of rhet/comp is not necessarily an obstacle to change, despite what is suggested by Vitanza's essay. Indeed, without "complicity" we would not be capable of affirmatively participating with-in, responding to, and transforming anything. In other words, we do not need to escape or transcend discipline or any other mode of determination to transform the conditions of possibility that compose rhet/comp, the only way "out" is through. If complicity with the system one is attempting to change is grounds for indictment, then we must all be charged. And no mode of writing, not even one performed at the threshold or on the "outside", will absolve us of our complicity or release us from the response-ability of a life of immanence. [1]

But perhaps I focus too much on the residue of Vitanza's (unconscious?) attachment to absolute negativity (via Bataille's out-Hegeling Hegel). And in so doing I risk not hearing the resonances and rhythms that emerge when a Nietzschean ethos of affirmation is brought into contact with an orientation of radical passivity, for which Vitanza offers Melville's *Bartleby* as an example.

Like the "aggressive" Nietzschean activity of affirmation, radical passivity is neither acceptance nor rejection of a given event or state of affairs but rather the performance of a mode of non-aggressive response akin to aikido, which works by redirecting opponents' forces. Like aikido, radical passivity involves the emergence of "a zone of indetermination" (73), as Deleuze describes it in his discussion of *Bartleby*, between a practitioner of this radically passive art and her "opponent." That is,

aikido requires of the practitioner that the distinction between two actual beings-in-opposition become-indeterminate, such that a dualistic encounter becomes an event of participation with-in a singular composition of potentials for movement. The actual being of the practitioner is not dissolved but rather becomes "*whatever*," as Vitanza, following Giorgio Agamben, describes it.

The notion of becoming-whatever vis-à-vis aikido is simply a way of saying that the practitioner exercises a learned capacity to intensify her always-already connectedness, a belonging-together-in-common, with the world in a manner that attenuates her (also learned) habits and capacities as a discrete subject who understands defense or resistance as willful opposition to something separate from itself. Aikido, then, offers us an example of radical passivity in that it is a practice whose effectivity involves a "not-doing" of subjectivity (at least as it is commonly understood and lived), a becoming-whatever. In Agambenian parlance, aikido qua radical passivity entails exercising a capacity *not to exist* and act as a sovereign subject in dualistic relation to the world (as so many of us are "taught" to be and do). [2] Thus, aikido also shows us that the learning and emergence of new and different capacities sometimes also involves unlearning others. When was the last time you thought of the work of resisting and redirecting the status quo as requiring *you* to unlearn ways that you exist and act in the world?

Although practiced differently, affirmative (re)invention and radical passivity share a common ethos, one that strives for an attunement to and inhabitation of the world as relations of forces and the potentials and possibilities these relations compose. Both, therefore, emphasize our involvement (our immanence) with-in the world, and thus ask us to attenuate that which teaches us to live as radically separate beings. Thus both invite us, as Vitanza's essay also invites but also blocks, to fold into our practices of transformation an attunement to ecological or distributed strategies. That is, we are invited to unlearn habits of separation, which position us as discrete actors, and learn to *act in concert*, a notion I do not have the space to elaborate here. However, acting in concert does imply that the practice of "giving people headaches" and then leaving them on their own to experiment, [3] while a legitimate and productive strategy, is perhaps one that needs to be coupled with an image of composing ensembles of experimentation and (re)invention, of collective response-ability. Otherwise, we run the risk of reinforcing the very dynamic of separation that practices of affirmation and radical passivity ask us to attenuate.

What does all of the above imply for rhet/comp and efforts to transform it? *That's our problem.*

Notes

1. Which is not to suggest that writing at the threshold, at the outside or limit of language, is pointless, but rather that such writing is not outside "complicity." ([Back](#))

2. Agamben explains that Bartleby's "formula," "I prefer not to," "calls into question precisely the supremacy of the will over potentiality" (254), it expresses a shift away from subjective will to "a zone of indistinction" as fundamental to understanding passive agency (255). ([Back](#))

3. Consider, for example, Vitanza's citation of Massumi: "You have left your readers with a very special gift: a headache. By which I mean a problem: what in the world to do with it all. *That's their problem*" (Vitanza's emphasis). ([Back](#))

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