

Why Do I Have to Read Like That?

Cecily Devereux
University of Alberta

IN 2007, STEPHEN SLEMON ORGANIZED A PANEL for the ACCUTE conference around the question “Why do I have to write like that?” (*ESC* 32.2–3: 1–37). The question generated a range of responses engaging with the limitations of academic writing as a form of expression, instruction, and communication, and interrogating the institutional directives of the discipline encoded in the writing practices that also function, perversely perhaps, as a location for the formation—albeit problematically—of a community. This year (2008), *ESC* organized an ACCUTE panel around what might appear to be a related question: “Why do I have to read like that?” The responses, however, and the discussion they provoked suggest otherwise: that is, we—the shifting community formed around practices of writing—all understand to some extent the imperative to write with reference to a discourse of disciplinary identification, using a language specific to English studies and addressing a constituency of like *readers*, who will recognize themselves as the subjects interpellated in and by academic discourse. We don’t *have* to “write like that,” but in many cases we do, as a function of training and what is constructed as an apparent necessity in disciplinary communication pertaining to a specialized field and mode of analysis. Although, then, reading might seem to be the obvious counter-

part of writing on these terms (we write *to* readers and *as* readers), the fact is that the reiterative practices of academic writing at this time, while they may once have been matched by comparable practices of reading, aren't anymore. There may be some continued consciousness of what Frank Lentricchia has described as the "imposing and repressive father-figure" of the New Criticism and its gestures of close reading (xiii), but that regulative and identificatory disciplinary practice has been largely abandoned in classrooms and in academic analysis. We don't read *that* way anymore; indeed, as Patricia Demers observes here, we don't demonstrably read in any unitary way, with reference to any coherent body of texts, or within a discipline united in its objectives in research or teaching. Although there is a growing nostalgia in English studies for some kind of return to close reading, with critics from a surprising range of postcolonial, feminist, and Marxist categories (notably, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Jane Gallop, and Terry Eagleton) recently making cases for revisiting New Critical or formalist analysis of one kind or another, the turn in English to a cultural and historical critique over the past few decades, while it has demonstrably effected some disciplinary ambiguity, has also significantly interfered with problematic structures of canon, pedagogy, and, at a foundational level, power and identity—who determines what and how we read; who establishes the criteria for inclusion in the discipline itself, for scholars, teachers, texts, and critique.

In differing ways, each of the pieces of this forum takes up these problematic structures, in part by resisting the categorical representation of "that" at all—"lop[ping] [it] off the question," as Nicole Shukin puts it—and in part by drawing attention to the complex relationship within the discipline of ideologies that make us, as Greg Bechtel indicates, "feel" as if we have to read like that, and of ourselves, as Glenn Deer suggests, as ideological agents complicit in what Shukin describes as "institutional prescription." Deer points out, "In the classroom and in our own reading and writing practices lie the origins of the discursive protocols that become our constraints." "[Y]ou don't," Clint Burnham observes, have to read like that. The New Criticism was motivated by a sense that it was necessary to define a critical practice in order to define the discipline. This forum indicates another impulse—not to define a practice but, as Burnham argues, an ethics of reading.

Works Cited

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