Poeticizing Scholarship
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Abstract

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The traditional scholarly journal article, while serving important intellectual functions, limits the expressive range of scholarship. At least four conditions draw scholarship more toward poetic modes of expression that privilege creativity over conformity: (1) acknowledging the influence of mentors whose teaching reaches beyond the pages of scholarly journals; (2) enriching the supply of metaphors that can provoke innovative views of communication; (3) experimenting with novel methodologies that transcend disciplines; (4) confronting meta-theoretical issues about the place and significance of communication as a discipline. Thinkers such as Vico and Heidegger point toward the importance of focusing on creative language as a key component of such investigations. This article includes several poems that enact the roles "poeticized" scholarship might play.

Keywords: Vico, Hiedegger, poetics, communication scholarship, creativity

My desire to extend the bounds of what counts as scholarship arises from the blood-curdling muteness of conventional scholarship. Many undergraduate students, non-academics, and indeed more than a few academics consider the prospect of reading scholarship is about as inviting as a slab of leftover beef liver. From the creative side, fledging writers may flinch or flee from the formulaic straitjackets they believe traditional scholarship imposes. For example, in the senior seminar capstone course I taught this semester, only seven of twenty-three students chose to write a research paper rather than participate in a semester-long service project. Although the service consumed far more time, students flocked to that option. According to student survey responses, senior communication majors viewed the creation of a traditional scholarly research paper as redundant or irrelevant. Consider these typical responses from graduating majors in the field:

1. The research option would not have allowed me to use what I have learned in a productive way. This way I can help others and get hands-on experience.

2. I feel that I have done many research papers and one more wouldn't do anything for me.

3. I would rather have hands-on experience that I could use than a paper that I will write and probably never look at again.

4. In a research project you are reading and studying others' thoughts and not evolving your own.

To these students, as to many non-academics, scholarly discourse in the format of the conventional journal article represents a closed world of discourse. Scholars address a narrow audience of other scholars in awkward prose dealing with issues that may seem to have little practical application or significance.

The fourth student comment bears particular relevance to this project: scholarly research privileges replication of past findings rather than creative problem solving. Hence the first source of academic insularity: deference to reference. The peer review process, while perhaps the best quality control mechanism for scholarship, tends to reward (i.e., accept and publicly disseminate) discourse that follows standardized presentational formats (research questions, literature review, method, findings, discussion) and reinforces or replicates previous research findings (Schwartzman, 1997). Indeed, part of the socialization into academia consists of learning to internalize and emulate the format of the prototypical research paper (Ziman, 1968). This quality control exacts a price: uniformity of style and minimization of risk. The scholarly tendency to squelch creativity can reach such extremes that scholarship and creativity practically become antonyms. Creative work of academics tends not to get recognized as "legitimate" scholarship if it violates the formal conventions of a scholarly work. Suffering a fate much like rhetoric did at the hands of Plato, creativity in the field of communication qualifies at best as an unruly stepchild. In the field's rush to emulate the sciences, it has paid scant attention to the challenges and promise of creative endeavors. As we will discover, such severance from art stems from motives that run to the core of the communication discipline's intellectual roots. My agenda of poeticizing scholarship questions the troublesome bifurcation between scholarly and creative endeavors.

Deference to Reference

The inaccessibility of scholarly discourse results not only from its arcane vocabulary, but from its methods of (re)production and modes of presentation. The gatekeeping processes involved in peer review tend to reward deference to established intellectual authorities. The very process of scholarly deference, however, drastically limits the range of tributes that can be paid. Ideas can be acknowledged only insofar as they are published, and even then only in "respectable" venues. Thus articles in peer reviewed journals tend to cite other articles in peer reviewed journals. Does making the footnote the badge of honor do justice to the way we learn? What about our best teachers, the ones who truly qualify as mentors? Often these master teachers do not demand or recognize being footnoted as the ultimate expression of gratitude. In fact, many of our most influential teachers rarely if ever publish in top-tier scholarly journals. How, then, can we publicly acknowledge the contributions of these educators? One answer is to broaden the definition of scholarship to include more personal, indeed poetic, modes of expression.

The idiosyncrasies of our finest teachers remain hidden in academic prose that frowns on first-person accounts, stresses generalizability rather than uniqueness, and invokes the litany of the literature review. Although the growing popularity of authoethnography has extended the range of what counts as scholarship, such works remain expository. Regardless of its originality, an authoethnography remains a report, albeit through an explicitly personal but publicly accessible perspective. More poetic modes of expression tend to experiment with ways to extend the resources of language. Poetic scholarship would act as an inventive resource for recognizing the incompleteness of our scholarly modes of acknowledging intellectual influence.

I suppose, then, that the foregoing considerations inform my poem "Deferences to References."

A multimedia reading of the poem "Deferences to References"

Career Objective: To become a footnote
: To see my name scoot up Hickson's list
or skyrocket to the top of a tabulator's tower
so that I occupy an entire volume of
the *Social Sciences Citation Index*.
: To confuse height with stature.

The richest legacies were mute by our standards,
Socrates, Jesus, or the unquantifiable kindness
and undocumented patience of the teachers
who signed their names to our futures,
asking nothing in return.

Play this childish game:
Say your own name,
repeat it until it sounds strange,
an alien assault on the ear,
then ask yourself
: Do I cleave to myself or to anything
better than when I was nameless?

The reference to the Hickson, Stacks, and Amsbary (1989, 1992) lists and similar scales of scholarly productivity raises a larger question. Ranking of scholars by numbers of articles published does represent one important way to compare people and programs. On the other hand, the traditional method of judging quality of academic achievement by quantity of information produced may no longer be tenable is an age of information overload. Scholars may need to look more carefully at indices of how information is used, measured by methods such as trees of citations that show whose scholarship has influence on subsequent scholars (Crane, 1972). Put more pithily, perhaps scholars should measure productivity by the bit instead of by the pound.

Metaphoric Rigor Mortis

The scholarly literature in communication is replete with accounts of how metaphors shape perception. These studies, however, tend to concentrate on metaphors already embedded in linguistic tradition. Archetypal metaphors, for example, gain a foothold precisely because they offer no surprises. Tapping into cultural traditions associated with the metaphoric term, archetypal metaphors conjure the long history of connotations these terms evoke (Osborn, 1967). Thus, imagery of the sea, through centuries of aquatic exploration, easily extends to any arduous trek (Osborn, 1977). Light and darkness stir primal associations of sunlight with warmth, health, and abundance, while darkness conjures vulnerability to nocturnal predators and other threats. Vertical imagery, with millennia of verbal and visual polarizations of heaven above and the underworld, bleeds into discussions of almost any hierarchy. Indeed, the bulk of scholarship seems to measure the social and cognitive impact of metaphors by the yardstick of how *un*original they are, by their capacity to tap into deeply established, customary associations. Thus the Nazi descriptions of Jews in terms of bacterial contamination capitalized on well-established rites of ritual purification and pollution phobias combined with the emerging faith in the ability to purge the contaminants from the body politic (Glass, 1997).

The status of metaphor in communication raises an important challenge. How can scholars continue to enrich the supply of metaphors to clarify and illustrate concepts? Can scholarship become a wellspring of inventive metaphors, thereby broadening scholarly focus beyond metaphors already embedded in language? The answer is a qualified "yes," but the customary canons of scholarship work against metaphoric

enrichment. The danger is that restrictions on the form of scholarship also may restrict its intellectual content and reduce its potential to reach non-academic audiences. More aggressive explorations of the metaphoric resources in language can reveal original ways to conceptualize communication. Consider the pedagogical usefulness of the Johari window, for example, which converts a simple quadrant diagram into a useful schematic of disclosure patterns. More generally, a metaphor's fruitfulness stems (pun intended) from its ability to disrupt customary patterns of thinking and experiencing, opening the way toward new emotional and epistemological experiences. As Vico claimed, the "labor of great poetry" includes its ability "to perturb to excess" (1744/1948, sec. 376). One way to appreciate how metaphors productively perturb is to invent novel metaphoric concatenations.

The Demented Magician

(inspired by Gabriel García Márquez)

Something must have gone haywire
in the clock God wound
that ticks down to non-
existence.
Miracles veer off at crazy angles
that stump theologians,
leave their bloodhounds baying
at tree stumps on moonless nights.
Maybe some misaligned sprockets in the gears.

Offbeat diseases infect healers
whose open palms slap foreheads, make no change.
The housewife counts her heartbeats,
runs out of numbers,
begs for a new heart
or a few more numbers.

The orthodox Jew wears his tallith
to bed but not to temple,
writhes all night,
sleepless from the noise the stars make
as they blink overhead.
The sleepwalker spends each night
undoing what he did that day.

Mutated miracles, wrecks of grandiose gestures
fill ditches alongside interstates:
Eight new wisdom teeth
that crowd the mute idiot's gumline.
The quadriplegic who could whistle arias
while chugging Budweiser but no other brand.
The leper whose sores sprouted sunflowers.

Hell still full of angels,
Magic seasoned with madness. (Schwartzman, 2001a, p. 20)

Re-creating Creativity

Rehabilitation of creativity begins with a retrospective. In writing that went largely unread and unappreciated in its time, Giambattista Vico (1688-1744) articulated poetry's claim as an epistemological endeavor on par with philosophy. Vico even argued that poetry assumed some epistemological and historical primacy over philosophy. The first intellectual activity, according to Vico, was the poetic expression—through myths and fables—of human reactions to the external world. "Men at first feel without observing" (Vico, 1744/1948, sec. 218), so the systematic arrangement of emotions into logical forms actually follows the creative act. Indeed, poetic truth represented the first metaphysical truth, and poetics provides insights and action guides every bit as central and reliable as those offered by logic. In fact, when poetic truth and physical truth conflict, Vico recommends siding with poetry because it gives greater insight to the metaphysical basis of physical reality (1744/1948, sec. 205).

In a move that portends an intellectual reconciliation between poetry and philosophy, or more broadly between creativity and scholarship, Vico contends that universal and particular knowledge share the throne of truth. Philosophy, understood in Vico's time as scientific observation and logical inquiry, yields generalizable knowledge. Poetry, also understood broadly as linguistic creativity, yields knowledge about particular experiences. Complete human understanding requires striving for these complementary types of knowledge, the universal and the particular (Vico, 1744/1948, sec. 219). "Poetic logic," on a par with formal logic, illuminates relationships among concrete experiences and thereby adds to knowledge (Vico, 1744/1948, sec. 494-495).

Occasionally communication scholarship has made forays into experimental forms. Scholarly creativity sometimes bursts the bonds of the scholarly article—or at least stretches them. Authoethnography, the personalization of scholarship by (actual, fictionalized, or fantasized) recounting of personal experiences, allows a firsthand, microscopic view of scholarly life and research. The creative act recognizes and revels in the slippage between text and act. Tom Benson's (1981) *mooving* epic "Another Shooting in Cowtown" employed plot and characters more akin to a novella or screenplay than to the customary format of articles in the stolid *Quarterly Journal of Speech*. "Cowtown" depicted the scholar as a character, a witness to the process of political advertisement production. Instead of the anonymous Voice of Authority, the academic interacted with the other actors and scene, emphasizing his search for knowledge and willingness to learn rather than his pronouncements of findings. Corey and Nakayama's (1997) "Sextext" article created such a stir because of its unabashed transparency: "My aim is to write aloud desire in an elaborate performance that indexes the fleeting nature of desire in the context of academic discourse that attempts (never successfully) to capture and ground that flight" (Corey & Nakayama, 1997, p. 58). The creative transgressions against academic propriety here are extreme and venal: a first-person limited rather than third-person omniscient narrator; proud admission of incompleteness; rendering the private (and private parts) public (and pubic).

Other scholarly experiments with form deal with structure and linguistic techniques. Some scholars, such as Victor Vitanza (1994), deliberately play with language. They employ puns, deliberate misspellings, irony, and every linguistic device at hand to illustrate the possibilities latent in scholarly discourse. Critics of such experimentation object that it sacrifices readability, reducing scholarship to complex and almost indecipherable riddles. Reading more than a few pages of Vitanza's experimental prose can generate revulsion against his contrived preciocity. On the other hand, these literary techniques allow readers to experience the play of research, to navigate writing that performs its points by illustrating them in the writing itself.

Vitanza's project has precedents. Heidegger's famously impenetrable prose did not merely talk *about* his philosophy, but *enacted* it by drawing the reader into apparent inconsistencies and puzzles that required resolution. Not surprisingly, Heidegger's literary idol was not a philosopher but the poet Friedrich Hölderlin (1770-1843). Heidegger recognized that the strictures of scholarly form sometimes become restrictions on intellectual progress.

> Few are experienced enough in the difference between an object of scholarship and a matter thought. (Heidegger, 1971, p. 5)

For Heidegger, understanding and experimenting with the creative possibilities of language represents the

core of philosophical inquiry. "Language is the precinct (*templum*), that is, the house of Being. The nature of language does not exhaust itself in signifying, nor is it merely something that has the character of sign or cipher" (Heidegger, 1971, p. 132). Extending Heidegger's point, important intellectual discoveries can result from language that calls attention to its own expressive force rather than prose that serves as a conveyor belt for denotations. Heidegger phrased the point more eloquently and enigmatically: "In its essence, language is neither expression nor an activity of man. Language speaks" (1971, p. 197). The following section explains how poetic logic might foster inquiry into two areas that traditional scholarship might overlook or address inadequately: the Holocaust and disciplinary boundaries.

Two Provinces for Poetic Research

My research on the rhetorical aspects of the Holocaust leaves me frustrated and disturbed. My discontent arises not simply from the horrors of genocide, but from the realization that rigorous academic analysis of the Holocaust cannot capture the personal impact such study has on the researcher. The canons of "good" scholarship direct the researcher to approach the topic dispassionately, yet I feel an obligation to explore the experiences of the people who were affected. When I see individual, uniquely valuable lives reduced to tallies of numbers not even referred to as people, I must resist dehumanizing them—and myself—by understanding my subject matter as just another mass of data. I obey the directive to find "how values creep in, and how if at all, they condition the direction, completeness, and warrantability of the results of research" (Mills, 1963, p. 467). I disagree, however, with the social scientific agenda that justifies this awareness of values: "In this way we may gain a position from which to formulate rules of evidence that will prevent exhortation from informing our results" (Mills, 1963, p. 467). As I see it, all my results should point toward better ways to exhort people to avoid hatred and intolerance. I hope my knowledge of Nazism's moral corruptness will influence my research.

Another problem confronts me when researching the Holocaust. Here the researcher encounters such a total inversion of human values, such a radical affront to basic moral codes, that words seem to evaporate in the face of the events. As philosopher Giorgio Agamben (1999) explains, no testimony can bear adequate witness to the experience of the concentration camps. The disintegration of humans into living corpses transcends description. Thus a dilemma regarding data faces any researcher who deals with this realm: "For the one who knows, it is felt as an impossibility of speaking; for the one who speaks, it is experienced as an equally bitter impossibility to know" (Agamben, 1999, p. 123).

While poetry cannot mend the fracture the Holocaust delivered to morality and to signification, it can help to articulate the relationship between researcher and subject matter. The following poems attempt that task. The first poem refers to archival research of the daily national Nazi Party newspaper, whose title roughly translates as "National Observer."

Re-searching *Völkischer Beobachter*

The best lesson: fondle volumes
of inaccessible ideas
whose paper crumbles to the touch.
Point a finger at fossils
of fractured raptures with a fictive Absolute
so utterly foreign in any language.
This fifty year-old echo of barbed words,
why still forceful if incoherent?
Their staccato pounding on fresh ears
a feeble hammering to nail down
coffin lids that defy such easy closure. (Schwartzman, 1994, p. 15)

One of the more heartbreaking exhibits at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum is the large pile of shoes gleaned from victims who were herded into the gas chambers. Before the exhibit itself is visible, the smell of old leather envelopes the visitor, as if the past infuses and chokes the present.

The Shoes at Majdanek

not the comforting aroma
of a baseball mitt softening into maturity,
not the gentle give of wrinkling uppers
as they bend along the toe joints.
this stale decay assaults nostrils, seeps into every sense:
it is the death stench of morbid memory.
we cannot purge it from our pores,
it leaches into our clothes,
constricts our throats when we utter
too many past-tense verbs
and chokes all apologies.
our past is rotten to the touch;
contaminated yesterdays cast their shadow
over every couple that conceives a child
or conceives of salvation.
faceless habitants of days we never lived
lose their footprints in unsorted piles, piles
that bury nothing, silently testifying
to naked absence.
we remove our shoes, arrange them in perfect pairs
forgetting or pretending we never knew
each of us harbors anonymous, mismated, worn but disowned
shoes that molder beneath the bed—
forgotten, unclaimed, invisible
just beyond arm's reach. (Schwartzman, 2001b, pp. 18-19)

Poetry also can broach subjects unsuitable for addressing in the forum of traditional scholarship. For all the ink that has been spilled about the need for interdisciplinary studies and the boundaries between disciplines, too often the actual politics of disciplinary divisions escape attention. Poetically, the actual experience of disciplinary boundary construction acquires additional significance. The narrator of "A Territorial Dispute" details a faculty senate meeting that shows how serious epistemological discussions degenerate into defensive sniping. The narrator, however, recognizes this tendency and resolves to contribute to its correction.

A multimedia reading of the poem "A Territorial Dispute"

A Territorial Dispute

Consider this biological gospel:
The smaller the creature
or the smaller its territory,
the more aggressive its defense.
Menageries of squeaky rodents

and other dwellers
in the cellar of the food chain
squiggle through my mind while
faculty backs bristle in the lofty Senate chamber.
Good reason to marshal defenses:
Upstart Communication publicizes its pregnancy,
parades a new course—
only a proposal—a fetal fact,
but it's enough.

Philosophy exhumes Plato for the fifth time this month:
Ghost of Mere Rhetoric casts its sophistic shadow
thrice removed from the throne of Truth,
voracious enough to gobble FTEs
from their rightful owners.
English reproduces a birth certificate,
bemoans the bastard birth of its stepchild.
Our canons are empty, so we preach blanks:
measly method sans substance.
Each discipline disciplines
the field too useful for its own good,
its ubiquity erasing its own existence.

This flogging feels fine,
if you wield the whip.
The upstart slinks away,
camouflaged across the curriculum.
Senate adjourns, mutual pats on bristled backs.
Amid the Diaspora
I fill my pockets with pebbles
to lay a foundation
instead of a border.

So What?

The stakes involved in reconciling creativity with scholarship are higher than academics might think. If scholars shirk creative activity, then they may buy into the damaging stereotype that now almost qualifies as folk wisdom: those who can, do; those who can't, teach. If as scholars we limit ourselves to talking about metaphors but fail to experiment with them, then we may indeed become armchair critics, spectators of inventive language. Indulging our creativity as a central component of scholarship can attract wider audiences to our intellectual endeavors, forcing open the closed world of academic discourse. In lean economic times, financial support does not necessarily flow along the same channels as in the past. Legislators and private donors may question continuing their support of larger and larger stockpiles of scholarly articles and books directed toward narrow academic audiences. In a healthier economy, scholars could afford to chuckle at their "uninformed" detractors. Now scholars should extend the scope of scholarship to genres beyond the standard research paper. In other words, scholars need to pre-empt their dismissal as "merely academic."

The alternative may be that we find our scholarship more often and more rapidly moving from journals to dustbins. One of my senior seminar students specified the fate that scholars hope to avoid:

When writing a research paper, just another paper is added to the stack of numerous papers written in every other class. This stack will either be thrown away after graduation, or perhaps looked at once or twice.

Perhaps more forays into poetics would empty more dustbins and enrich more minds.

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