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INTRODUCTION
A Meditation on Beginnings

> A beginning is that which does not itself follow anything by causal necessity, but after which something naturally is or comes to be.
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> ARISTOTLE, *Poetics*

> My way is to begin with the beginning.
>
> LORD BYRON, *Don Juan*

> The speaker is not the biblical Adam, dealing only with virgin and still unnamed objects, giving them names for the first time.
>
> M. M. BAKHTIN, *Speech Genres*

> Writers are . . . different from the subjects of the composing processes we often describe, for they do not generate, transcribe, and fix meanings independently from the systems of language and cultural history that equally participate in these processes.
>
> SUSAN MILLER, *Rescuing the Subject*

Perhaps the most appropriate way to begin this book is by asking what it means to begin, because in many ways this book is about beginnings, about *why* and *how* writers begin to write, and about the ways we in composition studies imagine, study, and teach how, why, and where writing begins—the subject of invention. It attempts to locate and describe where invention takes place and what happens *to* writers when they begin to write. In so doing, this book extends the question, "what do writers *do* when they write?" by asking, "what happens *to* writers that motivates them to do what they do?" Framed in this way, the question invites us to examine invention not only as a site for the writer's articulation of desire,

but also as a site for the writer's acquisition of desire. Recent scholarship in genre theory can contribute a great deal to such an understanding of invention, and in the chapters that follow, I will describe that contribution and explore what is at stake for the study and teaching of writing to imagine invention in this way.

But how can we begin to write about beginnings? Where do we begin? We could, as Byron suggests, begin with the beginning, the scene of origin that, according to Aristotle, "does not itself follow anything by causal necessity." Rejecting the *in medias res* (the "into the midst of things") strategy with which traditional epic poems begin, Byron announces that he will begin his epic poem, *Don Juan*, at the beginning, with the birth of his hero. Don Juan was born in Seville, Byron tells us; his father "traced his source/Through the most Gothic gentlemen of Spain," while his mother's "memory was a mine." Yet the fact that Don Juan is born in Seville, the fact of his father's lineage and his mother's memory—all these preclude any sense of a beginning unpreceded by "causal necessity." As soon as Byron announces his intention to begin with the beginning, he (perhaps unwittingly but more likely satirically) reveals the impossibility of beginning as such. The beginning of *Don Juan* is, in a very real sense, already in medias res, already taking place in the midst of things.

Such is the ironic nature of beginnings, performing at once an act of initiation and an act of continuation. This introduction—this beginning of the book—is a case in point. It initiates the book that follows, but it is also what Edward Said calls an "effort on behalf of discursive continuity" (1975, 69). That is, it sets up what is to follow at the same time as it situates what follows in the midst of what already exists, the "systems of language and cultural history" represented in part by the texts of Aristotle, Byron, Bakhtin, Miller, and the countless other texts that precede, flank, and make possible my own text. Beginnings are acts of departure, but always departures from something, in relation to something, so that, as Bakhtin reminds us, every beginning is a response to a prior beginning (1986). Along with Bakhtin, Said describes beginnings as gestures of continuation, nuanced repetitions, which

emerge not linearly but in adjacency to other texts, such that a "text stands to the side of, next to or between the bulk of all other works—not in a line with them, not in a line of descent from them" (1975, 10). Beginnings take place in the midst of things.

To describe beginnings as situated and textured is to describe them in what Said calls secular terms, terms that oppose a view of beginnings as divine or magical acts of unpreceded origination. Such a secular view of beginnings upsets a powerful desire for ultimate origins, what David Bartholomae calls the "desire for an open space, free from the past . . . deployed throughout the discourses of modern life, including the discourses of education" (1995, 64). This desire is particularly strong in the discourses of writing instruction, in which the blank page or computer screen stands symbolic of the open space, the frontier space, from which writers begin. The blank page is mythologized as an unmarked space waiting to be marked, its physical blankness masking the fact of its specification in discursive and ideological conventions, including genres, which already situate it, already mark it.

By and large, the way we imagine invention in writing reflects and enacts this desire for unpreceded beginnings. This desire finds expression in the dozens of self-help writing guides currently lining bookstore shelves that assume the writer as the point of origin for writing, and that purport to teach the aspiring writer how to unleash his or her ideas, voice, and untapped creativity. This desire also finds expression in the countless composition textbooks scattered around writing program offices, some of which are not unlike Marjorie Ford and Jon Ford's *Dreams and Inward Journeys: A Rhetoric and Reader for Writers* (a textbook in its third edition by 1998). In it, the authors tell students that writing is an inward journey, a "process of discovering what resides within your mind and your spirit" (8). They go on to write:

> Many people find it difficult to begin, wondering, perhaps, how they will be able to untangle all of their thoughts and feelings, how they will finally decide on the most accurate words and sentence patterns to make their statements clear and compelling. You may

> feel overwhelmed by the possibilities of all that is waiting to be discovered within you, and at the same time you may feel a sense of wonder and excitement, anticipating pleasures and rewards of uncovering and expressing new parts of your mind, imagination, and spirit. (8)

This is, without question, an extreme version of the articulation of this desire, and to say this view reflects current representations of invention in composition textbooks would be unfair and not altogether accurate.[1] Still, despite the enormous contribution work on collaboration, intertextuality, and situated cognition has made to our understanding of the thoroughly social nature of writing, it is not uncommon for composition textbooks, even those not designated as "expressivist," routinely to posit invention as "prewriting," as a practice within the writer that occurs before and outside the textured midst of things. Indeed, as Rebecca Moore Howard has recently noted, "one might even go so far as to say that expressionism is the prevailing model of writing in our culture" (1999, 47). Invention heuristics such as freewriting, brainstorming, clustering, and mapping locate the writer as the primary site and agent of invention.

Various factors account for this "normative model of the inspired, autonomous author [that] pervades contemporary pedagogy" (Howard 1999, 57), some of which I will examine in more detail in chapter 3. Briefly, the pervasive sense that invention, like beginnings, is a scene of origination helps contribute to the perception that invention is pre-social. This perception holds that only after something has originated does it become socialized. The scene of origination—the beginnings of a text—that we popularly designate as invention ostensibly resides before and somehow remains immune from the social, collaborative, and discursive conditions that later affect the text's production, circulation, and reception.[2] Likewise, an investment in what Nikolas Rose has called the "regime of the self" also contributes to this perception. In *Inventing Ourselves: Psychology, Power, and Personhood*, Rose examines how psychology as well as other "psy"

fields have invented the intellectual technologies for describing, regulating, and perpetuating the modern Western concept of the person as a locus of self. Such a self is "coherent, bounded, individualized, intentional, the locus of thought, action, and belief, the origin of its own actions, the beneficiary of a unique biography" (1996, 3). In such a fashioning of the self, the writer becomes the identifiable and self-possessed locus of invention, the origin of his or her own desires to act, even, as I will describe in chapter 5, when that desire is obviously prompted by a teacher's writing assignment. Not only is this account of agency politically frustrating; it is also pedagogically limiting when it comes to explaining how and why writers invent.

The "social turn" that has marked much of the scholarship and pedagogy in composition studies over the last twenty years has thoroughly challenged this view of the writer and writing. This social turn recognizes that there is more at work on the text than the writer's seemingly autonomous cognition; there are also various social forces that constitute the scene of production within which the writer's cognition as well as his or her text are situated and shaped. Within composition studies, this scene of writing is commonly (and, some would add, problematically) identified as a discourse community—the social and rhetorical environment within which cognitive habits, goals, assumptions, and values are shared by participants who employ common discourse strategies for communicating and practicing these cognitive habits, goals, assumptions, and values. Guided by an understanding of writing as a social activity, composition scholarship has become less concerned with inquiring into generalizable cognitive processes and more concerned with inquiring into the localized, textured conditions in which cognition and social activities are organized.

As Charles Bazerman explains, such inquiry recognizes writing practices not only as forms of social participation, but also as "integral to . . . complex forms of social organization" (2000, 6). Writing practices situate writers in these forms of participation and organization, so that writers are never alone, even when they

are physically alone, and even during invention. In fact, as Richard Young, Alton Becker, and Kenneth Pike demonstrated in their influential book *Rhetoric: Discovery and Change* (1970), invention involves a process of orientation rather than origination. Young, Becker, and Pike's tagmemic rhetoric and their elegant and complex heuristic of particle, wave, and field presents a set of questions that enable writers to examine a rhetorical situation from various perspectives. Their heuristic framework orients writers in the midst of a rhetorical situation, and the eventual problems writers formulate and analyze as well as the eventual choices that writers make in relation to these problems emerge out of this orientation. Young, Becker, and Pike's tagmemic rhetoric, along with Richard Young's (1978; 1986; 1994) and Janice Lauer's (1967; 1970; 1984) influential work on invention, teaches us that invention is less an inspired, mysterious activity and more a location and mode of inquiry, a way of positioning oneself in relation to a problem and a way of working through it.

Karen Burke LeFevre's *Invention as a Social Act* (1987), building on and adding to the work of Young and Lauer, turns to research in linguistics, creativity theory, sociology, philosophy, and psychology to examine the thoroughly social and interpersonal nature of invention. Toward the end of the book, LeFevre calls for continued social-based research into invention, research that examines "a larger locus of inventive activity, a social matrix rather than an isolated writer and text" (1987, 125). She writes: "we should study the ecology of invention—the ways ideas arise and are nurtured or hindered by interaction with social context and culture" (126). A number of scholars, to varying degrees and with different agendas, have since taken up this study of invention and authorship, including Brodkey (1987), Bleich (1988), S. Miller (1989), Cooper and Holzman (1989), Crowley (1990), Ede and Lunsford (1990), Faigley (1992), Flower (1994), Berlin (1996), Howard (1999), and Halasek (1999). In this book, I build on and add to these studies by responding in particular to LeFevre's call for inquiry into the ecology of invention, which calls for "re-*placing*" invention in a social and rhetorical scene

that shapes and is shaped by it. Turning to recent scholarship in genre theory, I examine invention as the site in which writers act within and are acted upon by the social and rhetorical conditions that we call genres—the site in which writers acquire, negotiate, and articulate the desires to write. Genres, which Carolyn Miller (1984) has defined as typified rhetorical ways of acting in recurring situations, position and condition discursive behavior in such a way as to preclude a sense of beginnings as unpreceded, unmediated, unmarked scenes of origin. If beginnings take place in the textured midst of things, as the aforementioned scholarship on invention argues, then genres are part of this midst of things, rhetorically sustaining and enabling the ways communicants recognize and act in various situations. Writers invent within genres and are themselves invented by genres. In arguing that genres are places in which invention (and writers) take place, I hope to contribute to and enrich our understanding of invention in composition studies.

When I began my research for this book a few years ago, my father asked me what I was studying. I told him, "Genre." Looking puzzled, he said, "Jon-ra?" I said, "Yes, jon-ra." Then, in an attempted French accent, he said, "Oh you mean genrrrr," rolling the r at the end. My brother, who was listening nearby, asked, "What is genre?" In all seriousness and without hesitating, my father replied, "Nothing; genre is nothing. You are writing a book about nothing?" Academics' sensitivity to the charge that we study "nothing" notwithstanding, my father's claim about genre was not unfounded. After all, the word *genre*, borrowed from French, means "sort" or "kind," and to study sorts or kinds of things (inherently an abstract notion) is not as substantial as, say, studying the things themselves. Certainly, genre appears to be nothing when it is defined as a way of innocently classifying or sorting kinds of texts. But in the past two decades, scholarship in genre theory has come a long way in dispelling the notion that genres are merely artificial and arbitrary systems of classification, positing instead that genres are dynamic discursive formations in which ideology is naturalized and realized in specific

social actions, relations, and subjectivities. Indeed, genre is not nothing.

Genre is not nothing in the same way that beginnings are not preceded by nothing, a way of moving from nothing to something. A genre is not simply a classification, a way of describing something that is produced before or outside of its rhetorical and conceptual framework. As I will describe in chapter 2, genres *function* on their writers, readers, and contexts. Indeed, one of the roots of the word *genre*, by way of its related word *gender*, can be traced to the Latin cognate *gener*, meaning to generate. This etymology suggests that genre both *sorts* and *generates*. As such, what makes genre significant to a study of invention is not so much that it functions as a site in which the thing invented gets placed in order to be identified, but that genre functions as a site in which invention *itself* takes place. In this formulation, genre becomes akin to what Pierre Bourdieu calls "habitus," which he defines as "structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which *generate* and *organize* practices and representations" (1990, 53). Like habitus, genre both organizes and generates the conditions of social and rhetorical production. The function of a genre only seems like nothing when we, through practice and socialization, have internalized its ideology in the form of rhetorical conventions to such an extent that our invention of a text seems to emanate independently and introspectively, even almost intuitively, from us. Indeed, as we will examine later, the power of genre resides, in part, in this ideological sleight of hand, in which social obligation to act becomes internalized as self-generated desire to act in certain rhetorical ways.

Insofar as genres are structuring as well as structured structures, they can be metaphorically described as rhetorical ecosystems. There are several reasons why I find this metaphor useful and why I take it up in later chapters. For one thing, it suggests that generic boundaries are not simply classificatory constraints within which writers and speakers function; rather, these boundaries are social and rhetorical conditions which make possible

certain commitments, relations, and actions. Just as natural ecosystems sustain certain forms of life, so genres maintain rhetorical conditions that sustain certain forms of life—ways of discursively and materially organizing, knowing, experiencing, acting, and relating in the world. More significantly, the metaphor also captures the dynamic relationship between rhetorical habits and social habitats that genres maintain. It suggests that, rather than being static backdrops against which speakers and writers act, social and rhetorical conditions are constantly being reproduced and transformed as speakers and writers act within them. By way of genres, speakers and writers maintain the habitual social and rhetorical interactions and practices that sustain the social and rhetorical conditions that in turn compel such habitual interactions and practices. Just as ecosystems maintain a symbiotic relationship between organisms and their habitats, with habitats being sustained by the very organisms that they sustain, so too genres are sustained by the very writers that they sustain. As such, genres organize the conditions of production as well as generate the rhetorical articulation of these conditions, reciprocally. Which is another way of saying that genres maintain the desires that they help writers fulfill.

Genres are places of articulation. They are ideological configurations that are realized in their articulation, as they are used by writers (and readers). Genres also place writers in positions of articulation. Here we discern the dynamic, seemingly paradoxical, relationship between writers and genres, one that we will examine more closely in chapter 4. Genres exist because writers produce them, but writers produce them because genres already exist. In this formulation, the notion of agency becomes more complicated, requiring us to examine more closely how and why we are motivated to act. Kenneth Burke, in *A Grammar of Motives*, describes how this paradoxical relationship is at the heart of his attempt to explain the drama of motive:

> We may discern a dramatistic pun, involving a merger of active and passive in the expression, "the motivation to act." Strictly speaking,

> the act of an agent would be the movement not of one *moved* but of a *mover* (a mover of the self or of something else by the self). For an act is by definition active, whereas to be moved (or motivated) is by definition passive. Thus, if we quizzically scrutinize the expression, "the motivation to act," we note that it implicitly contains the paradox of substance . . . to consider an *act* in terms of its grounds is to consider it in terms of what it is not, namely, in terms of motives that, in acting upon the active, would make it a kind of passive. We could state the paradox another way by saying that the concept of activation implies a kind of passive-behind-the-passive; for an agent who is "motivated by his passions" would be "moved by his being-movedness," or "acted upon by his state of being acted upon." (1969a, 40)

For Burke, then, the motivation to act captures the paradox of articulation, namely that writers articulate genres as they are articulated by genres. This scene of articulation takes place within genres, and has a great deal to offer to the way we study and teach invention in composition studies.

There is, of course, a chicken-and-egg dilemma at work in all this, but attempting to address it is beyond the scope of this book. Ultimately, I am less interested in the "time before genre"—that time no longer exists—and more interested in what happens once genres are in circulation, because it is there that the dynamic relation between writers and genres always already exists and affects future actions. In particular, I am interested in how and why already existing genres not only enable individuals to shape social and rhetorical practices, but also to transform them, so that new genres emerge out of contact with those already in use, and evolve as they reflect changing values and assumptions (see for instance Popken's 1999 research into the evolution of the resume and Bazerman's 1988 research into the evolution of the experimental article). As such, I am interested in the synchronic relationship between genres and writers, especially the ways this relationship gets enacted during the scene of invention, where genre knowledge becomes a form of what Berkenkotter and Huckin call "situated cognition" (1993, 485).

To think of genre knowledge as situated, textured cognition is to implicate genre in the formation and negotiation of subjectivity and desire (Fuller and Lee 2002, 211), which is what makes genre such a useful site for investigating invention. In arguing that invention begins and takes place within the social and rhetorical conditions constituted by genres, however, I do not presume that genres are the only sites in which writers invent, nor do I suggest that genres are entirely deterministic. Genres themselves take place within what Bakhtin calls larger "spheres of culture" (1986), what Freadman calls "ceremonials" (1988), and what Russell, borrowing from activity theory, calls "activity systems" (1997). Within these larger spheres of language and activity, writers negotiate multiple, sometimes conflicting genres, relations, and subjectivities, so that there is always the potential, in some genres and in some situations more than others, for generic resistance and hybridization. Indeed, as I will discuss in chapter 4, the articulation of genre is also the possibility of its transformation. In addition, various other forces are also at work shaping how and why writers invent, including economic conditions; power relations; racial, ethnic, class, and gender formations; material and geographic conditions; libidinal attachments; not to mention biological and other x-factors. I cannot and do not claim, then, that genres account entirely for how and why writers invent. What I do claim is that genres reveal and help us map part of what LeFevre calls the "ecology of invention," hence allowing us to locate a writer's motives to act within typified rhetorical and social conditions. In giving us access to the ecology of invention, genres can provide a richer account of agency as well as a more useful means for describing and teaching invention.

In later chapters, I will consider in more detail how different genres constitute writers into different subject formations, and what these formations reveal about how and why writers invent. Along the way, I will examine the position of the writer as someone who not only writes, but who is also "written" or produced by the genres that he or she writes. I am curious about what

happens to writers as they write—what positions they are asked to assume, how and why they represent their activities, themselves, and others rhetorically, how they act as they are acted upon, what tensions exist between a writer's intentions and a genre's social motives, and how these tensions get played out as social and rhetorical practices. Such questions appear increasingly relevant to the work of composition theory and pedagogy. These questions challenge scholars and teachers of writing to examine not only the complex processes involved in the *production of the text* and its consequences (what writers do when they write and its effects), but also the complex processes involved in the *production of the writer* and its consequences (what is done to writers when they write and its effects). We cannot, I argue, fully understand or answer the question "what do writers *do* when they write?" without understanding and answering the question "what happens *to* writers when they write?" In genre theory, I see a way to bring these questions together, to account not only for how writers articulate motives or desires, but also for how writers obtain motives or desires to write—how, that is, writers both invent and are invented by the genres that they write.

Chapter 2 introduces the concept of genre, tracing its development through literary studies up to its more recent reconceptualizations in applied linguistics, communication studies, rhetoric, and composition. Bringing together definitions of genre from various disciplines, this chapter presents what I will be calling the "genre function," a term borrowed from Foucault's concept of the author-function to describe genres as constitutive (that is, both regulative and generative) of social and rhetorical actions, relations, and identities. Such a view of genre will serve as a framework for examining invention and the writer in later chapters.

In chapter 3, I will consider the various views of the writer that have dominated the study and teaching of writing since the late eighteenth century, especially how these views of the writer continue to be reflected in what Sharon Crowley and Karen Burke LeFevre have described as composition studies' introspective

theories of invention. In particular, I will investigate the role that the "process movement" has played in shaping our views of the writer as "author" over the last forty years, views that have contributed to a privatization of invention from a social and rhetorical act to an individual and introspective act. By and large, writing instruction continues to treat the writer as its point of departure, and this chapter will consider what such a treatment has meant for the ways we define writing and its instruction, and what it would mean to rethink the writer and invention as a result.

Analyzing the relationship between genre and subject formation, I locate invention at the intersection between the acquisition and articulation of desire—the site at which writers obtain, negotiate, and enact specific social commitments, orientations, and relations within what Bazerman has recently called "genred" discursive spaces (2002, 15). Chapter 4 locates the figure of the writer within these genred discursive spaces, demonstrating in theory and with examples how and why writers are produced by the genres they write. Drawing on the work of the sociologist Anthony Giddens, chapter 4 describes the role that genres play in reproducing the situational motives that writers internalize as intentions and actualize as socio-rhetorical actions and identities in such varied examples as the Patient Medical History Form, the state of the union address, social work assessment reports, and greeting cards.

In chapter 5, I will consider genres as situated topoi within which invention takes place, habits as well as habitats for acting in language. I will describe and analyze the first-year writing (FYW) classroom as an activity system shaped and enabled by various genres, each of which constitutes its own topoi within which teachers and students assume and enact a complex set of social actions, relations, and positions. In particular, I will analyze the syllabus, the writing prompt, and, its uptake, the student essay, in order to counter misconceptions that the FYW classroom is an artificial environment within which writing takes place. Actually, like any other environment, the FYW classroom is a multilayered, multitextured site of social and material action and identity

formation, a site that is reproduced as it is rhetorically enacted by its participants within the various classroom genres available to them. By studying the relationship between the writing prompt and the student essay, for example, we can observe the complex relations and repositioning that students must negotiate as they transition from one genred discursive space to another. Invention takes place at the nexus where prompt and essay meet, and in chapter 5, I examine how students negotiate this discursive transaction by recontextualizing the desires embedded in the writing prompt as their own self-sponsored desires in their essays. Analyzing the syllabus, writing prompt, and student essay as sites of invention gives us insight into how students and teachers (re)position themselves as social actors within at the same time as they enact the activity system we call FYW.

Writing takes place. It takes place socially and rhetorically. To write is to position oneself within genres—to assume and enact certain situated commitments, identities, relations, and practices. In the final chapter, I will consider the implications of making this positioning visible and accessible to students, implications which invite us to rethink not only our teaching practices in writing courses, including the ways we teach invention, but also our goals for writing instruction. I offer genre analysis as a way for students to access, position themselves within, and participate critically in genred discursive spaces and the commitments, relations, identities, and activities embedded within them. Along the way, I will argue that this approach challenges us to teach writing not so much as "composition" but as rhetoric—as a way of being and acting in the world, socially and rhetorically, within genres—and then I will speculate on what it would mean, especially for writing in the disciplines (WID) initiatives, to teach FYW in this way.

Today, perhaps more than ever, the place of composition is contested. Among those who study and teach composition in the university, some justify the place of composition within English departments while others argue that composition needs to forge its own interdisciplinary identity—its own

place—either as its own department outside of English or as part of WID programs. These are pressing and significant debates about the institutional place of composition, and they will continue to shape the teaching and professional identity of composition studies in the U.S. Yet these debates about the institutional *place of composition*, debates which have motivated a great deal of scholarly work in composition studies and contributed in large part to the field's self-definition, can also be fruitfully read in relation to where *composition takes place*, particularly the beginnings of composition, the locus of invention. At the end of the book, I will address the place of composition within the university (the institutional place of writing); in the rest of the book, I will define "the place of composition" to mean the genred scenes in which writers invent and write. By examining these scenes for what they can tell us about how agency operates, we stand to gain a richer and I hope a more pedagogically useful understanding of invention, the writer, and their place of composition.