TROUBLE IN COMPOSITION

A Review Essay

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Winifred Bryan Horner, ed., *Composition & Literature: Bridging the Gap* (Chicago and London: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1983), 184 pages.

This collection of essays addresses the field of composition: its nature, the status of its faculty, and its relation to literature. Almost all the essayists are at the major research universities, so readers at other places need to keep in mind differences in conditions and resources. But what is being debated here is important, for it bears on the nature of English which, as a department, is centrally concerned about the crisis in literacy today.

Richard Lanham's essay begins by characterizing the literature faculty as out of touch with national needs. They work with the false notion of literature as a "separate reality" (21), which is an "exhausted paradigm" (28) that traps them in a "rancid, Luddite, coterie mentality" (24) and renders them useless to the coming "multiracial and multilingual America" (23). He offers that ordinary prose (just like poetry properly understood) "both creates the reality beneath and in turn is affected by it," so that between literature and composition "no difference *in kind* exists" (19). But composition as taught today "threatens to turn your mind to oatmeal" (20) because the "intellectual breakdown" of the schools makes "college students read and write like high-school sophomores" (25). He suggests that we move to new courses arising from a "new humanist consensus" based on evolutionary biology, primatology, genetics (but not, incidentally, on rhetoric), "based, that is, on new, genuinely legitimating behavioral premises" which "will really refound the undergraduate curriculum" (22). The literature faculty had better join this interdisciplinary movement, lead it in fact, or wind up "an Anglo Studies Center in a country no longer predominantly Anglo" (24).

Josephine Miles shows how she uses jokes and riddles to deal with the "disruption of standard expectations" in writing, whether this be in *Walden* or in student themes on "my summer vacation" (30). When these gaps and breaks are understood, the basic nature of language is understood, and the student can see how sentences are put together by good and bad writers alike to achieve certain effects.

J. Hillis Miller focuses on metaphor. An insight into the "fundamentally figurative character of language" will lead to an understanding of "rhetoric as reading, as decomposition," which is to say, as literature, but it will also lead to an understanding of "rhetoric as composition" (49). By this, binary oppositions are fused: "rhetoric as analysis" versus "rhetoric as persuasion, as synthesis" (38), reading-writing, "rhetoric as persuasion and rhetoric as knowledge of tropes" (43), the metaphorical and the literal, language and "silent doing" (48), self-world, and so on. He observes the inadequacy of English handbooks in regard to their handling of metaphor, consequently the inadequacy of composition teaching in general. New ways of teaching composition must come about, although, as he says, "What a 'deconstructive' textbook of freshman writing would be like I am not sure" (55). He feels, however, that something new must be done for composition, some equivalent of "new math" in the sciences, and in this the literature faculty must take the lead, in conjunction with teachers of writing to be sure: a "cooperative teaching of writing and reading" (56).

Wayne Booth thinks the literature faculty are isolated, wanting "nothing to do with teaching a 'citizenry' anything": this "elite" who "write to each other about 'literature' " (59) and who think composition is "flunky work" (58). He centers in on prose's ability *"to shape reality with words."* But students must not be taught to write "naturally," because this results in "destructive shapings" (64); rather, they should be taught to write with "one or another of their various selves, after thinking about how it relates to a given audience and a specified purpose" (68). Booth stretches this out to mean the genuine creation, through words, of selves, ethos, the past [history, e.g., because it is "imagined," (75)], the future [laws and polemic], and the timeless [philosophy, religion, science]. Out of this would come "a *three*-year LITCOMP sequence" to replace composition as presently taught (78). Seven things are needed (61-62): lots of papers, tough assignments, thorough instructor critiques, small classes,

student discussion, "writing across the curriculum," and, as texts, all "first-class writing" (not just "literature"). Booth points out that "no writing course of this kind can be turned over to a 'composition' staff," but needs to be led by "serious professors of 'literature' " and others, to be sure: "specialists in many different fields" (79). He sketches a syllabus containing "literature" but also philosophy of discourse, cultural anthropology, writings in law, metarhetorics of the disciplines, and so on.

Bleich has his composition students write "experience essays" and "literature essays" (94), which is to say, essays of "intentionality" or abiding motive and of "intention" or immediate motive (82), in whose juxtaposition we may see that the "conception of the 'literary' world is an objectification of the individual's emotional and affective language options" (94). The "literature essays 'mean' the experience essays" (94) and vice versa, through the "*intersubjective context*" (95), which is to say, talking about yourself in class. One of Bleich's students, for instance, puts literature and experience together by writing, "When you have something nice like Major de Spain's house you take care of it, keep it clean" (90). As we may see, Bleich is bringing reader-response criticism to bear on composition teaching.

The essay by Nancy Comley and Robert Scholes sets up the "psycho-pathology" of teaching as a number of binary oppositions. On the one side: literature, texts-from-outside, the good, the academic, consumption, and interpretation. On the other: nonliterature (composition), texts-from-inside, the bad, the real, production, and creativity. Creative writing is "the production of pseudoliterary texts," and composition, as taught, is the production of "pseudononliterature." This is the "deep structure" by which the real "by its very usefulness, its nonliterariness" eludes our grasp, and by which "sexual and economic" oppression is practiced (96-98). "The proper remedy for our troubles," continue the authors, "must begin with the deconstruction of our basic system of binary oppositions" through three principles: that not just literature but "all texts have secret/hidden/deeper meanings," that "the writer is always reading and the reader is always writing," and that "the 'real' and the 'academic' deeply interpenetrate" (99-101). Out of this comes "a new approach to freshman English." First is "to locate the qualities of good writing," a "set of virtues," given as "clarity, power, precision, originality, convincingness, coherence,

correctness," but, most of all, "voice" as the development of student "selfhood" (102). The rest of the essay deals with how Betsy, "attractive, intelligent" (103), freed herself from the "anxiety" of "pseudononliterary discourse" (104) by writing about why Richard Cory shot himself, and about how "less advantaged" "Students / Seven in Mrs. Merz Class" [sic] wrote a poem in imitation of Gwendolyn Brooks's "We Real Cool" (106).

Elaine Maimon's essay centers upon the idea that forms of writing such as lab reports are "genres" defined by "conventions . . . expectations in the minds of readers" (112). She demonstrates how lab reports should be written — in seven sections, from Title to References Cited — and concludes that "studying the lab report as a genre will help students learn how scientists behave," especially "if students are guided in this analysis by an English teacher" (116). Maimon observes that "the difficulty with most freshman theme writing is that the theme as it is usually taught is a genre that exists nowhere outside the composition classroom," the cure for which is to ask the student to think in terms of "the particular genre of research for each discipline" (117), that is to say, in terms of "purpose and audience" (118). Out of this comes a "new perspective on composition," a "new paradigm" that would emphasize "the processes of composing" (119). The present paradigm has "the emphasis on the composed product": on modes of discourse, on usage and style. For those unfamiliar with the product-process distinction, Maimon provides an analogy. The product-minded composition teacher is like an instructor in a pottery-making class who brings in a Grecian urn, lectures on its qualities, tells students to make one, and leaves the room. The process-minded instructor would show the students how to work with clay, shape it, and make pots of their own. Student pots (or compositions) often look misshapen because the students "never learned procedures for reshaping" (119). On the other hand, students also need ideal forms. This is not to say that an ideal form is better, but it is "different." Thus, a "composition course should help students use private writing to discover their own voices" (their own pots) and then to discover genres (urns) as "different systematic ways of understanding" (120). The process of learning how to shape comes through student-teacher "dialectic": "the colleagueship we cherish" (124).

Father Ong observes that in oral cultures thought does

not proceed in "analytic linearity" as in writing but in "formulatory fashion, through 'rhapsodizing' " (129). Writing is "consciously and reflectively contrived" but "speech is structured through the entire fabric of the human person" (13), so that writing is an isolated and isolating act, with an "imagined" audience needing proofs and logical connections, while in "live oral communication" such requirements are "at many points superfluous" (131) because the audience is there to know, inquire, and comment. Two kinds of orality are to be distinguished: primary, with men untouched by writing or print, and secondary orality "induced by radio and television" (132). Secondary oral cultures produce people "unconcerned with analysis" (133) but sometimes quite able to take "nonanalytic shortcuts into the depths of human issues" (134) by "getting 'with it' " orally (135), a condition in "varying degrees literate" because done in "a media-conscious world" (138). Father Ong then describes a course he helped create based on the idea of "verbal communication actually composed in writing," on "carefully worked out contrasts between primary oral performance and writing, and between both these and secondary orality" (139). This undergraduate course is, as he says, "a demanding one": Readings run from the *Iliad* through Spenser and Milton over to Poe and Henry James; included are tapings of *The Mwindo Epic.*

E. D. Hirsch's essay is based on the idea that "you cannot have linguistic literacy without cultural literacy," without a "central canon of cultural information" (145). This represents, as he notes, a contradiction to his position given previously in *The Philosophy of Composition,* where the student was to learn how to think, read, and write, without regard to content (143). His current belief is that "to teach form alone is to perpetuate illiteracy even at the level of form" because of the neglect of "cultural vocabularies" (145). Illiteracy "is not merely a deficiency in reading and writing skills" but a "deficiency in cultural information." His conclusion is that "composition is *not* a special subject apart from its particular cultural contents," and so our task should be the double one "of teaching the technical skills of exposition as well as the cultural knowledge that is inseparable from those skills" (147). Who is to decide on the content of such courses? Hirsch believes "that the Modern Language Association, National Council of Teachers of English, state councils on education, and the various national academies

can hammer out compromises and specific goals for cultural literacy." Although he does not say so, Hirsch must be imagining courses of the type Lanham and Booth outline: rigor of content, using writings from all disciplines. "For instance," he says, "over the past few years, the term 'DNA' has become part of cultural literacy" (146).

David Kaufer and Richard Young say that the "gap" worth worrying about is not that between traditional programs in literature and composition, nor between the rewards in the one field and the other, not the difference in status between full-time faculty on the one hand and the T.A.'s and part-time instructors on the other — these are all accepted facts, discrepancies which will persevere (148). Nor is the crucial gap between the traditional faculty and the New Rhetoricians who want to "reintroduce rhetoric into English studies" — this will iron itself out as professionals dealing with professionals. The real gap is "between what we as English faculty have to offer and what society expects us to provide" (149): "a literate public" (158). The bridge over this gap does not lie in bigger rewards and, thus, a "higher-grade service program," but in "establishing composition as a substantial academic discipline" (150). Two errors beset composition now. First, to think of it as separated from strenuous intellectual activity. The object too often is just to teach the student standard English, and the result is that composition is now "a kind of halfway house between high-school and college English" staffed by "literate but untrained teachers." Second, to think that "writing and thinking are inseparable." The result here is to regard composition as mysterious high art, and thus unteachable (151). The answer is a "competence theory" of art, as often promoted by the New Rhetoricians, which focuses on "the distinction between novice and expert" (152). Writing would be taught not through rule-governing plans (like simple addition) but through a plan that the authors call heuristics. "Heuristics are explicit strategic and tactical plans for effective guessing": operations whose results are always provisional. "Although explicit and more or less systematic, heuristic search is not wholly conscious or mechanical: intuition, relevant knowledge, and skill are also necessary" (153). The authors illustrate the method by showing "fair ways to refute an opponent's position in argumentative writing" (154). English departments would do well to invest intellectual resources into composition programs to maintain depart-

mental position and power; if not, "another new rhetoric is likely to emerge, but outside English departments and uninformed by the rich traditions we draw on" (158).

Frederick Crews notes that literature people who start to concern themselves with composition may well be "notified by a hail of arrows that the place is already inhabited" (159). So his essay is, as he says, "a minimal, utilitarian, and therefore noninflammatory rationale for literary readings — namely, that a modicum of literature ought to combat the plague of sullenness that menaces every freshman English section." But, on the other hand, Crews also mildly observes that maybe freshman English "is not even an optimum means for achieving its own modest ends. Perhaps composition should not be made a subject matter at all, but rather should be diffused through courses possessing their own intrinsic interest" (166), which puts him with not-so-mild people like Lanham and Booth who call for a drastic rethinking of composition (and with Hirsch too, in the sense of questioning composition as a subject).

Edward Corbett gives the history of composition: out of rhetoric and oratory to its present checkered status (from creative writing through freshman composition to advanced technical writing). The history of literature too: out of belles lettres to its polyglot nature today (everything from the Bible to the Movies). He notes that literature is often used in composition courses but usually in its "imaginative" form rather than as great writings of every sort. But a poem or short story "is not going to be a very helpful model for the student who has to write a book report for an economics class" (179), so his conclusion is that "literature and composition should not have to compete in the same classroom" (183). He would have these constituencies, along with "language," as three equals in the department, supporting one another.

Winifred Horner, the editor, says that these essays have as a central concern the gap between composition and literature, the essence of which is the misconception (on the part of the literature faculty who dominate English departments at the major research universities) that there is a gap "between research and teaching in literature and research and teaching in composition." And this misconception is responsible for the main gap at issue here, that between the measure of "research funds and salaries . . . promotion and tenure" given to the composition faculty and the measure of

rewards given to, or rather taken by, the literature faculty (1). We may presume that the central problem for the composition faculty is being caught up in the traditional "research-teaching-service" formula for faculty rewards, where research is the dominant, controlling factor, teaching a lesser category, and service the least important. What is apparently happening is that research in composition is not being recognized as genuine, because (perhaps) it is being seen as research in teaching.

The crucial question would seem to be, what is the nature of research in composition? Horner is careful not to say that it is research in teaching, for she is aware, no doubt, that research in pedagogy would be considered under "teaching" still. She seems to be defining it as "research in rhetoric or composition theory" (6). It is in this sense, presumably, that the essays will show that "research in composition is alive and growing" (8) and, accordingly, comparable to research in literature — and rewardable to a comparable degree. But there is a problem here, for she also says that "literature and composition cannot be separated either in theory or in teaching practice," that "composition theory and critical theory are indeed opposite sides of the same coin" (2). Too, the essays are by people who "all deny that they are specialists in either composition or literature": "All see their work as bridging the gap" (8). This seems to be saying that generally, and in these essays specifically, we will not be able to distinguish research in composition from research in literature. How, then, may we be sure that it *is* research in composition that is alive and growing, rather than research in literature (or rhetoric)? The only answer that would appear to make sense is that what is being presented here, while at heart indistinguishable from research in literature, nevertheless grows out of, and is original to, the field of composition.

Thus, the first question might be whether the essays do in fact demonstrate research of this nature. But the essays do not seem to do this. Lanham and Booth mention in passing some basic critical understandings about how writing creates reality (in conjunction with reality) but their essays deal mainly with curriculum reform. Hirsch's essay too is primarily about curriculum reform. Miles, Miller, Bleich, and Father Ong bring their work in literary studies to bear on the teaching of composition, but plainly these are importations: not research *in* composition because not growing out of composition. Comley and Scholes have two essays joined: a

short polemic, theoretical in nature, about the deep structure of injustice in English departments, and an essay, not theoretical at all, about how "voice" can be taught to develop student selfhood. Maimon would seem anchored in theory but "genres" come down to teaching "purpose and audience," a long-time technique though refined here, to be sure. Crews offers that maybe a little literature should be used in composition courses, and Corbett offers that maybe not; there is no research touched on in either essay. Perhaps Kaufer and Young are the only people who deal with research in composition as we must understand this term; good writing does seem in large part to come from unconscious powers of exploration and synthesis, powers whose nature could be established theoretically, with implications for both student writing and literature. The collection would appear to show that research in composition, on the whole, consists of interests in pedagogy and curriculum. This "research" is really borrowings from, and applications of, research in literature or rhetoric — and thus not research as universities would understand this term.

There is something even more troubling here. If it cannot be established that, at present, there is research in a subject, we then must ask if, at present, there is a subject here at all. Several of the essayists answer this rather plainly: at present, there is not. Hirsch says that composition is not a subject apart from its cultural contents (147), Crews that we should stop trying to make it one, apart (that is) from its disciplinary contents, and Kaufer and Young, by their call for the *establishment* of composition as a "substantial academic discipline," that, generally speaking, it is not now such (150). Too, Lanham, Booth, and Father Ong, by their call for new interdisciplinary courses of rigorous content, seem to be distancing themselves from present composition as almost an embarrassment. In effect, the drift here is that composition as we know it is not a subject because of its insubstantial nature, to wit, its triviality of content. It must follow that this triviality necessarily derives from composition's engagement with present student insubstantiality, inadequacies in ability to learn, invent, explore, synthesize: in brief, to read and write. In terms of an old philosophical saw, quantitative difference here has resulted in a qualitative difference: composition has, of necessity, become something other than what would make it a subject or discipline. By these calls for the " 'higher' level" of composition

(Booth's phrase 63n6), the authors are not saying, of course, that concern about freshmen, as they are, is not worthwhile, merely that their present condition obviates composition as a subject.

If research in composition cannot be established and if, indeed, composition as we know it is not a subject, where does this leave the composition faculty? Lanham calls on the literature faculty (that is, not on the composition faculty) to help create the new humanist courses in writing (biology, genetics, primatology, etc.), to join what we must think is a pretty special interdisciplinary faculty indeed. Booth says of his three-year LITCOMP (anthropology, law, metarhetorics, etc.): "No writing course of this kind can be turned over to a 'composition' staff," but, necessarily, turned over to "specialists in many different fields" (79). We may doubt that Father Ong would want his courses (orality, writing as technology), or Miller his course in deconstruction, or Hirsch his in cultural literacy, to be taught by the composition staff either. We cannot avoid the thought that what these people are saying is that present composition has produced a type of faculty whose interests are necessarily joined with an insubstantial and trivial course content, namely, the contents of the present freshman mind. Again, this is not to say that the composition faculty are engaged in worthless endeavors, merely that, as long as they are engaged with composition as we know it, they cannot engage the "higher" composition being called for. There is here conceived a disjunction between the two kinds of composition, so that the issue cannot be upgrading the one into the other, but adding one to the other. To be sure, other essayists are not saying this, apparently being content that what they are doing is sufficient unto the day; they seem to have no problem with thinking that composition is a subject nor with working with freshmen as they are.

Thus, we may have come, perhaps, to the basic issue here, the gap between the people who feel that something drastic has to be done about composition and the people who feel composition as we now know it is all right (that is, if everyone did as they do). The heart of the matter seems to be the present freshman mind. It may surely be said that the first group of people feels the urgency it does because, like Lanham, it feels that there has been an "intellectual breakdown" in the public schools such that "college students read and write like high-school sophomores, law students (if you

are lucky) like freshmen," and so on (25). That is, student competency seems about three years out of whack with respect to where, idealistically (one may say), the freshman ought to be, and where, in fact, he (she) is regarding counterparts in every other civilized nation. So the split among these essayists (just about an even one) is that between a rejection of the present state of college literacy and an acceptance of it, between a feeling that the three-year lag must be made up and a feeling that it cannot (or perhaps, should not) — or, indeed, that the lag is not really a lag at all or, if there is one, it can be made up with an improvement in present practices. The thought then arises that perhaps this split is best characterized as that between those who think that present composition is really addressing the three-year lag in student competency (being, in effect, high-school English) and those who think present composition *is* college-level composition (whether in fact, or by definition).

It is odd that none of the essayists touch on this. True, Kaufer and Young do refer to composition courses which merely teach standard "forms and norms" as a "kind of halfway house between high-school and college English" (151), and, furthermore, suggest strongly that most college composition is like this. Booth refers to "the sensible practice of requiring a remedial course" for those not yet ready for courses such as those he envisions (63n6). Call it halfway house or remediation or high school itself, present composition programs seemingly are not what college composition should be. It is not inconceivable that even those essayists who believe that they are doing the right thing by present composition could agree with those calling for its supersession by the higher composition, if the question were put on idealistic or comparative terms. That is, if money were available and if the political difficulties could be overcome, might it not be said that present composition programs are, indeed, what the high schools should be doing? And if the answer is yes, it follows that, because the high schools *cannot* be doing this (for a variety of reasons), then the universities, even the major research institutions, are, in effect, operating units of the high school (so to speak). So if the freshman is writing and reading at the tenth-grade level, it is essential that he (she) be brought to college literacy as soon as possible. In other words, the present composition faculty are performing the most important of services and they need be recognized in some way.

We have come, thus, by a series of significations, to the idea that this collection of essays establishes more, perhaps, than it meant to. It has established that research in composition consists primarily of thought about pedagogy and curriculum, that composition itself may not be a subject at all, but, most of all, through the idea of the "higher" composition and the "new" faculty, that composition as we know it is the make-up of high-school English and its present staff a kind of high-school staff. Sometimes images reveal more than discursive prose does. Take the collection's subtitle: "Bridging the Gap." Surely this suggests composition and literature (here, "writing") as two territories separated by a chasm across which bridges facilitate commerce of some sort. Or take Crew's image of the literature folk venturing their civilization onto the heart of composition and finding, from the arrows, that the inhabitants are not going to take kindly to this. The implications here are that the two cultures will continue. Half of the essayists say that composition-land is in quite capable hands, thank you; improvements can be made but, as Crews points out, only in accord with present practices. The other half more-or-less accept this insofar as they really don't want to talk about it; they talk instead about processing the raw material that comes in from overseas into finished form.

We seem to be left with two imperatives, as far as writing and reading in the university goes. The first is to improve and institutionalize high-school-in-college, and the second is to establish the "higher" composition. The two programs need to be integrated through a common concern about university-level literacy, but it is hard to see how they could have common understandings about security and rewards for faculty because the research game won't play in composition. The composition faculty need evaluation criteria which are markedly different from the criteria under which the literature (here, the 'higher' composition) faculty do, and would, operate. Implementing all this is a dismaying prospect. On the one hand, the university system would have to make room for what would be, in effect, a piece of the high school system. It is hard to see how this could be other than a box by itself on the organization chart, coordinated with English but, as far as rewards go, bypassing all that now goes on by way of evaluation of faculty and curriculum. On the other hand, the university (all the individual departments, that is) would have to agree that yet another

layer of composition has to be inserted into degree requirements. The university administration would have to divert, or find new sources for, a lot of money for both these programs, even assuming the administrators could apprehend the magnitude of the problem involved and take the lead in what is, essentially, a money problem. It is hard to be sanguine although, as Booth says, "We cannot know unless we try" (80).

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