

DE(CON)FINING ENGLISH: LITERATURE, COMPOSITION, TEXTUALITY

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One of the sidelights of the literacy issue—or maybe the essence of the literacy issue—is the battle between composition and literature. It is certainly a heated issue in college English departments (for example, at the University of Texas at Austin); I suspect it is also, or will soon be, a thorny problem for high school and middle school teachers. The debate has been getting a great deal of journal space lately, and it has attracted some noteworthy participants: people like E. D. Hirsch, Maxine Hairston, James Kinneavy, Wayne Booth, Jonathan Culler, and Terry Eagleton, to name but a few. Whole books have been devoted to it: the most well known of these is probably Winifred Horner's *Composition and Literature: Bridging the Gap*; Robert Scholes' *Textual Power* is another. Entire conferences like the 1985 Indiana Teachers of Writing Conference have addressed the issue.

Important curricular questions fuel this debate: Should English departments and/or English faculty be charged with teaching composition? Are the teaching of writing and the teaching of literary works compatible under the same heading "English"? Are they compatible in the same classroom? Is there a defined body of texts—a canon—that defines the discipline, or is the discipline defined by a set of skills, by a critical perspective, or by a more general focus on language arts? What is it that teachers of English are supposed to be doing?

THE STEREOTYPES

For spectators' convenience, several characters have been identified in this developing comedy. The caricatures drawn of the opposition by each side tell us something about the nature of the debate: it is emotional, it is political, it is sometimes nasty, and it tends to be oversimplified. An "us vs. them situation" has developed.

On the one side, we have the so-called "literature people," the die-hard traditionalists, the lions of the English department—or dinosaurs, depending on your point of view. This group is said to represent the view that we should be teaching (and are in fact historically defined by) the traditional canon of English and American literature—the sacred manuscripts of our exegetical discipline. Our job is to teach students how to interpret these works, which all educated, cultured people know. By studying these works, students will become more intelligent, more sensitive, and more literate. Some literature people have bumper stickers which read "I'd rather be reading Jane Austen" or "I'm a novel lover." But most of them find bumper stickers "tasteless."

The so-called "composition people" fall into one of two groups. The "retreads" are the counter-culture revolutionaries who went to graduate school in the sixties and seventies, couldn't find literature jobs, and ended up in composition. They are thought to be lying in wait, ghoulishly, for literature people to retire or die off so they can take over literature classes (which, of course, all retreads secretly desire). The "composition and rhetoric people" are those who actually received "training" (the operative word) in the teaching of writing. They are either nihilist deconstructionists or social scientists who create strange models of the writing process and blather in nominalized style about such things as "protocols" and "cognitive schema." As nihilists or scientists, they do not believe there are any such things as sacred texts. There are only "texts"—any will do. They have a pathological interest in student writing, even going so far as to save it—instead of throwing it out like the literature people do. Comp and rhetoric people are interested in teaching "skills," and they have a distinctive jargon which they guard jealously and use as a club code to find out if you are one of them. They are a humorless and politically self-conscious lot. Their bumper stickers read "Support Your Local Rhetorician."

Now I am not sure if any of these characters actually exists in English departments, at least not in the pure, stereotyped forms described. But people clearly think they do. And we must admit that the categories do serve to identify teams; they are a useful, if misleading, rubric at department meetings. (In fact, believing that these characters are real may even provide a reason to attend department meetings.)

But I have yet to meet an English teacher who, when in a reasonable mood, would not admit that our discipline was defined both by a body of texts and by a set of skills; that our historical responsibility has been both reading and writing; that, in fact, the best English teachers are, and always have been, lit and comp persons simultaneously. But the question is, can we ever dissociate ourselves from the stereotyped roles to agree about this? Can we ever hope to draft that policy statement that would recognize the essential unity of the discipline? Should we even try?

THE NAY-SAYERS

Some oppose “bridging the gap.” Maxine Hairston, Professor of English at the University of Texas, believes that efforts to link composition to literary theory are futile because such efforts are one-sided: comp people trying to win approval from the literary elite by showing their former mentors that their hearts are still pure (2). Hairston sees the literary establishment as entrenched and unregenerate. Composition people are wasting their time in dialogue, she says, because the literature people “ARE NOT LISTENING” (3, caps Hairston’s). She proposes that a split would grant composition the special status it needs and deserves.

Jay Robinson, Professor of English and Chairman of the Composition Board at the University of Michigan, doubts that a merger is possible or even desirable. According to Robinson, students will not be served until English departments restructure themselves and alter their priorities radically. He suggests that we are damaging students now by hiring faculty to teach composition who have their entire training in literary studies: such people are not qualified to teach composition.

THE YEAH-SAYERS

Others believe that bridge-building is possible. Some of the

writers who contributed to Horner's book map out various strategies for creating unity. To achieve this, however, we clearly need a restructuring of the current curriculum, and perhaps a new defining term—or a “de(con)fining” term—to describe what it is we do. And more than a simple change in vocabulary is needed; a teaching philosophy and strategy must accompany it.

“Rhetoric” might have functioned as such a term, but it is now affiliated exclusively with composition. Robert Scholes proposes that we use the term “textuality,” and—I hope without suggesting that we should become members of the “Department of Textuality”—I would like to support its use also. “Textuality” refers to the way a piece of writing works, to the way it achieves its informative, or persuasive, or literary purpose. “Textuality” embodies a set of principles governing textual production—and “production” here means both reading and writing. It refers to principles for writing poetry and for reading it, for producing a television commercial and for understanding how it has been produced. The things that we examine are “texts”—or, if you prefer, simply “writing.” Our canon thus becomes, says John Gerber,

every type of written discourse, from the simplest sentence wrestled over in writing laboratories to the most subtle kind of imaginative work produced in our creative writing workshops. The term implies not only exposition but rhetoric, scientific and technical writing, business and professional writing, film and TV scenario writing, poetry and fiction writing, satire, and humor and burlesque, and whatever other modes are current and desired. (313)

Our job as researchers in “textuality” is to discover those principles that underly texts; and as researchers we may choose a wide variety of texts. We are not throwing out the idea of “canon” here, because not just any piece of writing can be admitted into the canon of textuality. To be admitted, it would have to be a model illustrating an important textual issue. Thus, there will be a canon, but it will be more diverse, less settled, fluctuating with the whims of textual researchers, who will be focusing on different discourse types. One researcher might analyze metadiscourse in social science textbooks, another the science writing of the Royal Society in the late seventeenth century, another the discourse of the mathematics classroom, another persuasive appeals in political

speeches, another the definition and use of metaphor in different cultures. In fact, there are already researchers doing work in these exact areas.

A business sales letter or tv commercial, then, could become a “canonical work” if it is deemed significant—if it raises questions about the ethics of persuasion, or raises an issue about audience, or fits a certain level of instruction.

Some will argue that the content of an ad or a TV commercial is not substantial. After all, the referents for TV commercials are things like soap, laundry detergent, and car wax. They show us things like dancing Kool-Aid pitchers. Do you mean to tell me we’re going to have our students analyzing stuff like that? I hear some people sneering.

Yes, and it will be intellectually rigorous, I sneer back. Because what we look at is not the content. We do not look *through* the language to some content or issue behind it—committing the referential fallacy in other words. We look *at the language itself*, at what the text is doing, how it is operating in its rhetorical context. *That* is the sophisticated, intellectual challenge here, and *that* is the proper focus, I am suggesting, of the English teacher. Every text, even the so-called simple one, has a complex rhetorical context that can be analyzed. We can teach students to do this kind of analysis when they read and to apply this kind of analysis when they write. But to do this students need a vocabulary for talking about texts.

What is the vocabulary for discussing textuality? Questions about audience, aim, and genre should be the first questions students learn to pose: What type of discourse am I reading—informative, persuasive, poetic, argumentative, expressive? What audience does it address, and what level of knowledge and what attitudes does it assume about that audience? Is it a narrative, a process description, a satire, a sonnet, a technical report? (And what assumptions about context does its form suggest?)

Classical and contemporary rhetoric and poetics provide additional terminology. Students can learn the terms and techniques for critiquing and developing arguments—stasis theory, the topoi, and Toulmin logic, to name but a few. They can learn how induction and deduction work—and, more importantly, how different types of induction and deduction are appropriate for different audiences and subjects. They can learn techniques for in-

venting arguments, which are in effect the same techniques for analyzing them. They can learn the difference between artistic and inartistic proofs—and when to use which kind in argumentative and persuasive writing. They can learn to recognize and describe and themselves use different writing styles, and the conventions governing discourse production in different disciplines (in literary writing in different periods, in history, the sciences, the social sciences). They can learn about schemes and tropes, cumulative sentence constructions, and sentence combining as techniques for expanding their semiotic potential. They can learn to look at any text—past or present, literary or non-literary—and understand how it achieves meaning. They can learn to imitate features of a text, for themselves, in a writing context of their own creation. They can learn to appreciate the ethical issues in textuality.

Students should be able to apply these principles to understand any text they encounter, though of course they cannot learn all these principles at once. In my freshman composition class at Indiana U.-Purdue U. at Fort Wayne, I introduce several key principles during the first two weeks of the course. I begin by handing out a two-page “reader” on the first day of class (see Appendix). This reader contains thirteen short texts which represent a range of discourse types. I use these texts to teach students to read “textually” (or “rhetorically”), looking at audience, purpose, and strategy.

Here is one of my favorite canonical works from this reader:

You should definitely go see the movie *Vacation*, starring Chevy Chase. If you like Chevy on Saturday Night Live, you’ll love him in *Vacation*. It is the best movie I have ever seen. It has lots of car chases, sexy girls (particularly Christine Brinkley), and raunchy humor. I definitely recommend it.

On the face of it, this text looks like bad writing—and students are quick to condemn it. But *why?*, I ask, what makes it bad writing? The students point out that the writer’s tone is obnoxious (often they will not distinguish between the tone and the person); that the stance is inappropriate (for *whom?*, I ask); that the persuasive strategies are not likely to work (for *whom?*, I ask), and so on. With this one example I can introduce in about twenty-five minutes several key textual concepts—persuasive discourse, *ethos*, artistic and inartistic proofs, and of course audience. The writing

may be bad (and that, the students come to realize, depends on who the audience is), but the example is a good one. After analyzing the thirteen sample texts in my reader, the students are armed with a basic vocabulary—and a textual reading method—which they will apply in reading more rhetorically complex works, and in writing their own.

An entire set of principles is available to us in both composition and literature studies—but I know of no college freshmen who have developed it, and very few instructors who teach it. The best students can tell us what “onomatopoeia” is, and they have perhaps heard of “prewriting.” But the vocabulary of textuality is underdeveloped. Even students who read and read and read literary works in high school have very little appreciation for the textual nature of the works they have read—chiefly because they read them for some presumed content beyond (to get at the thinking processes of the writer, perhaps, or to understand the culture in which the work was produced.) Even the well-read students have little understanding of the principles, and in most cases no sense of how they might employ the principles in their own writing. They rarely understand the basis of argumentation, for instance, though this theory was central to classical education. Can our students handle this stuff? I think they have to learn how to handle it. Cicero wrote an entire book on it when he was fifteen.

THE TEXTUALITY PROGRAM

The kind of literacy I’m promoting here is neither exclusively “literary literacy” nor “cultural literacy” nor “compositional literacy.” It is by no means the vision of literacy promoted by E. D. Hirsch, who would solve the literacy crisis by having students read a set list of “great works.” This plan would only institutionalize the referential fallacy without addressing the essential problem—lack of critical thinking skills. Granted, we cannot teach “literacy” in the abstract—we must teach literacy *in* something. The “content” that we would teach would be the set of terms and perspectives—the philosophy, if you like—of “textuality.” Our goal is “textual literacy”—the ability to analyze a text (oral or written) and understand how it achieves its meaning.

There are ways to redesign our curriculum to accomplish this goal. James J. Murphy proposes that English ought to return to the kind of integrated language arts curriculum described by Quin-

tilian in *Institutio oratoria*. In this curriculum, writing, reading, speech, and logic are taught together, at every stage: students learn by imitating models, then by creating their own versions for their own purposes. This curriculum model guided education from the Renaissance to the beginning of the twentieth century; but it eroded in this country, in this century, and our language arts curriculum is now badly fragmented, says Murphy.

Some universities are now developing programs which attempt to reintegrate language arts by focusing on principles of textuality. Carnegie-Mellon has just introduced what department head Gary Waller calls "the first poststructuralist literary curriculum." It focuses on "the way language functions in the world—from rhetorical theory to poetry to tv commercials" (7). The University of Texas at Arlington has developed a program called CACTIP (Composition Analysis Critical Thinking Integrated Program), funded by a \$392,000 NEH grant. At Arlington the departments of English and philosophy designed a three-course, team-taught sequence for freshmen. The program employs methodologies drawn from the Renaissance trivium. Students take three courses—"Texts as Exposition," "Texts as Argumentation," and "Texts as Self-expression/Literary." In all three courses they read and write texts to understand how meaning is shaped in various academic disciplines. They learn such things as what general heuristics operate in all texts, and which ones are specific to various disciplines. They are expected to know a body of principles that comes from rhetoric, from poetics, from logic.

CONCLUSION

The teaching of reading and the teaching of writing are possible together; theoretically, at least, they coalesce under the term "textuality." Whether composition and literature faculty can ever pitch their tents on this common ground practically is another matter. I suspect that at many universities politics and personalities will prevent it. Unity is possible, but it is not necessarily desirable.

At the high school and middle school level such a merger may be more vital. There, the same English teacher is likely to be held responsible for literature *and* composition. Teachers can go crazy without an integrated language arts perspective. Unfortunately, I see many schools going in the opposite direction: fragmenting the language arts by setting up English classes which

forsake the principles of textuality to “cover content”—that is, the canonical works. (We hear horror stories about classes where students are given multiple-choice tests on the *Odyssey*.) Other schools are teaching composition courses without a strong reading analysis component. This fragmentation can only hurt students. I believe that by seeing our goal as “textual literacy,” and by adopting teaching strategies that help students learn how texts make meaning, we can perhaps avert such fragmentation.

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APPENDIX

TEXTS

1. My wife is a psychiatrist. Very attractive, very easy to intimidate, very abstracted, a likely target for muggers both outside, because she's lost in her thoughts, and at home, because punks think doctors keep drugs in their houses (they don't). She has a gun, too, a .38, and she knows how to use it. We are not hillbillies; we are people who went to Radcliffe and Stanford, respectively. Appalling, huh? It used to appall us, too, until we were forced to realize that our lives, both as a married couple with a deep commitment and as individuals doing important and meaningful work, were worth protecting.
2. One day a fox was walking through the woods with her three cubs when she came upon a lioness, who had one cub.

The fox said to the lioness, “Gee . . . it's a shame you only have one child, while I'm lucky enough to have three.”

The lioness responded, “I may only have one, but that one is a lion.”

3. Ouch!
4. James Matson (age 65) is slated to retire from the drill press area next month, but he's applied for the MTS I position. With his 22 years of seniority in the company he'll make \$20K (vs. \$15K in retirement benefits if he retires now). Carol Reeves is the best of the five other applicants in my judgement. She would start at \$15K.
5. In the late summer of that year we lived in a house in a village that looked across the river and the plain to the mountains.
6. Four students at Kent State University, two of them women, were shot to death this afternoon by a volley of National Guard gunfire. At least 8 other students were wounded.
The burst of gunfire came about 20 minutes after the guardsmen broke up a noon rally on the Commons, a grassy campus gathering spot, by lobbing tear gas at a crowd of about 1,000 young people.
7. Have you stopped beating your wife?

8. To get to DeKalb High School from Fort Wayne, take Clinton north until it becomes State Road #427. Take #427 north until you get to Auburn. Follow #427 through Auburn until you get to DeKalb High School, on the left side of the road.
9. You should definitely go see the movie *Vacation*, starring Chevy Chase. If you like Chevy on Saturday Night Live, you'll love him in *Vacation*. It is the best movie I have ever seen. It has lots of car chases, sexy girls (particularly Christine Brinkley), and raunchy humor. I definitely recommend it.
10. The tragic nature of the division of this country, exacerbated by escalation of the war, was underscored yesterday when four students were killed during a confrontation with National Guardsmen and police at Kent State University in Ohio.

Whoever was responsible for the fatal shots must be brought to justice promptly and steps must be taken to make sure that the forces of "law and order" do not themselves become the instruments of further anarchy

11. Yet students who write persuasion or argument with the intention to change the attitudes, beliefs, or intentions of others probably cannot learn very much about persuasion or persuasive argument if they are restricted by vague rules and admonitions to "be good," "be fair," and "be decent." Without helping students to understand in *practical* terms how to recognize good ethical persuasion, to understand when even distinguished, honest, and moral writers might need to resort to "unfair ethical persuasion"—appeals to emotions, appeals to greed, appeals to ties with group, nation, family, or social group, overgeneralizations, underexplanations, red herrings, stereotyping, and so on—teachers teach their students to persuade imaginary people with an imaginary arsenal of rhetorical techniques.
12. Had we but world enough, and time,
This coyness, lady, were no crime.
We would sit down, and think which way
To walk, and pass our long love's day.
13. This study has two objectives: first, to develop the concept of a "rhetoric of encounter" and to operationally define that concept for use in content analysis research, and secondly to employ this rhetoric of encounter concept in one case study, specifically a content analysis of the student newspaper, the administration public relations periodical, and the proceedings of the Faculty Senate at Kent State University during the Fall Quarter immediately following the May 1-4, 1970, disturbances there.

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