Response to "Language, Politics, and Composition: A Conversation with Noam Chomsky"

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It's with considerable trepidation that an inveterate doer of low-level clerical work responds to the conversation of two eminent compositionists with Professor Noam Chomsky, especially because this lowly clerk is tempted to pick a bone or two with both Chomsky and the compositionists; but perhaps the fear-of-giving-oneself-away disease is even less creditable than ambition beyond one's station.

There's not much point in bothering with the smaller bones. The compositionists did ask some enormous, conversation-stopping questions ("For you, what are the most important elements of rhetoric?"), and sometimes they were imperceptive, as when they asked whether "our media" are victims or conspirators. Generally, though, they prompted good talk without getting in Chomsky's way. Once or twice, however, they asked questions which invited, and got, inadequate answers.

Who can say, for example, whether or not the United States is experiencing a "literacy crisis"? The term crisis suggests a dangerous deterioration from an earlier, better state; but data and definitions adequate to establish such deterioration are simply lacking. Chomskysays what anyone might have said at any time for some centuries past—namely, that "there's a big degree of illiteracy and functional illiteracy"; however, he then launches into "looks as if" and "seems" and goes anecdotal about colleagues (disgruntled readers of Z Magazine?) who complain that "the articles are too long." Though his remarks on the media's demand for "concision" are enlightening, the discussion would have been more useful if it had examined the way in which corporate executives have used the cry of crisis to extend their control of the educational system.

An even unhappier question appears to have been deliberately loaded: "Do you still believe that a sensible prescriptivism is preferable to linguistic permissiveness?" Permissiveness is about as useful a term in argument as you son of a bitch, for everybody tolerates some things that others don't. Real questions are what time is available for any subject in a crowded curriculum, and what prescriptions can and should be applied in the allotted time, for what reasons, by what methods, and with what policies toward non-learners.
To those questions, as Chomsky said of the use of English in India, there are no simple answers; yet the foolish antithesis of "sensible prescriptivism" to "permissiveness" prompted a reply which is simplicity itself—and devastating simplicity at that. Students, Chomsky replied, "ought to know the standard literary language with all its conventions [and] absurdities"—should "know it and be inside it and be able to use it freely," because the standard language is "a real cultural system," an important part of "a very rich cultural heritage."

Citing that answer, resolute grammaticasters will feel justified in continuing to teach They thought him to be me but He was thought to be I—and with what results on the shores of Roxbury Pond? As Chomsky himself says in response to another question, much teaching ends in real or feigned submissiveness (far worse than imagined permissiveness) and in unfeigned contempt for foolish teachers. Independent-minded students, however, don't learn absurd and unnatural conventions just to keep teachers off their backs, especially not if they understand that the absurdities are essential to the functioning of the standard language as a class-marking barrier; and the appeal to a "rich cultural heritage" won't persuade them. Slavery was once a part of a genuinely rich inherited culture in the southern states, and patriarchy is not dead even in the enlightened north. Some parts of one's cultural heritage must be critically considered.

Two of Chomsky's answers will leave some readers wishing that the interviewers and the interview-situation had prompted and allowed a fuller development of oppositions which he invokes. In one instance, Chomsky opposes police control to thought-control. Of "middle-class white folk" he says, "If they start thinking they might start doing... They share in the privileges of the wealthy and therefore you can't control them by force so you've got to control what they think." That conclusion is too optimistic, and it's too flattering to a stodgy middle class. As one can gather from Chomsky's remarks elsewhere in the interview, the powerful have many ways of preventing action besides police power. One notable way has very recently been exemplified: since one party under two names controls elections, voters can't act on the common conviction that both the Democratic and the Republican candidates are unworthy (otherwise, NOTA would be governor of both Texas and Massachusetts). Again, control of capital means control of jobs, and the fear of joblessness is a great preventive of subversive activity, just as administrative control of raises, promotions, and other goodies keeps radical academics from doing anything much except endlessly talking. Though force may be the last resort of threatened rulers, they are stupid if they let themselves be driven to use it. Control of other institutions than the police can keep the most convinced rebel from actively rebelling until the time comes when rebellion hurts less than continued submission.

The second opposition that some readers may wish to hear more of is that between the "intellectually interesting" and the "humanly significant,"
which Chomsky says have little overlap: "The intellectually interesting, challenging, and exciting topics, in general, are close to disjoint from the humanly significant topics." That opposition would seem to make single-minded intellectuals humanly insignificant, no matter how great their genius. Few readers will suspect Chomsky of holding so strange an opinion, but fuller exposition is needed to prevent another of the misunderstandings of which he justly complains.

Still, when all bones, real or imagined, have been picked, it must be acknowledged that Chomsky gave his usual distinguished performance. Even imperceptive questions produced powerful answers. For example, when Chomsky denied that he had any theory of rhetoric and alleged that he tried "to refrain from efforts to bring people to reach [his] conclusions," the question came back, "Is that because you might lose credibility or lose the audience?" Chomsky's answer, "Not at all," led him through a characterization of good teaching to the assertion that "the best rhetoric is the least rhetoric." Repeatedly, the interviewers peppered him in this way with ideas popular (or faddish) among compositionists, and the result was an exhilarating kind of demolition derby. Thus, an interviewer risked the challenging assertion, "If your colleagues and followers had not accepted and then helped champion [your] cause [in Syntactic Structures], you would simply be a kook out in the wilderness with some crazy idea." That defense of servile conformity, akin to the common stupidity that knowledge is constructed when successful rhetoric breeds consensus, prompted a salutary disquisition on "rational inquiry" and "rational understanding of the nature of argument and evidence." Chomsky added, "I think these things are essentially fixed."

For compositionists in particular and the English professoriate in general, the interview may be read as having two special values: in it, a man of huge intelligence and undeniable nobility of character offers a reasoned alternative to some current fashions in the composition industry and suggests limitations on the powers which intellectuals, and especially teachers, sometimes too eagerly claim. A reader's sensitivity in these matters may be heightened by perusing the 1990 Program of the MLA, where a great pomp of buzzwords betrays a foolishness that appears even in minute details (of the first 200 titles of papers, 108 included a medial colon, too often separating an unintelligibility from its supposed explanation).

No fashion among compositionists is more irritating than loose talk about the "new paradigm" and the "revolution" in the teaching of writing. What some compositionists call their new paradigm is only an ill-defined conglomerate of practice and belief, not a coherent set of interdependent propositions susceptible of precise statement, and certainly not remotely comparable to "the seventeenth-century revolution" which Chomsky briefly characterizes as "a very sharp shift . . . from a kind of natural history perspective to a natural science perspective." No such fundamental change has taken place among compositionists, who in fact are engaged in a practical
activity where the wisdom of long and sensitive experience ("lore") is more valuable than wildly over-ambitious attempts to state "laws" that explain and even predict "the ways in which people do, teach, and learn writing" (Stephen North).

We comp teachers, in fact, because we have petty authority over a captive audience of younger victims, are constantly tempted to inflated estimates of our own importance. We like to think of ourselves as modern intellectuals, superior to benighted predecessors; we pick up odds and ends from other fields (too often, as Chomsky says, without real understanding) and toss them about to show that our work is "interdisciplinary"; and we claim to do far more than in fact we can for students, who commonly are brighter than we are. For these weaknesses, however painful they may be to confess, Chomsky's remarks on the making of intellectuals and on the nature of good teaching are excellent correctives.

Most of all, we may thank the JAC interviewers for mediating the most important of all educational experiences: the acquaintance with greatness. Optimists may dream that that acquaintance might inspire the boss compositionists to undertake a real revolution in the teaching of their subject: an end to the systemic exploitation of graduate students and contingent workers, the principal teachers of writing in U.S. colleges and universities.

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Kinneavy Award Winners Announced

The James L. Kinneavy Award for the most outstanding essay in volume 10 of JAC was awarded to Joy S. Ritchie for "Confronting the 'Essential' Problem: Reconnecting Feminist Theory and Pedagogy." Professor Ritchie received a cash award and a framed citation.

Richard M. Coe received an honorable mention for "Defining Rhetoric—and Us" and also received a framed citation.

The award is generously endowed by Professor Kinneavy, Blumberg Centennial Professor at the University of Texas, and was presented by him at the meeting of the Association of Teachers of Advanced Composition at the CCCC Convention in Boston.