The Annotated Space: A Dialogue on the Marriage of Composition and Literary Theories

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Professor Weft: Like train corridors, hallways are simply not conducive to gatherings; even the two of us have to jump left or right to let traffic go by. Conversations come and go; threads are lost, tangled. Is it only during lunchtime that we can spread the menu and attack issues as if they were a full course?

Professor Warp: But the hallway may be closer to the way I experience the world—in fragments. And your train metaphor is appropriate only in the United States, since they organize corridors differently in Europe and Asia.

Weft: I can only wish for further illumination, Professor Warp. I wonder if this urge to summarize and to place in context is a fin de siècle operation, or do we look for order under a timeless pressure to make logical all our accidental arrangements? As a teacher whose area is currently called rhetoric and composition, I have special reason to look to the big picture. We “comp specialists”—although that label always reminds me of workman’s comp, which may not be such an unhappy reference given the battering we sometimes take—are most concerned, according to catalogues and administrators, with writing. But English departments aren’t about writing. English isn’t even reading any more. The days of the exclusively male Arnoldian are gone. Belles-lettres are something practiced in romances. Close reading, and why not tip our hats to Brooks and Warren here, is terrific if you live in 1957. But we don’t. And you, sir, who had something to do with both Columbia and Berkeley, must agree with me when I say that the 1960s revolutionized the concept of English—as a discipline, language, career, and culture. What do you say—are we forever rid of the concept of reading-as-ethics?

Warp: Is that what existed before the 1960s? I will agree that a widespread intellectual acceptance of the textualization of reality emerged after that period, making the discipline of “English” more central in academe than it has ever been in the United States. In Europe, there was a greater continuity
between old-style philology and contemporary theory, with men like Auerbach, Curtius, Spitzer, and Bakhtin providing an important link for Americans. Curtius' use of topoi as a methodology for comparative literature, for example, raised cross-cultural questions that the deep readers ignored. I was at Columbia toward the end of the old order, however. In 1957, Lionel Trilling was still looking for the "right word" to describe Stephen Daedalus so he could "possess" the text. Columbia's academic goal was to produce "the whole man," but in Trilling's class, reading was expropriation. Colonize the text, we would say today, or be colonized by it.

Weft: Attention, Third World!

Warp: To an academic English teacher like Trilling, the issue was control, not ethics; and the path to control, to power over the text, was close reading. The authority supporting the power play, however, was a naive belief that the text contained a single meaning that the educated reader could mine.

Weft: Or the ironic, the ambiguous, resolved with the ingenuity reserved for professors of literature and their very best students. The good old days, when the sound of the university was the call of the elite.

Warp: For whom was it good?

Weft: Those who could afford it. Your "close reading" was a symptom of the humanities awash in the spirit of science, a way to unlock the substance of a work as if under a microscope; it was supposed to tell us very little about the world around the text. But it told us plenty about the cleverness of the professor, upon whose brains we patiently waited for that final twist of the focusing knob. Control: a term that has a nice laboratory sheen to it. Close readings existed more in those halcyon days of the mid-century than they do today; the public university has responded to cultural pressures to reflect in our curricula a little or a lot of everything; surveys have overtaken great authors. Great authors have become palimpsests. These palimpsests become the cultural function of thinking and dreaming about history. I know that my students keep telling me that hardly any of their teachers bother to look very closely at texts anymore. Texts are only traces of absent things; they retain a mystique certainly, but only as they represent social and historical forces. Somewhere in the revolution the author was executed, or at the very least drawn and quartered into the functions of class, gender, race, and early childhood. And here I shake my fist as a teacher of writing: Is it any wonder that a crisis in literary theory about "authority" should be seized upon by the unauthorized? The writing teachers grabbing for a piece of the pie?

Warp: Eliot (out of T.E. Hulme) was banishing the biographical author as early as "Tradition and the Individual Talent," or about the same time that
Freud (your reference to "early childhood") was making his first impact on American writers like Eugene O'Neill. The classic statement from the New Critics themselves, of course, is Wimsatt and Beardsley's "The Intentional Fallacy," which makes it clear that the initial beneficiary of the author's banishment was the text, not class, gender, or race—which were banished along with the author. It wasn't your "revolution." Don't you think that you are over-valuing the changes wrought during or, more likely, by the 1960s?

Weft: Just caught like a good guy in his own subject. But I wasn't banished; I just see that decade as especially violent to form, primarily that of institutional enrollment and the cultural ingredients of that enrollment. Changes were wrought by politicians and their constituents, not by the literary critic. It must be difficult to accept that the mission of the department should be redefined externally.

Warp: The shift from a romantic interest in author to the New Critic's privileging of the text and, therefore, of reading over writing has been going on all century. Deep reading is a necessary stage on the road to the textualization of reality. It's the poststructuralists who have been revolutionary by asserting that reading is actually writing.

Weft: That's because they've given up on language's ability to mean much of any one thing. No wonder they view composition as something undercultural, something that cannot possibly rise above mere function, mere form-filling. Can you imagine Paul de Man teaching freshman comp? The prospect is appalling—rightly so. The poststructuralists are as elitist as any Agrarian bunch of Brooks, Ransom, and Tate. The difference is that they deflect blame to language, and shrug. The 1960s were important to writing teachers because, I think, they were the years that forced us to see universities as places now opened to peoples and ideas without privilege. The battle or dialogue was joined then. Peter Elbow was at Evergreen State, cooking up a method of teaching writing explicitly connected to a new assumption of value, value which resides in individual experience. The expressive school (I have to mention Donald Murray above all) dedicated itself to drawing out writing from anyone willing to try. Value resided in experience and only needed to be drawn out.

Warp: The winner may have been the university . . .

Weft: Exactly. Those teachers who hold the center.

Warp: teaching those formerly excluded peoples the joys of elitism rather than the excluded peoples liberating the university. I think that you are overestimating the changes that have survived from the sixties. Without open admissions, universities are as elite as they ever were. But you were
making another point when I interrupted.

Weft: I just wanted to say that long before deconstruction, the first awakening of reception theory, especially Louise Rosenblatt's *Literature as Exploration* in 1938, suggested that reading was a performative act much like dance, using outlines, feelings, sightlines along which the reader-as-performer worked to reach an understanding of the text. This was a powerful moment, and writing teachers adapted this view of reading so that responding to texts, either "in the air" or on paper, constituted a real act of writing. I don't believe there was any such thing as a "comp specialist" before 1975 or so; the academic specialty arose out of a push for literacy, first proposed by the public, then taken up by the university. English departments would rather not see themselves as providing any particular service to other departments, so the job was designated "composition" and dumped rather quickly upon a few brave souls like Mina Shaughnessy and a cast of thousands of graduate assistants and other part-timers who have been exploited ever since. Enrollment for these composition specialists, I suspect, was, in fact, enlistment—an army of difference, of diffusion, of a multiethnic charge that could be wielded against the unambiguously efforts of literary theorists (a generation earlier) who wished to conserve meaning. Students may have become pawns in an overwhelmingly rapid series of divisions in the field. The expressive school of composition instruction was challenged by a transactional one, which asked, Don't we want all of this writing to really get some work done?, who were in turn challenged by the social epistemologists, who asked, Why can't we learn and teach together as a writing community? The field became rather roughly broken up into fields, and we haven't even dealt with those ancients, young and old, who prefer to call themselves teachers of rhetoric.

Warp: In education, as in social psychology, there is no middle term between survival and decadence.

Weft: How about "desperation"?

Warp: Good. Or just "despair." Louise Rosenblatt was a minority woman. Twenty-five years after your egalitarian revolution, minority women still don't teach in your university. City College in the 1930s is more like your ideal than today's state university, with its white male faculty and the resurgence of bigotry and especially sexism.

Weft: Your siren song of the despairing white liberal male is tempting, Professor Warp, but we have to move on to the response to that siren song; when expressive rhetoric caught on in the 1960s, the implication was, "Write your own novel, kids; it ain't that difficult. It means honesty, detail, and righteous experience." It seems to me that this was good. What do you think? Were writing teachers correct—or well-meaning (putting aside the specter of
survival)—to transmogrify a romantic principle for the sake of an emerging generation? Or was this a sappy, indulgent methodology that led to a million worthless essays about love and hate?

**Warp:** Of course. An emphasis on process and empowerment always leads to a million worthless products. But if you truly value empowerment, the product doesn't matter.

**Weft:** Objection. Doesn’t matter in the short run.

**Warp:** No, doesn’t matter at all. Worrying about product always leads to worrying about excellence, which is elitist according to you. Where Elbow, Murray, and the rest have gone wrong is to imply (or allow their followers to imply) that their methods sneak improving the product into the classroom by the back door. We are talking about values here, not teaching methods. You began this exercise by talking about our influence on society. If all we want are articulate citizens, then we should send our students to drama and speech classes. If (and here the 1960s are very relevant) we want students who are “together,” then focus on empowerment and on spirituality. If you want good writing, you need to produce good readers and clear thinkers. Your talk earlier of reading as performance takes us awfully close to Stanley Fish’s moment of outrageousness when he claimed that critics no longer had to be right, only interesting. Fish recanted, of course, but explication, especially in class, is always performance.

**Weft:** “Excellence” is the kind of term universities use to advertise themselves and attract big contributions from alumni—a meaningless term in the context of expressive rhetoric and my suggestions that “product” is not words on the page but a gain in confidence, direction, articulation. In short, attitude. Excellence is just another word for exclusion. As for Fish, he always recants (which is a performer’s right, I suppose), a convenient self-mockery that we will not allow our students.

**Warp:** What do you mean, “we”?

**Weft:** Departments, virtually without exception, will not allow students, under any circumstances, to make fun of its own demands. Speaking of demands, I will note that your words “good” and “clear” are just the kinds of terms that drive students absolutely batty, since these terms vary in meaning semester to semester, according to their teachers (and in some cases are never fully explained). What I meant by “good” was the way the process approach facilitates articulation: “Listen to what happened to me.” The mistake that many writing teachers made was leaving it at that, as if telling stories in print has any value in and of itself. It doesn’t, but only if seen as part of a languaging continuum—integrating modes and contexts of expression.
I'll drop a quick definition of literacy in at this point from James Agee: Literacy is saying what you mean and, before and after that, knowing what you mean. I don't think even the most misty-eyed of expressivists would say that self-discovery in writing has much to do with university curricula these days. As in the literature class, to respond to reading is not interesting in itself, or is it? Am I right in pointing us (you with the filled anthology, me with the blank themebook) toward a common goal? It is power, isn't it—a kind of learning associated with language-use? I am being fair to other composition specialists, I believe, in saying that we want to turn language back upon itself; this is the social-epistemic as James Berlin has defined it.

**Warp:** I'll pass on "languaging continuum," but only because there are other more important issues here. You want to move towards the social morality of teaching, but your statement about "the filled anthology" and "the blank themebook" sends me in another direction altogether. Thanks to xerox machines, the anthology can be recreated every semester, legally or otherwise. Canon formation is instant. If we ever move to on-line textbooks, tailoring the anthology for the actual students in the class becomes possible. As the events in China during May and June 1989 indicate, power today depends on instant information that can be passed around the world at the speed of light. Passing a diskette back and forth may be more "natural" than passing manuscripts that have to be retyped, and so on, but it is far less empowering than exchanges on electronic mail would be. Our dialogue may be more open-ended than the format of a linear essay is (with the tendency of a linear essay to emulate Dr. Johnson arguing coercively to win), but it is rigid compared to a hypertext essay that substitutes the complexity of various levels of branching for the misleading simplicity of the five-act essay.

**Weft:** To marry technology and learning as closely as you have here is to exclude much of the world from its possibilities. Cynthia Selfe, among others, sees computers, for example, as facilitators, not originators, of the power to write.

**Warp:** But the world wants that technology, and teachers have always "talked" by writing. We now have journals on-line and electronic newsgroups that let me "talk" to colleagues all around the world. I look toward a future that may never come into being because its technology may have already been undone by the thoughtless exhaustion of our natural resources. You look to a past that artificially begins when composition theory aligns itself with a series of sociological and psychological movements of the 1960s, marries it to classical rhetoric, and tries to declare the product of that marriage a new discipline. Of course self-interest is involved.

**Weft:** You keep putting me in that tie-dyed tee-shirt.
**Warp:** And you insist on labelling everything I say elitist; you fear technology; you emphasize empowerment. So if tee-shirt fits, wear it.

**Weft:** It's not that I fear technology. I fear its effect—an effect similar to that prior to the distribution of reading skills in the nineteenth century. The politics surrounding the distribution of this technology is a little scary; here in our own state, as you know, the schools in middle-class districts have banks of IBMs; the poor schools drag out the Smith-Coronas.

**Warp:** Meanwhile, you're trying to make me a straw man on the right so you can claim the center. Keep the center. I don't want it.

**Weft:** You are a curiously substantial straw man. And if you want, I'll stand next to you. How can you claim to give up power if you deny having it in the first place?

**Warp:** Your friends in composition theory want to be the new orthodoxy.

**Weft:** So what if I accept the charge of self-interest? We need an orthodoxy. We need it in order to take the next step away from it, to new positions. There has to be a center, a starting place. That is the orthodoxy of composition studies, and of literary studies as well. The orthodoxy can be expressed this way: Make these people better, stronger, able to think for themselves, more complete, assist them in achieving selfhood. These specifications arise from a certain liberal concept of education. But this is the writing teacher in me, looking to de-center power (away from the teacher) as a prelude to relocating power in the novice. Am I wrong, or isn't literary theory also caught up in modes of reading that lead to moral education?

**Warp:** What do you mean by "stronger" or "better" (they seem as vague to me as "good writing" did to you) or by moral education?

**Weft:** I'm thinking of feminist, Afro-American, and Marxist theories of reading, all of them providing avenues for variant subjects, for special interests. The reader is an ideal, if I understand the Frankfurt school, Iser especially, which motivates a liberal imagination. This imagination activates the reader into a writerly mode. The reader signifies, encodes the text as if it were a job application with blanks. The job being applied for here, according to composition specialists, is selfhood. But many literary theorists have another view of this kind of rampant subjectivism, especially when this writerly mode is not politically specific—that is, when it is not hiding behind the banner of this or that camp of the oppressed, the disenfranchised. Why is this view negative? A little knowledge is dangerous, but is a little private power dangerous as well?
**Warp:** You know the answer yourself. Theoretically, structuralists and poststructuralists alike do not use the same definition of selfhood that liberal educationists use. Rejecting the essentially American and psychological notion that our selves are autonomous entities, there to be "found," they move toward two extremes. The liberals among them argue that our selves are social constructs, products of a reality that we help create (we find ourselves in an already written text but, like this exercise, we are allowed to annotate and edit; see Walter Benn Michaels out of Peirce). The conservatives argue that we are texts fully written by forces beyond us—and yes, I'm calling Foucault a conservative in this context. Yet, as Katharine Hume has observed, "In theory, individuality is problematic on philosophical, psychological, and sociological grounds, but in practice this seldom prevents a member of the human species from trying to save his or her own skin." Self-interest again.

**Weft:** You've left me hanging here. Would "identity" be more satisfactory than "self"? Can't identity be just as much a process of writing as it is of reading?

**Warp:** The problem is the same.

**Weft:** I like David Bleich's approach to the self, or finding the self. We know ourselves, he says, only in the way others do. In other words, we take on identity based on what others think of us. This is the double perspective: what do I look like, and how do I look? Writing allows for this perspective to be expressed and investigated, with or without the mediation of literary texts. How can we know ourselves? Here's another. This is Raymond Williams' second definition of culture: self-signification. Writing is a large part of that signification; we comp specialists believe that. The elements of that writing must encompass not only literary art but the world as text. Accepting the larger view for a minute, we see that we in our department, as sprawling as it is, as many bailiwicks as we can discover among us, are neither the font nor the feet of culture. We are, of course, intimately involved in shaping that culture, but perhaps no more or less than, say, Proctor and Gamble, Time Magazine, MTV, or the Government Printing Office. I know that both writing and literary theories have embraced cultural studies partly because of its ethnomethodology: specific moments, real contexts, the prime individual. Writing theory's adherence to an agenda of self-discovery followed by social interaction, and literary theory's interest in the linguistic constitution of this world, and this world, and this world. What I don't know is the outcome of such a trope to the carnival. If we stay too long at the fair, does a department of English just become a State Office of Reading and Writing, no more or less important than public service announcements?
**Warp:** Since I mentioned him, let me push him a little further while the pizza lasts. Foucault would argue that we are already a State Office, in spite of our illusions of freedom. I was amazed at how little interference I got from the State Department and the U.S.I.A. when I was a Fulbright lecturer in China. I finally realized that they didn't need to interfere. Even the most negative, anti-Reagan literature teacher was a missionary *malgré lui.* No matter how critical my words were, my actual day-to-day behavior was an argument for "the American way of life," a discourse that included my opposition to it within itself. American culture of the 1960s, represented by the anarchic freedom of dress and rock music, has had a greater influence on the changes in Eastern Europe than the American political or economic system.

**Weft:** And none of that has anything to do with literature, but with language and signs. Thanks.

**Warp:** Would you thank me if I pushed further in Jameson's direction and argued that it's all a manifestation of Late Capitalism? Or that American sixties culture is McDonald's as well as tofu? I have other plans, however. The American university system, in spite of the liberal politics of the average faculty member, is the central institution for inculcating the dominant discourse—control by hegemony (in Gramsci's fullest sense) rather than by coercion. And go ask minorities and woman about their liberal colleagues' tenure policies.

**Weft:** Hence, I suppose, in continental circles the interest in semiotics and film, fashion, photography, and so on. Those texts do not emanate from the university, nor do they seem particularly guarded or espoused by professors. Departments such as ours worry at these texts, but they remain on the margin—a far cry from their centrality, as you say, in real revolutions. We have a common reason at least to console each other: culture does see us still as a real place and not yet an electronic construct. And isn't this a key to our current theories' potential match? They share an identical premise, Sapir's: language constitutes reality. Constitutes: present tense. For the writing teacher: process. For the reading teacher: what, narrative?

**Warp:** We're back to my view of the poststructuralists. Accept that language constitutes reality and reading becomes writing—annotations of the secondary space provided by absent auteurs. Since reading teachers still dominate their classrooms, our student papers become records of their (mis)reading of our writing of the texts that have chosen us as readers.

**Weft:** A lovely knotting of becoming! But even this poetic rendering of the system will not work with many students out there.

**Warp:** I wasn't being poetic. I'm just describing what I see every semester.
Weft: And I wasn't being cynical.

Warp: But you seem to be moving in a more apocalyptic direction.

Weft: Only if the institutional "You and I" feel threatened by multiplicity. We've both heard the spoken or unspoken question that hovers over many of our classes. It is, What does this have to do with anything? Gerald Graff would reply that it may have nothing to do with anything unless we make our theories explicit, both to ourselves and our students. Only then can a gestalt occur, in which our individual enterprises are connected or arranged in a field of other enterprises having to do with the nature and power of language. Can we at least tell ourselves and our students this: that both literary and composition theories take as given this constituting of reality, and that the representing of this reality takes reciprocal forms, one containing an orthographic element, the other not?

Warp: Sure, but they won't believe us.

Weft: If we offer them the keys to the kingdom, will they?

Warp: In what department are the keys this week? My students still believe that empowerment means a house and a car. Literature teachers have known for a long time that our general education students will do whatever they have to do in order to achieve a grade consistent with their overall academic plans. Writing teachers, buoyed by composition theories that talk about empowerment, are beginning to feel the frustration of dealing with students who have thought the issue over and are still more interested in correct writing than empowerment.

Weft: I'm not sure your easy division of persons into teachers of literature or writing is enough; the two of us, and a few million more, might object to this simplification. But your older, wiser literature teacher has, in other words, become convinced of his or her own disposability. Teachers who like peer-response groups probably like the idea, too, but at the heart of your response is a skepticism directed at all the players—and at the game, for that matter. The pragmatics of university life, in other words, do not have much to do with learning, unless the term is taken to mean form, procedure, and information. The passivity we all encounter in the classroom poisons any ideal we may have of the "empowered student," unless we take another look at that fatal buzzword empowerment. For composition theory it has been superseded by literacy, I believe. To be heard, understood, believed—that's power. Rather like, I might venture, a great text.

Warp: You're right about my general skepticism. I share the sentiments behind Edward Said's shrill attack on the academy as a place where literary Marxists work in their offices while the homeless hover over subway vents.
Weft: Composition theory suggests that the homeless can rescue theory from theorists. The expertise that Ann Berthoff describes so cogently as the mind's ability to "form/think/write" is the expertise of our natures. We make order out of disorder using language as our tool. Berthoff can demonstrate this theory through practice.

Warp: Then composition theory takes itself a lot more seriously than even I thought it did—if, that is, a theory without living, breathing, essentially white male theorists can suggest anything.

Weft: Theory does not live and breathe. Teachers do, however, when giving of themselves those things they believe in. One of those beliefs is that literacy matters, matters to the core of our existence today. If that sounds as though I am taking things too seriously, I have no explanation. I would suggest a quiet corner and a copy of Mike Rose's Lives on the Boundary.

Warp: In the academy, empowerment has traditionally meant the ability to choose. For writers, it means knowing what the conventions are, knowing when they are conventionally used, and being able to choose what is appropriate (or inappropriate) in a given situation for a given audience. Yes, rhetoric. For readers, it means being able to escape the tyranny of the writer—in other words, recognize and reject this rhetoric—and to understand a text in terms external to that text. I've been battling for almost twenty years with Pynchon's rhetorical constitution of reality in Gravity's Rainbow. I am sympathetic to various poststructuralisms because they give me those external terms with which I may escape the novel. In a literature class, it means the ability to construe a text from a series of critical approaches, not just one. In any of these contexts, correctness cannot be empowerment because choice is limited to the one convention or approach that is determined by some external authority—a political determination. Fish's interpretive community is rarely constituted democratically.

Weft: You have described, beautifully, what Shor calls "critical literacy," but with one important difference: your adherence to something called "literature" as being something more than "text." "Leave your any-old texts at the door, stranger; this here room's for literature." I detect not a political determination of interpretive correctness here, but something even more of a premise—a political determination of textual value. The teacher is a body politic of one, unfortunately.

Warp: Bull. I talk about "literature" because that's the role I've been assigned in this dialogue. In fact, I've been arguing that text is a much larger category than literature. As for politics, every time you make up a syllabus you've made a "political determination of textual value" because you've chosen between texts. The only way our students may have to resist our "body
politic of one" is not to read those texts or to reject those texts. That's guerilla action, not empowerment.

**Weft:** Writing, of course, is resistance. To "not read" or "to reject" suggests a class action of the unwashed and illiterate.

**Warp:** And the homeless. Pynchon's preterit still don't go to our universities. Even when we choose "texts they will enjoy reading," they reject us because any text on a syllabus, from Homer to science-fiction, takes its character from its presence on the syllabus rather than from the words on its pages.

**Weft:** It's only a syllabus; we all sift through it, finding our own valued texts. That's your history, and my history. Isn't that okay?

**Warp:** It's not okay because you're imposing your personal syllabus on students twenty years your junior who don't have your history. But there may be no alternative, unless we join Allan Bloom in his nostalgia for Chicago's Great Books and the concept of a dominant culture that can be taught. You began by dismissing Arnoldian man, but the charter of our own university quotes Arnold on the "best" that has been thought and written. Have the changes you observe really occurred "out there" or only within the corridors you tend to overvalue?

**Weft:** I'll answer this way, and put out on the table beside my last slice of pizza two definitions of empowerment which, I think, cover the term pretty well as it applies to writing. They arise out of competing rhetorics already mentioned: the expressivists would consider "power" in writing the ability to reach an audience of undetermined identity with determined subjectivity—that is, voice, pathos, and point of view. Transactionalists—or, in more recently manufactured English, social-epistemists—view empowerment as a political gain achieved through language-use in particular contexts. The latter group may be irritated by my lumping them in with transactionalists, but the outcome is the same, if methods (the former is imperial, the second democratic) are not. I am, you might guess, much more in sympathy with the latter definition. At least around our department I am; every two weeks I get a check from the state and I'm reminded who I'm working for. The former definition describes a belletristic universe, while the second comes much closer to fitting writing instruction into institutional frameworks, of which you and I are mere grains. For the social epistemic group, what matters is figuring out what institutions such as governmental bodies, corporations, communities, even families want or need, and then working through a sense of community to construct effective and honest responses.

**Warp:** What you call self-expressive writing grows out of a post-Cartesian disbelief in the knowability of the external world. Such writing isn't express-
ing the self, it is creating it and re-creating it every time the individual writes. Most of us call that creation discovery, as if the self had existed before the writing. Let me explain. The position I am moving toward conceives of what we call the self and the world as fictions. At the level of perception, where most of us spend most of our lives, those fictions seem solid and real, especially because they reinforce one another more often than they conflict. Our sense of identity is a fiction of continuity that we impose on a series of discrete, historical selves. It seems continuous the way a motion picture seems continuous: as an illusion of perception. In American culture, the inability to impose continuity is considered a personality disorder because American identity is grounded on (authorized by) a belief in the self as a transcendental presence. My position does not require that I throw out rhetoric. Quite the contrary, as I thought I was stating here. What it requires is that we in fact see rhetoric as performative—but a performance that creates (self, identity, reality), not one that discovers. For the American deconstructionists, there is only self-expression.

Weft: Somehow I can't believe that students will believe this of you any more readily than the rather modest suggestion that they might enjoy reading Huckleberry Finn, or that writing two pages on chimney symbolism in Melville is creative.

Warp: No, they won't believe me. And year by year they become more nervous around Huckleberry Finn because the word nigger appears so often.

Weft: Whether you call it creative or I call it “theme in literature” writing, my doubts about the relevance of self-expression in writing have pushed me away from seeing power in the subject, either self or literary text, and instead in the social context. And here you see my dismay with the conventional literary canon. Text becomes the data-of-moment. Of course, school is bitterly social, but I don't refer to that context. I refer to streets, offices, hallways, playing fields, voting booths, job centers, farms, and so on. And this is my moment to return to your prescient opposition of correctness and empowerment. Your opposing the terms indicates to me that you think the rugged individualism of most writing instruction is also a liberal humanism directed, with proper tempering, at the ignorant savages we call freshmen. If you do think this, I am in agreement, and we should go have a drink over it. But in the best world of transactional rhetoric, correctness is empowerment. Correctness arises from those formal pressures that any well-defined context of language-use demands. “Incredible,” some say. “We are returning to the themebook, the five-paragraph essay, and a point off for each misspelled word.” A modern priest of the social-epistemic oracle, James Berlin for example, would say, “Not quite. Only if it matters.”
**Warp:** That's quite a speech. You've made the same move that the "new historicists" have made. They agree that the self is created but assume that it was created by a socio-economic situation rather than in a socio-economic situation. But I have to agree with those approaches based on Peirce that see us changing and rebuilding the context into which we are born and with which we continue interacting throughout our lives. We are as much responsible for that context as it is for us. And the ruling party (economic class, generation of critics, leading composition theorists) always determines what is correct. The five-paragraph essay is a convenient tool created by people; it does not exist in nature. It works if you value a certain kind of lucidity, a certain kind of logic that dominates academic institutions.

**Weft:** Correctness is not only tied to conventions, of course, but to content as well. For the literature teacher, James and Faulkner are correct; Dreiser and Steinbeck are not. Whatever else we may say about E.D. Hirsch, we should give him credit for recognizing that disciplines have a right to their own identity-via-content. Indeed, as Robinson, Graff, Bleich and others insist, we cannot replace one definition of academic literacy with another, even on the scale of a university campus. Literacy can only be defined with great care and specificity. It is a concept that binds us into an English department, I believe, but can we even agree on a definition? Or should we even try?

**Warp:** You are the expert on discourse theory.

**Weft:** Thank you. I'll pay the check.

**Warp:** A discourse is constituted by both form and content, not just content. Our old friend the five-paragraph essay, for example, is a form that trains us in arguing to win, not abstract and objective "logic." Don't get me wrong. A discipline is entitled to its own jargon as well as its own content, since the jargon defines the style and aesthetic of the discipline. Even you and I have clashed in this interchange over what I, speaking as a literature person, not as the Wise Old Professor, condemn as your composition theory neologisms. My own undergraduate experience was at Columbia, a school committed to what was once known as "general education," committed to a definition of literacy that was appropriate for all educated human beings. At most places, those core requirements were tossed out of the window during the 1960s.

**Weft:** I detect another shot at the 1960s here, but I'll turn the other cheek and say that the human race has always considered the Ivy League a friendly planet.

**Warp:** Note that the Ivy League has rarely considered Columbia part of the same club as Harvard, Yale, and Princeton. Too many Jews in the fifties; too many Chinese now. Get me a little drunker and I'll tell you about my assault on the Ivy League.
Weft: I thought that was root beer. As for assaulting the Ivy League, we writing teachers have been considering it for years.

Warp: You have been beating so long at the rotting doors of traditional English departments that you haven't noticed how respectable you've become yourselves, and attention to writing-across-the-curriculum has created more monsters of power within the academic system than Ivy League English teachers ever dreamed of.

Weft: Unfortunately, yes—but not in practice, only in regulation. To get back to the weighty problem at hand, I am hung up on a sort of meta-reception theory. I am looking for and trying to build a consistent vision of English studies. Am I simply projecting an internal search for identity upon the field? You know my history. I prefer to see literary theory as a parallel text to criticism, which is a parallel text to literature, which is a parallel text to speech, which is parallel to rhetoric. If we braid these, and we do all the time, composition theory (or what I would like to call "eloquence" at times, or rhetoric) emerges like a figure in the weave, peeping out, wavering uncertainly as a function of the interaction of strands. This is my private metaphor, now public, with perhaps little use-value other than to provide a testing ground for the rest of us. It has no discursive space of its own; but neither now does literature, except for those who think the latter is an objective category.

Warp: I like your braid metaphor, but let me be consistent and argue that "objective category" is a political category, determined, like correctness, by the dominant discourse. The category becomes objective once it is imposed on a group of categorizers, but it remains arbitrary. Am I permitted a story?

Weft: If you don't mention the Ivy League.

Warp: I was answering questions after delivering a lecture on theory at Sichuan University in Chengdu, PRC. The teachers and graduate students in the audience were finding my dismissal of "objective" difficult to understand so, before God and everyone, I created a new theory of literature. A work was literary, I posited, if it contained a description of shirt sleeves. The work was good if the sleeves were short, bad if the sleeves were long, and ambiguous if long sleeves were rolled up. My theory becomes objective the minute it is taught.

Weft: But only if they believe you, and I thought you said students don't believe a word you say.

Warp: They don't, but it's also my point that they pretend they do in order to get a good grade. Two readers exposed to the theory at dozens of removes from me and from each other, can read the same text and come to the same determination of its literariness and its quality.
Weft: I would agree that the chance exists, but not the probability. You are describing, I think, the spiral of discourse, overlaid with Fish's relativistic interpretive community. We remain ambiguous—or questioning, to put a positive spin on that spiral.

Warp: As usual.

Weft: Excelsior! We know that we never perform in a vacuum, no matter how unmoved our students, yet behind our actions there must be an informing, guiding theory.

Warp: Mine, in practice, has always been, "Improvise!"

Weft: This is mine. Literacy, as Brian Street asserts, should be descriptive, not prescriptive, and it should arise out of the discourses we want to or must inhabit. Literacy becomes a more accurate term for what I (or any of us) care about, embedded in a multitude of discursive practices, the latter meaning conversation, dialogue, interaction, essay, transaction, negotiation, xerography, letter, photograph, tale, orality, performance, theatre, debate, and the novel and the poem. To be literate is to find meanings and to express those meanings. These practices may be explored, experienced, analyzed, and changed by discoursers whose lives are influenced by some or all of this discourse. Composition as a term may go the way of elocution, into the Victorian toilet, and be replaced by something better; whatever it is, I hope it allows for that shapeshifting in the linguistic carpet. To change one's shape—that is to be literate. And as for literary theory, can we think of something better, and so braid our enterprises that much closer?

Warp: There are only fictions, whether we recognize them as such or not. All our academic disciplines are specific fictions; what we call comprehensive English departments deal with the theory of fiction itself. We teach our students how to understand fictions and how to make them. In my most comprehensively colonial moods, like the Masters of Theory, I prefer to see reading and writing, not literature and composition—only in these moods, reading encompasses all understanding and writing encompasses all making. Who's driving?

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