After Progressivism:
Modern Composition, Institutional Service, and Cultural Studies

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Education in America, especially literacy education, has always been marked by a peculiar faith in social progress. From the establishment of the first universities in the New World with the mission to build an American New Jerusalem, to the Whitmanian determination to create a wholly literate and enlightened populace to oversee the functioning of an idealized democracy of intellectual and social equals, to the technocratic dream behind the founding of the “new university” at the turn of the century which looked toward the erection of a self-evidently fair and rational “meritocracy” administered by benign Science, to (especially important for modern composition as a university discipline) the Cold War imperative for “Space Age” national “advancement” in education, Americans have regarded the schools as perhaps the most important agents in fulfilling a whole host of manifest destinies. In The Composing Process of Twelfth Graders, Janet Emig bears witness to the implication of English teachers in this sense of mission when she quips of the five-paragraph theme—which she identifies as a kind of pedagogical monolith of the American secondary-school, “so indigenously American that it might be called the Fifty-Star Theme”—that its very discussion should invoke echoes of “Kate Smith singing ‘God Bless America’ or the piccolo obligato from ‘The Stars and Stripes Forever’” (97). Indeed, it is hard to overestimate the power and regularity with which such echoes have informed generations of dutifully committed teachers of that formula and a host of other similar formulas—teachers placed by proverb in the very “trenches” of the “fight” for progress, whose work needed always (and still needs, it seems) to be underwritten by just such a compelling sense of purpose in order to alleviate its well-documented laboriousness.1 In the light of such purpose, service in the institution—a vocation, we should note, clearly inscribed in and reinforced by composition’s powerful institutional gendering as something like housewife/schoolmarm in the male-dominated English department—by simple immediate extension works to represent service in the progress of the social organism as a whole.
And yet as composition struggled to begin to come of age as a self-conscious academic discipline in the late 1960s and early 1970s, it seemed anxious to mark itself a certain distance, even if sometimes somewhat tentatively, from this still largely intact sense of the educational institution as enrolled in some greater mission of social progress, and especially from the sense of its own institutional service as part of that mission. And since then, in fact, as the first waves of exhilaration over modern composition's then newfound, Sputnik-inspired institutional legitimacy finally began to flatten out, it has been fashionable for self-conscious teachers of writing to show a "healthy" cynicism about, sometimes even disdain for, composition's role as an institutional servant, or at least about the ends toward which that service has typically been directed. Even, say, since James Britton and the "growth model" theorists began in the middle and late sixties to challenge the traditional American grammarian's emphasis on propriety—along, at least implicitly, with its corollary ethic of good citizenship (an ethic which served to ally that tradition of grammatical propriety powerfully to the new institutional forces of cognitivism and classical rhetoric through their respective associations with technocratic first-citizen science on the one hand and the very roots of Western civicism on the other)—it seems to me that it has been part of the discipline's set of implicit agreements, only seldom expressed openly, that "compositionists" need to qualify their presumed complicity with the goals of the general university community in order to take themselves seriously as practicing intellectuals. Those goals, that is, were coming to be implicated more and more frequently, and on occasion even quite explicitly, in what Richard Ohmann, for example, began calling "the military-industrial complex" in an indictment of conventional writing instruction as crudely transparent "rhetoric for the meritocracy" (93, 97).

Of course, the exercise of this sort of obligatory qualification has not been taken up monolithically in every disciplinary quarter. One need look no further than Carnegie-Mellon's continued success conducting federally-funded empirical research in cognitive psychology—as well as the number of dissertations and published papers invested each year in Carnegie-Mellon-style scientism—to see that the matrix of power relations behind modern composition's original institutional legitimation which had begun to crystalize even in the early 1960s still exists and still generates a network of negotiable institutional currencies. But it seems to me that a clearly recognizable strain of composition scholarship, growing in the 1970s and 1980s all the time more definitive of the disciplinary mainstream, trades much on the signs of its often only partially articulated opposition to this matrix. Literacy-for-the-war-effort-style social utility has long since been confronted by a competing disciplinary currency, so that by and large institutional legitimacy has been defined increasingly in the last twenty years in very different terms, even when unconsciously or half-consciously. That is, the traditional American progressivist sense of education in the service of highly
generalized social goals—through which, as I have suggested, the American academy has traditionally drawn its cultural power—can be seen to have reached a certain frenzied apogee in the defense department’s attempted commandeering of the literary academy in the 1960s. But after the waning of general enthusiasm over this recognition and embrace by the educational and social establishment sometime in the late sixties and early seventies, it became increasingly difficult, and remains difficult, to mark one’s professional seriousness in composition studies without demonstrating some form of antagonism to one or another of those ostensibly universal social goals, or at the very least without cultivating a certain cynical self-consciousness about enlistment in their service.

In fact, it seems to me that this impulse can be seen to have manifested itself to some degree or another in a remarkable share of the different agendas brought to composition studies over the last twenty-five years (after the formative big three scientisms, that is, of cognitive psychology, classical rhetoric, and post-Chomskyan linguistics)—though this is a manifestation easily overlooked, from within the climate of recent composition scholarship. Such scholarship, that is, has often been anxious in its admirable enthusiasm for a heightened intellectual rigor in composition to dismiss much of this work (which admittedly can now be seen as significantly reactionary) without, nonetheless, having sufficiently acknowledged its contexts and purposes. It should not be difficult to recognize the brashly anti-grammar-and-style “vitalists” of the early 1970s, for instance, as significantly formed by radical anti-service and anti-establishment inclinations, such vitalism’s now potentially offensive and much-critiqued romance of the autonomous creative individual notwithstanding. As spirited proponents of an “authentic voice,” such vitalists saw literacy as the key much rather to a heightened humanity than to any sort of conventional civic propriety and complained that the mechanized bureaucracy of the university and the stifling conventionality of traditional prescriptive “English” instruction stunted their students’ real intellectual development. Ken Macrorie’s notorious comma-splice-eliminating, five-paragraph-theme-manufacturing composition monster, “Engfish,” a sort of a Nurse Ratchett for the academy, effectively blanched and regularized its healthily spirited and idiosyncratic university students into proper and insipid automatons exactly suitable for the purposes of domination by the boorish and sometimes brutally exploitive powers that be (like the anti-Civil-Rights racists Macrorie continually chides, or the university president who ruthlessly squashes a student protest in the book’s prologue). In this way, Macrorie clearly connects service in the traditional academy with the larger goals of a repressive culture, effectively implicating them both, in fact, in a “conspiracy of silence” carried out simultaneously against both pre-Civil-Rights “blacks” and the “slaves in my classes” (54). Expressivist-affiliated scholars like Anne Berthoff and James Miller, whose work had influence not only on the process, revision, and
group-work movements but also on the imperative for connecting writing to "critical thinking," either ignored or openly disavowed the set of sciences (cognitivism, empirical research, transformational grammar, structuralist linguistics) that had been used to authenticate composition's practical usefulness in something like "the real world." And this was true even when the expressivists would embrace science as an "abstract" principle, separate as much as possible from the smack of such real-world pragmatism carried by science's association with technology (as Berthoff herself does with her unswerving faith in the composing process as a sort of holistic manifestation of a scientistic natural order⁶). In "The Problem of Problem-Solving," her much-cited attack on Janice Lauer's call for the use of cognitive psychology in composition research, Berthoff openly berates those she calls "the technologists of learning" for pedagogical and scholarly "approaches which are politically not above suspicion," pointing with great censure to the traditional "alliance between the needs of commercial interests and what the American public schools offer" (237, 239). And old-guard literary-trained compositionists like W. Ross Winterowd, whose orientation in rhetoric served as a kind of home base from which to write on composition impulses as diverse as speech-act theory, discourse analysis, and invention heuristics—while still convinced of composition's social utility in a conventional way ("all of my somber ... moralizing about commitment, authority, and service" [335])—could still be seen to rail (both openly and implicitly by way of a self-consciously elegant, literary prose style) against the simplicity and theoretical naivete of the volumes of practical advice on writing and teaching writing that served to demonstrate that utility: "an endless string of pedagogical tips: teaching without teachers; teaching with tape recorders; teaching writing with or without writing; teaching writing through immersion in TV game shows; teaching games through an immersion in writing; infinite variations on the touchy-smelly-looky-listeny-writey model" 329).

Even if composition could still perform an indispensable service to the university community, such scholars decided, nearsighted allegiance to the performance of that service had resulted in a shameless anti-intellectualism. So by the middle seventies (though it's easily forgotten lately) vanguard composition scholarship had settled into an orthodoxy of what might be called controlled institutional dissent—or at least a measured rejection of the old earmarks of composition's institutional function—clear enough, though often only indirectly expressed: an at least vague sense of dissatisfaction with the writing teacher's traditional role in the institution became an important badge of pedagogical and scholarly purposefulness. Even a book as soberly scientistic in tone and as invested in the utility of training in all the old institutional proprieties that defined "acceptable" prose as Mina Shaughnessy's Errors and Expectations had by 1977 developed a sophisticated squeamishness about the suggestion carried by such proprieties of an uncritical alliance with the implied goals of the institution. Shaughnessy carefully
marks her reservations about those goals, conceding almost obligatorily:

When one considers the damage that has been done to students in the name of correct writing, this effort to redefine error so as to exclude most of the forms that give students trouble in school and to assert the legitimacy of other kinds of English is understandable. Doubtless it is part of a much vaster thrust within this society not only to reduce the penalties for being culturally different but to be enriched by that diversity. (9)

Without question, then, a certain smack of unholiness began to pervade the original founding alliance—powerfully seductive to the new compositionist struggling to take him or herself seriously in the 1960s—between composition as an independent discipline and its surrounding academic and social institutions.

And of course, more recent expressions of composition's frustration with and uneasiness about this alliance, like perhaps most notably Patricia Bizzell's groundbreaking work in such essays as "Cognition, Convention, and Certainty" and "What Happens When Basic Writers Come to College?" or James Berlin's now almost standard "Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Class"—fueled by the explosion of structuralism and sign theory into the contemporary radicalisms of knowledge/power relations and ideological critique—are the direct heirs to this general anti-service impulse, though they are clearly far more explicit, emphatic, and incisive about the dangers of composition's traditional role as institutional and social servant, as well as about the insidious process by which composition has been interpellated as such a servant. They worry openly about the indoctrination of students into the socially oppressive terms of traditional academic discourse, about how to enable students to become "resisting, negotiating subjects within positions of power in the dominant culture" (Berlin, "Contemporary" 50) and about "the school's function as an agent of cultural hegemony" (Bizzell, "Cognition" 237). And of course they have even been—quite rightly, if on occasion somewhat nearsightedly—vocal in their insistent dissatisfaction with the limits of the work of their anti-service predecessors, whose pedagogies, they point out, were always ultimately disabled by an insufficient understanding of the ideological constructedness of language and the writing subject. The battle-lines, then, have emerged even more clearly under the influence of "cultural studies": there is nothing indirect about the way this new generation of compositionists has announced its rejection of old-style institutional service, in which (in its crudest form) teaching students clarity and grammatical correctness would, it was supposed, somehow manifest itself unproblematically in the good of the social organism as a whole. Berlin and Bizzell—along now to some degree or other with a whole range of different figures from John Schilb to Henry Giroux to Victor Vitanza to Linda Brodkey to Charles Schuster—have taken up composition's post-Sputnik-era tradition of submerged anti-establishmentarianism and made its active, self-conscious articulation the cornerstone of new cultural-studies-informed pedagogies.
Indeed, it is difficult at this moment in the development of the discipline not to read the history of modern composition as the story, carried out across all composition’s major phases in the last twenty years, of a continual evolution ever closer to a refined and effective critical rejection of the institutional and social role concretized for it in the 1960s, a narrative having come to its conclusion in some sense with cultural studies’ recent foregrounding of politics in the academy. Composition, it seems, has finally begun to throw off the oppressive yoke of its tangled institutional archaeology (through which, as we have seen, it always rooted and rerooted itself in the grand American myth of progress and service) and has become an autonomous, self-conscious field of inquiry on its own terms, now fully the equal of (and no longer the ostensibly insipid housewife to) that centered in the “English” department, at the same time empowering its students similarly in the classroom. Never has the imperative for composition to renounce its traditional role as a “service” discipline, then—which as we have seen ended in producing (among other things) uncritical pragmatism, science-as-totem, and blind participation in the often oppressive project of the institution—seemed so pressing or so nearly fulfilled.

Progress, “Expressionism,” and Disempowerment in the Institution

And yet it is difficult at the same time—in the crudest possible terms, for example, when ostensibly professionalized “compositionists” typically still teach four courses a semester—not to wonder if all these attempts to mark a distance between composition as an intellectual project and the overwhelming smack of institutional and social enlistment implied by composition’s formative keeping-up-with-the-Russians impulse haven’t themselves all ultimately been coopted by the residue of that impulse in a way that renders them largely harmless.7 Avant-gardes of all sorts, especially academic ones, have a long history of disappointingly partial successes. Even if the categories set up by composition’s latest coming-of-age narrative (institutional service and intellectual independence) seem powerfully convincing, it is still easy to imagine that the sense of disciplinary arrival they imply may seem suspect. At least implicitly, composition, even at its avant-garde fringes, by and large still conceives its project in the same service-oriented terms that it has staked so much of its own sense of intellectual legitimacy on rebelling against.

And of course the persistence of these terms is especially clear in the earlier manifestations of what I have called the anti-service impulse, which have been under fairly constant attack for different, though parallel, reasons recently by that impulse’s more contemporary representatives. As I have already suggested, we have been reminded often in the last ten years or so of the politically disabling effect of the “humanist” cult of art and the autonomous creative individual in the academy, as well as of the overwhelming humanist orientation of the bulk of the earliest composition pedagogies
implicated in what I have tried to identify as a generalized implicit resistance to composition’s traditional designation as a service discipline. What it seems to me hasn’t been adequately considered, though, is that this often-noted political disability, normally articulated simply as the artist’s general withdrawal from the social, worked not only (as we have so often heard) to de-politicize the humanist-aestheticist English classroom in a larger ideological sense, but also in a much more local sense to effectively disable composition’s own attempts in the 1970s to rebel against the politics of institutional service.

Probably the most notable of these now familiar critiques of the humanist-aestheticist tradition within the field of composition itself have been James Berlin’s, made public for an especially wide disciplinary audience in College English. Berlin perceptively summarizes the reasons for the social and political ineffectuality of what he calls “expressionism” (while acknowledging its intention of political committedness) by explicating the epistemological assumptions on which it is founded:

The underlying conviction of expressionists is that when individuals are spared the distorting effects of a repressive social order, their privately determined truths will correspond to the privately determined truths of all others; my best and deepest vision supports the same universal and external laws as everyone else’s best and deepest vision. (“Ideology” 486)

Hence, of course, the function of the expressionist composition classroom as a social sedative by which knowledge in general is rendered politically neutral through the elision of cultural difference and ideological constructedness.

But as I have suggested, such an epistemology can also be seen—less obviously, perhaps, but just as powerfully—to accomplish the resurrection of composition’s service ethic, even from within expressionism’s often explicitly anti-service position (just as its explicit claims to “empower” students through “personal growth” and “self-discovery” can be seen ultimately to disable them with its implication of “universal and external laws”): universally recognizable social goals and duties still exist for “expressionist” teachers as they did in the traditional service model, even though one must now be able to see through “the distorting effects of a repressive social order” in order to recognize them. While “expressionist” writing teachers are no longer enlisted (as in the old Sputnik-era model) in the service of a standing institution which was taken unproblematically to reflect a body of universally recognizable truths, they nonetheless come to be enlisted in a similarly compelling (and coopting) service—this time, the service of a set of nobler and more cryptic truths which are accessible only through the cultivation of “personal” literacy and which have by and large eluded that institution. In this way, Berlin’s “expressionists” establish a sense of professional order that corresponds perfectly to the theoretical assumptions behind their pedagogical order, even though it fulfills their “anti-service” impulse only quite
That is, the social goals of the enlightened teacher in this model (usually somewhat contrary to those of the institution) are still, like the work of their students, validated by reference to an unchanging and universal if somewhat mysterious internal reality in something like artistic truth (even if instead of to a simple consensus in common sense, as the scientism of the traditional service model would have it). "Expressionist" composition, then, has no better chance of achieving an effective critical position in the arena of institutional politics than its students do of seeing, as Berlin says, that the expressionist vision "in fact represents the interests of a particular class, not all classes" (487). Ideological constructedness, including the constructedness of the terms of the academic enterprise itself, are cloaked under a deified essentiality, figured ultimately as "art."

Indeed, then, vanguard composition scholarship's strategy of institutional resistance in the 1970s was clearly compromised—as Linda Brodkey has also suggested provocatively in "Modernism and the Scene(s) of Writing" (though again at the level of the individual student in the classroom and not at the level of the discipline in the institution)—by its intuitive adaptation of the high modernist strategy of cultural resistance, played out in its cult of the individual artistic genius. And this intuition is not surprising given that the literary training of most second-generation compositionists asked them to see the appreciation of enactments of this strategy as their primary professional vocation. That the New Criticism was invented as a technology of consumption for the products of high modernist culture is hardly a new idea, and that New Critically-trained "compositionists" brought the baggage of the high aestheticist's withdrawal from a compromised culture into the Self with them as they confronted the problems of professional legitimation in an emerging discipline is understandable. They would resist an institutional alliance they found problematic in the terms they knew best, the same terms in which the modernist artist (as it is so often explained) resisted the industrialized culture that alienated him or her. So it is not without significance to note the connection here to how powerfully and how often teaching came to be figured as high art in composition scholarship in the 1970s: like the noble modernist alone in a garret, the enlightened compositionist would cultivate truth and beauty as a form of resistance in the cloister of the classroom.

And yet the ultimate political effectivity of such a gesture of resistance, as critiques like Berlin's and Brodkey's have made clear at the student level, should not be overestimated. For both the modernist aesthete withdrawing as a mode of resistance into high art and what James Berlin calls the "expressionist" teacher of composition to whom modernism eventually gave indirect intellectual animation, the epistemological commitment to essentialized ideals, at any level of accessibility, implied a faith in progress easily more powerful than their respective senses that their work was implicated in a "politics" that needed critical engaging: even if it were only for the
enlightened literate, there was still illumination above ideology and discourse to move toward. The attempted replacement of science by art as twentieth century high culture's animating discourse has done little to achieve the sort of liberatory radicalism it seemed to promise. Beyond the momentary, though not altogether inconsiderable, sobering effect provided by their respective shock values, the rebellion against the politics of progressivist institutional service implied by Ken Macrorie's attempted reinvigoration of the mechanical and anti-intellectual "Engfish" monster seems in the end little more effectively subversive than the more general revolt, say, against the politics of progressivist technological "advancement" taken up explicitly by T. S. Eliot's intensive *l'art-pour-l'art* cultivation of aesthetic form, both of which ultimately get reenlisted in progressivist service on another *merely somewhat less conventional* level. In the end, then, composition's wide reaction in the 1970s against the mindless assumption about social progress embodied by the traditional service ethic, a reaction launched under the banner of high aesthetic anti-institutionalism largely at the residual impetus of the abating New Criticism, could be only a decidedly partial success. Clearly, its implied sense of social progress was entirely as real as the traditional and explicit allegiance to the sort of old-fashioned, for-the-good-of-all progress it defined itself largely against; and its ultimate effect, in fact, was the invocation of what it seems to me hard not to recognize precisely as modern composition's golden age of "progressive" thinking.

**Progress, Cultural Studies, and Disempowerment**

If the disabling effect of this implicit recuperation of the progress ethic seems striking, the degree to which its residue quite openly marks composition's most significant contemporary expression of resistance to institutional service is perhaps shocking. Indeed, it could well be argued that composition's cultural studies movement is itself largely coopted by the same progressivist discourse that we have seen embodied in the expressionist pedagogy that cultural studies seems most self-consciously poised against: even while it has articulated an effective alternative to the compromising epistemology it critiques so thoroughly, the progressivist trappings of that epistemology often remain disturbingly uninterrogated in the new orthodoxy of radical composition scholarship. In the earliest, most tepid articulations of the new epistemology for composition, these trappings were sometimes painfully obvious: Richard Young, Alan Becker, and Kenneth Pike—peculiarly situated between a cautious theory of anti-foundationalist rhetoric and various affiliations with the positivist establishment—argued for a kind of happily enlightened scientism in tagmemics, a system of cognitive principles designed as a kind of exhaustive science of language use and yet based on the conviction that knowledge is shaped by arbitrary distinctions embedded in different languages. And later, even in an institutional climate generally more agreeable to the aims and methods of critical theory, composition
scholars as serious and as intellectually energetic as C.H. Knoblauch and Lil Brannon proposed their own "New" rhetoric largely as a way of giving new urgency to all the now traditional 1970s progressivist pedagogical themes which had by then crystallized into an easily recognizable cluster: process-over-product, grammatical relativism, group work, non-quantitative evaluation, freedom from generic and formal constraints, exhaustive revision, decentered classroom authority, writing-across-the curriculum, and so on. 17

But more startling is the sort of casual obliviousness with which recent cultural-studies-oriented critiques of progressivist pedagogy (by all accounts considerably more self-conscious and militant) seem prone to fall into progressivist discourse themselves, threatening in this way to coopt cultural studies as simply the latest in composition's long line of ultimately moderationist liberalisms. We have seen, for example, the committedness of James Berlin's critique of "expressionism." Invoking Louis Althusser and Michel Foucault by way of Swedish Marxist sociologist Goran Therborn, Berlin argues that "Ideology is . . . inscribed in language practices, entering all features of our experience" ("Ideology" 479) in order to press still-expressionist-invested composition scholarship "to place the question of ideology at the center of the teaching of writing" (492). He goes on from this first principle toward such an objective by claiming that "A rhetoric can never be innocent, can never be a disinterested arbiter of the ideological claims of others because it is always already serving certain ideological claims" (477), and then by attacking what he sees as composition's two main rhetorics on this basis: the rhetoric of cognitivism for "claiming for itself the transcendent neutrality of science" and the rhetoric of "expressionism" (as we have seen) for obscuring ideology with a "creative realization of the self, [which] exploit[s] the material, social, and political conditions of the world in order to assert a private vision" (478, 487). Instead, he offers what he calls "social-epistemic" rhetoric, which, "self-consciously aware of its ideological stand" (478), eliminates "arguments from transcendent truth since all arguments arise in ideology" (489). So he is scrupulous in his anti-foundationalism and insists that only such scrupulosity can effectively empower the reading and writing subject.

Nevertheless, it seems to me as if in a kind of unconscious mouthing of composition's apparently immanent progressivist heritage, Berlin goes on to take "democracy" as just such a transcendent truth, as an absolute value (here an "ethical" one) which requires no justification or explanation. And his anti-foundationalism starts sounding strangely compromised in order to accommodate the unblinkingness of this value. 18 Though knowledge-as-ideology is inescapably a matter of "linguistically-circumscribed" possibilities, it nonetheless turns out, it seems, also to have certain features which are somehow inherently democratizing: "ideology is always pluralistic, a given historical moment displaying a variety of competing ideologies and a given individual reflecting one or another permutation of these conflicts" (489,
479). That "all arguments arise in ideology," he continues with newfound tautological verve, "thus inevitably supports... democracy... Because there are no 'natural laws' or 'universal truths' that indicate what exists, what is good, what is possible, and how power is to be distributed" (489-90). That particular ideologies are culturally dominant and that subjectivity is ideologically constructed, then (the ostensible basis of "social-epistemic" rhetoric and its accompanying pedagogy), is apparently no longer important: knowledge is no longer a "never innocent" matter of "ideological conflict," but an unproblematic manifestation of something like "free competition" in which all positions of subjectivity have equal dialectical chances (492, 489). Democracy bubbles up from nowhere, erupting in the progressivist rhetoric of pluralism and egalitarianism, which of course sits more than a bit unevenly with Berlin's stated concern over "the interpellations of subjects" which "are always already ideological" (490). He speaks of promoting "self-fulfilling behavior" which would serve to flesh out one's "full humanity," even though "There is no universal, eternal, and authentic self," and "selves" are "social construct[s]," the ideological "creation[s] of a particular historical and cultural moment" (490, 489). He invokes "the greater good of all" (490) with similar fervor—even though knowledge of such ostensibly universal good is attained only by way of highly subjective and suspect "socially-devised definitions" (489)—just as he vigorously holds onto the idealist orthodoxy of "false consciousness" (490) while his "social-epistemic" rhetoric is said to be founded immovably on "the inherently ideological nature of rhetoric" (489) and thus the unavoidable "falseness" of all consciousness. And he argues passionately for "the liberatory classroom," as if it were somehow above ideology and indoctrination, even though "a way of teaching is never innocent" (491, 492).

All that is potentially radical about Berlin's deployment of "social-epistemic rhetoric," then, seems to me in this way quickly coopted by its implicit association with composition's progressivist baggage. The progressivist discourse of educational democracy—along with its allied senses of duty ("our responsibilities as teachers and citizens" [493]) and social welfare ("the greater good of all" [490])—is so fundamental a part of the language of composition scholarship that it can effectively underwrite the work of even as guarded an anti-foundationalist as Berlin.19 Very much, in fact, as in the "expressionist" model Berlin critiques so thoroughly, both student and teacher are pressed into the service of an absolute which works to represent the establishment, in this case the apparently self-evident value of "democracy." The goals of the classroom and the goals of the social organism at large, it seems, are once more essentially the same, just as the progressivist ethos insists they must be.

Not surprisingly, this leads Berlin back to an espousal of a kind of happy Freireanism (the circle-up-the-desks progressivist idyll), in which the classroom serves as the ultimate enactment of the birthright democracy in which
the committed pedagogue hopes to empower students to participate. In the same way, then, that Berlin's discourse of essentialized democracy reenlists composition in the service of the institution by ignoring differences between contesting social interests in favor of some "greater good of all," his corresponding vision of classroom practice also serves, I think, largely to make students impotent in the larger economy of cultural politics: when we pretend that the institutionally inherent differences between teachers and students don't exist (even though teachers write syllabi, choose readings, assign grades), students are both deceived about the politics of the classroom and encouraged to ignore such differences between cultural affiliations outside the classroom in favor of a happy faith in the inherent cultural authority and personal integrity of their own free "opinions." Patricia Bizzell gets at the problem perceptively in another context:

Ultimately, I am calling for the inspection of what some curriculum theorists have called the "hidden curriculum": the project of initiating students into a particular world view that gives rise to the daily classroom tasks without being consciously examined by teacher or students. If we call what we are teaching "universal" structures or processes, we bury the hidden curriculum even deeper by claiming that our choice of material owes nothing to historical circumstances. To do this is to deny the school's function as an agent of cultural hegemony, or the selective valuation and transmission of world views.

("Cognition" 237)

In his establishment of democracy as a transparent value, a matter of political "ethics," then, Berlin ignores the problematic of discourse and ideology he theorizes so finely and insists on so stubbornly. Freireanism not only "hides" but positively denies that such implicit curricula exist: a course's focus is to be created by equal participation inside the classroom, just as meanings, one must assume, are to be generated outside it somehow "freely" in culture at large. Indeed, as Bizzell suggests, the institution's "function as an agent of cultural hegemony" must be taken responsibility for—and not be made even more insidious than such cultural functions already are through any pretense of "natural" democracy—if students will be saved paying a crippling cultural price for it. Once more, even for as focused a critic of the establishment as James Berlin, the compositionist is enlisted in the service of a transcendent good embodied in the proper function of the institution, and the composition student is left, once again like the discipline itself, inadvertently but undeniably disabled.

Progress, Disciplinary Archaeology, Critical Literacy, Politics-as-Ethics
It seems to me fundamentally important for those interested in radicalizing composition as a cultural force, then, to recognize the powerful disciplinary heritage in the context of which the cultural studies movement in composition must make its play for disciplinary authority, a heritage from which that movement characteristically sees itself as having effected a fairly breathtaking secession. In this context, I should make clear that I do not wish by any means to single out James Berlin for critique, to suggest that he has been less
than one of the most important and clearly committed voices in the struggle to bring cultural studies meaningfully to composition, or to diminish his obvious contribution to composition's development as a critical intellectual project. But I do hope to make the presence of the latent and largely disabling residue of progressivist libertarianism in Berlin's work suggest the difficulties inherent in any attempted radicalizing of composition. If even Berlin's very deliberate, self-conscious, and carefully theorized assault on the cultural orientation of traditional composition pedagogy can be in some way implicitly shaped by the spirit of that orientation, then it is clear that we need to develop and maintain a special fastidiousness about the discourses that enable our own critical formations as participants in such a dialogue. All that we can speak in our attempts to contribute to the development of the project that composition has become must necessarily be framed by an extraordinarily complicated institutional archaeology, one out to enlist us in projects of its own from the start.

What this paper amounts to, then, is a call to composition's cultural studies contingent to maintain a diligent self-consciousness about the ways in which the shape of the discipline itself implicitly but powerfully asks that contingent to construct its commitment to the social. And such a self-consciousness, I think, should begin with a recognition of the peculiar power that the discourse of progress has been made to wield for composition, a power consolidated by a narrative in which all new disciplinary developments become stages in an evolution toward something like a discipline effectively engaged in the service of the essentialized general good of the social organism. First science, then art (and now social justice) have been made to serve as the essentialized goal—in Saussurian terms, the transcendental signified—that makes that narrative meaningful, the absolute toward which progress is taken to be directed. But if we have come to accept the deployment of some theory of anti-foundationalist rhetoric as the single useful mode of contemporary resistance—and I think such acceptance is definitive of all serious manifestations of the cultural studies/ideological critique impulse in the academy—then models of making composition a site for meaningful cultural engagement simply cannot allow themselves to be underwritten by any such transcendental signified even as "ethics." If all knowledge is, as Berlin says so eloquently, "an arena of ideological conflict" (489), then "progress's" implication of a finally useful goal—even if a mysterious and ultimately unattainable goal, as in aesthetic fulfillment, or an ostensibly enlightened goal, as in social justice—can only serve to perform a dangerous effacement of that conflict. It is vital, then, to recognize the monumental historical significance of the ongoing play for power made by progress as a concept: meaning is always a matter of problematic, contestatory difference; never simple reference, as progress would have it.

So the real urgency of cultural studies' commitment to the social is animated not by the invocation of any timeless code of democracy or even
ethics—as so much of the cultural studies contingent in composition, like Berlin, have had it, and as composition’s traditional urge to justify itself as an academic discipline by making some sort of contribution to the general project of the social organism would suggest—but simply because the production and distribution of knowledge is inherently a matter of social contest, one in which we are always already positioned at the moment we consider opening our mouths to speak. Indeed, the contemporary theoretical fetishization of ethics (only the latest in a long line of powerful essentialist mystifications) is what the example of Berlin suggests most graphically as we begin to think in the early 1990s about the sorts of effects cultural studies can have on academic practice: politics-as-ethics is only the dangerously moderationist pseudo-radicalism to which contemporary cultural studies has been propelled by the academy’s progressivist residues, which we need to remember wield special power in composition.20 We do not need to invoke the moral to speak of power/knowledge relations and of participation in the “ideological arena” of knowledge: as readers and writers we simply have no other choice. If we accept that meaning is always cultural and ideological, then textual action is political action, so our insistence on the importance of intervening in the production and distribution of cultural meanings needs no justification by way of moral right; such intervention happens unavoidably whenever we open our mouths to speak. As makers of and traffickers in knowledge, that is, we necessarily find ourselves always already engaged (and positioned) in the ideological contest of culture at large, and not propelled into the fray by some innate sense of any timeless principle of “justice” or “fairness.” In fact, to recognize the promotion of, say, democracy as this sort of unconditional, unconstructed “ethical” imperative is actually to effectively tame all that is potentially radical about cultural studies’ anti-foundationalism, no matter what smack of political “involvement” it may carry; simply, it amounts to the restoration of the essentialized referent. As Victor Vitanzha has insisted, the great “narratives of emancipation” clung to by “social-consensual theory-hopeful rationalists, who through social reengineering and instrumental reason . . . want to cure society and make the world into a great, good place,” ultimately “only further remystify[ ] and disempower students and us all” (143, 142). Such categories as the scientific, the aesthetic or the politically ethical cannot be left uninterrogated. Instead, we need to ask tirelessly what cultural forces provide the imperative behind the constitution of those categories, and what the effects of such constitution are, especially when the categories in question serve as the grounds for other knowledge. And the progress ethic in which composition has been steeped for at least thirty years refers us constantly, as we have seen, to such ostensibly self-evident grounds for knowledge, replacing one for another ingeniously as each ousts its rhetorical utility.

This, the deft and constant deferral of serious critical engagement behind reference to apparently self-evident absolutes which defy interroga-
tion, is progress' great insidiousness. It also suggests the challenge presented by the composition studies tradition to the critical integrity of cultural studies's commitment to the social. Progress has a vital interest in seeing cultural studies represent this commitment as a matter of "ethics": even if invoked to provide an imperative for investigating knowledge as an "ideological contest," ethics posits the same sort of final, universal ground for knowledge—the greater good of all—that is at the center of progress' cultural powerplay precisely by serving to obscure that contest. If as I argued earlier, then, the political disability of much of traditional composition pedagogy has to do with its implication in "modernist" strategies of resistance, then this essay can also be understood as a call for composition to become a cannily "postmodern" discipline—that is, to carefully interrogate and disclaim the effects of the essentialist epistemology on which modernism—and modern composition, in turn—was largely founded.

It is only in this way, I argue, that composition can accomplish either of the imperatives which were beginning to be set for it at least implicitly as early as 1965 by what might meaningfully be called its first avant-garde: the liberation of the discipline itself from uncritical service in the academic institution and the liberation of the student from uncritical service in the arena of culture at large. As I have suggested, it seems to me vital to recognize that both depend on the assumption of the same critical posture and that neither can be achieved successfully without the other: composition studies cannot become politically effective, either as a discipline within the academic institution or as a pedagogical technology for its students within their larger cultural spheres, without stubbornly resisting the urge to defer critical interrogation by positing an essentialized reality of some sort or other, an urge made frighteningly manifest in the great American (and modernist) fantasy of "progress." The mindless institutional service effected by such deferral on one front—in the hierarchy of disciplines within the academy—is destined to replay the larger mindless cultural service effected by that same deferral on the other—in the classroom. And the recent movement to bring cultural studies to composition has only partially succeeded in establishing the resistance to such service that it seemed to promise. We can only stop being a "service" discipline when we begin taking intelligent, self-conscious account of the ideological conditions that have enabled us. Indeed, effectively renouncing blind institutional and cultural service means sensitively and assiduously sorting out, delineating, and critiquing composition's complicated intellectual heritage—carefully accounting for the ideological forces that have enabled its erection as a discipline—exactly what essentialist allegiance to the idea of "progress" makes impossible. Critical intellectual work, literacy even—both inside and outside the classroom—can mean nothing else.
Notes

1 It is difficult, for example, for any teacher of college composition, struggling to think through the implications and presuppositions of his or her practice critically—while teaching, say, four sections of first-year composition—not to take as emblematic Berlin’s report of “four teachers and two graduate assistants” at Michigan in 1894 who “were responsible for 1,198 students” in a day when convention dictated the writing of daily or near daily themes (“Reality” 22), or in turn not to rally around Stephen North’s observation of the tendency in English departments to write composition off as “academic dirty work” (13).

2 See Chapter 1 of North for a thorough discussion of Cold War nationalism’s crucial role in shaping modern composition as an academic discipline. Albert Kitzhaber’s 1966 call for “a ‘New English’ to take its place alongside the ‘New Mathematics’ and the ‘New Science’ now being taught in many United States schools,” though, pointed out recently by Harris, serves to suggest the contours of that role pretty plainly (635). See also note 5 of this paper.

3 There are notable exceptions—like W. Ross Winterowd and Louise Phelps, who self-consciously combine a high theoretical seriousness (largely unallied to the disciplinary forces of science and classicism which would capitalize most clearly on the Cold War sense of educational crisis) with a willingness to understand—sometimes even with a profound commitment to—the cultivation of literacy as a public service performed in a spirit of republican, even classically modeled civic responsibility. But such scholars seem to me decisively outnumbered by those who would lay claim to such seriousness by way of an at least partial (or even implicit and unarticulated) repudiation of the role of institutional servant. In fact, theorists like Winterowd and Phelps, despite their allegiance to some form of the service ideal, are typically most troubled by those composition scholars who embrace institutional service least problematically.

It is worth noting, too, that Phelps has pointed out a potentially serious problem with my enterprise in this paper on a related score: she reminds me that academic work (and work in general) is necessarily already implicated in a context and is thus unavoidably enlisted in the “service” of certain interests. I do not at all mean by calling attention to the ways in which it seems to me that composition has been intellectually and institutionally disabled by “service” in such projects that “service” in the abstract can be escaped. Much to the contrary, my project is fundamentally based on this very problematic, and I do not intend to give the impression that I endorse disciplinary “liberation” in any naively Romantic way. Instead, I argue only that critical engagement, literate intellectual work, means being as self-conscious and savvy about this process of enlistment as possible—only that service, that is, should at all costs never be blind, and that such blindness makes for the crudest kind of ideological indoctrination.

4 See Lauer and Asher for a sense of the still formidable marketability of different forms of empirical research in contemporary composition studies.

5 If this language seems extreme, witness for example the almost rabid rhetoric of civic duty that marks documents like the NCTE’s 1961 The National Interest and the Teaching of English (“Only a quality education will prepare our youth for the test” [136]) and the Commission on English’s 1965 Freedom and Discipline in English (“The commission was fully aware of the importance of [its] objective for the students who will be the future citizens of a great democracy” [viii])—documents which were clearly direct responses to establishment culture’s new eagerness to embrace English studies as something like a “national priority,” a matter even of national security (an eagerness manifested materially in the advent of “Project English”). Or see the barely submerged us-and-them nationalist sensibility so important to a book like Corbett’s omnipresent 1965 Classical Rhetoric and the Modern Student, which is rife with Cold War language and categories and which from the perspective of 1990 often seems even crudely and frighteningly propagandistic, especially in the simple casualness with which its ostensibly arbitrary and innocent examples of logical forms and moves invoke the terms of Cold War conflict as generic content. In this way, the book works powerfully to legitimize the apparent importance of those terms even when applying them to examples of specious argument. It includes, for example, exercises in the logical evaluation of such syllogisms as “No Russians are democratic. All Americans are democratic. [Therefore] All Americans are Russians” and “Since only radicals want to subvert the duly constituted government of a country, this man can’t
be a radical because he wants to preserve the government of the country" (60, 61).

6See, for instance, Berthoff's suggestion that "Interpretation is a branch of biology" (Making v).

7Slevin outlines the managerial practices by which compositionists are effectively deprofessionalized, denied, for example, the time and job security needed to participate in professional development as a scholar given as a matter of course to faculty in other disciplines.

8Most notably, see one of the introductions to teaching critical theory published in the last ten years, such as Catherine Belsey's Critical Practice. More incisively, see recent articulations of the problematic of radical Marxism in the Humanities in the work of such figures as Stanley Aronowitz, Henry Giroux, and Peter McLaren, or on a somewhat different radical left, Mas'ud Zavarzadeh and Donald Morton (see especially "Theory Pedagogy Politics: The Crisis of the 'Subject in the Humanities' and the recent collection of the same name).

9Here I will quote from "Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Class"; see also "Contemporary Composition: The Major Pedagogical Theories." For a significantly more thorough treatment of the same ideas, see Berlin's Rhetoric and Reality.

10Berlin concedes, "Most proponents of expressionistic rhetoric during the sixties and seventies were unapologetically critical of the dominant social, political, and cultural practices of the time," and he even offers Peter Elbow as an example of this sort of outspoken though ultimately impotent political consciousness (485). Also, it's worth noting the other less strictly theoretical grounds on which Berlin makes his critique of "expressionism": the disabling effect of its suggestion that "effective resistance can only be offered by individuals, each acting alone," its reification of "entrepreneurial virtues" like "private initiative" and "risk taking," and the way it promotes "a variety of forms of consumer behavior" by making leisure (and never work) the only possible site of "self-discovery and fulfillment" (487). Though these are astute and useful readings of expressionism's various social utilities, I have confined myself to Berlin's sense of the theoretical limits of expressionist epistemology (even though it is perhaps less thoroughly articulated than the rest) since these theoretical limits will figure most prominently in what I will argue about composition and the progress ethic.

11See, for instance, Eagleton's The Function of Criticism, where he speaks of "the liberal humanist consensus which was, in effect, criticism's sole rationale" in the age of "New Criticism's cloistered aestheticism" (86, 85).

12Of course, it is something of an over-simplification (and a popular one) to reduce as undeniably varied and complicated a cultural impulse as "modernism" to a single aesthetic-epistemological tenet in this way, just as it smacks of over-simplification to explain New Criticism in turn wholly as a manifestation of such an impulse. And even though one might name a good number of writers, artists, intellectuals, and so on commonly identified as "modernist" who neither advocated nor enacted any withdrawal from the social into high art—what Andreas Huyssen has called an aestheticist "anxiety of contamination" (vii)—it is not without value to see the phenomenon of "modernism" more generally as born significantly out of the need for just this kind of withdrawal. I do not intend to suggest that there were either no modernist aesthetes (consider Pound) or no New Critics (remember New Criticism's self-consciously political roots in Agrarianism) who had political preoccupations or who were willing to see their aesthetic positions as politically conditioned and implicated. I argue only that the general modernist impulse for aesthetic cultivation can be seen ultimately to represent a strategic shrinking from what modernism conceived as "administered" culture through the cultivation of a profound and compelling (though ultimately disabling) individuality.

13For a sense of this conjunction (of writing and teaching writing behind art in humanist-aestheticist circles) see the work of William Coles.

14It is useful to consider, for example, how vigorously a voice as steeped in modernist discourse as, say, I.A. Richards' in Science and Poetry (1926) can be seen to have insisted on conceiving its modernity as a manifestation of the early twentieth-century assertion of idealist art against empiricist science. For a sense of the failures of modernism as this sort of project, Jameson's observations on Wyndham Lewis are typical of similar critiques articulated from various lefts:
The most influential formal impulses of canonical modernism have been strategies of inwardness, which set out to reappropriate an alienated universe by transforming it into personal styles and private languages [and which] have seemed in retrospect to reconfirm the very privatization and fragmentation of social life against which they meant to protest (2; emphasis added). Also see Huyssen, Krauss, Eagleton (Against), Lyotard, and Foster.

It would be a grave over-simplification, of course, to understand all the 1970s composition scholarship that I have called "progressivist" as animated wholly by New Critical aesthetics. I claim only that progressivism's strategy of institutional resistance devolved mainly from a sense of the culturally liberating effects of art, played out most importantly in the academy for composition scholars like Britton, Macrorie, and Coles by the grand institutional specter of the New Criticism. This does not mean that the theoretical implications of this strategy of resistance were played out with any kind of consistency in the other aspects of progressivist practice. Very general disciplinary impulses like the ones I have named aestheticism and scientism are seldom manifested in categorically distinct ways. Science, for instance, once allied very powerfully to classicism and what I see as the first generation of modern composition "progressivism" in the post-Sputnik era via the Aristotelian sense of rhetoric as a descriptively exhaustive and perfectly logical taxonomy (as in, say, Lauer's determination to use empirical research in order to arrive at a finally prescriptive and exactly correct cognitive model of composing), quickly becomes a convenient ally for the second-generation "progressivist" fixation on process, despite the same group's celebration of art (see, for example, Britton's commitment to painstaking empirical research in order to demonstrate the pedagogical urgency of teaching "expressive" writing). Composition's discourse of development is invested with a similarly curious and complicated disciplinary currency as is writing-across-the-curriculum. This, in fact, is why I will come to insist later in this essay on the vital importance of acute theoretical self-consciousness for meaningful composition scholarship.

See especially Chapters 1 and 2, where the authors argue that reality is "a creation that reflects the peculiarities of the perceiver" and that a language is "a theory of the universe, a way of selecting and grouping experiences" (25, 27).

For a fairly detailed explication of the intellectual archaeology behind the alliance of these themes, see Bizzell's reading of what she calls "personal-style pedagogy" ("Composing").

I will focus here on Berlin's attempts to provide a theoretical justification for his sense of democracy as a natural right, but I should note that he seems aware of the essentialist implications of such a sense in as much as he is tempted at times to avoid it by simply begging the question and claiming his embrace of democratic idealism as something like a frank admission of his own ideological orientation. The real issue for a social-epistemic rhetorician, of course, would be to account for the cultural reasons behind such an orientation. Anything less amounts to what I find my students doing all too often: deferring serious discussion by claiming what they call "a right to my own opinion."

It's worth noting that the pattern suggested by "Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Class" is representative of almost all Berlin's other work as well, though admittedly a bit less plainly so in more recent essays. It is characteristic, that is, for Berlin to invoke anti-foundationalist rhetoric in order to argue in strikingly dutiful, sometimes even baldly patriotic terms for "democracy, [which] ordinarily provides political and social supports for open discussion, allowing for the free play of possibilities in the rhetorics that appear" (Reality 5) and for a politically interested pedagogy as "an effort to prepare students for critical citizenship in a democracy"—or even to appeal without irony to the ostensible authority of "leaders in government, business, and industry" ("Composition 51, 53) as reliable evaluators of this capacity for "critical citizenship" in students. That his more recent work represents what seems a self-conscious (if only partially successful) attempt to suppress this rhetoric of democratic fervor is similarly suggestive: the movement from pronouncements of "the greater good of all" promised by democracy ("Ideology" 490) to the somewhat less energized and more theoretically careful "rigor and promise of a dialogic rhetoric in a democracy" ("Composition" 54) does a good deal to indicate the palpability of this contradiction between cultural studies' radical anti-foundationalist imperative and composition's residual progressivist discourse.
I hope in disavowing "ethics" in this way that I do not seem to prudishly assume what Bizzell has recently so eloquently denounced as the "posture of frozen horror at the operations of the ethical binary" typical of "American intellectuals" ("Marxist" 68). I certainly do not mean this paper to be a call to inaction, and I am in fact not ultimately unwilling to reunderstand "ethics" in an aggressively post-foundational, "dialectical" manner like the one Bizzell hints at. But then ultimately, I would argue, why bother? I have to wonder, that is, not only about the philosophical problems but even about the simple practical utility of salvaging "ethics" as a key animating principle for "political" intervention (even if it serves to make certain social issues raised by ideological critique more, say, popularly compellingly and thus broadly accepted, what can ethics do in the end to make critique and the deployment of such sentiment finally more incisive and useful?). And I worry significantly, on the other hand, about what seem to me the likeliest effects such a salvaging might have on the possibilities for cultivating what I think of as a more truly enabling critical self-consciousness, at both individual and institutional levels.

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