The Bewitching of Composition: Metaphors of our Discipline

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Words, even if we take them as magic, refer only to other words, to the end of it.

Harold Bloom

Gorgias the Sophist reminded us in Encomium to Helen that "words can drug and bewitch the soul," knowing of course that language, even a word, can condemn a person to ignominy. Especially for composition teachers and theorists, rhetoricians that is, text is potent. We propose, however, that when we composition theorists and teachers talk our work and about our theories, we forget ironically and poignantly that our words reveal and shape us more powerfully than we pretend. "There is always and only bias, inclination, pre-judgment, swerve; only and always the verbal agon for freedom, and the agon is carried on not by truth-telling, but by words lying against time" (Bloom 9). Some of the metaphors used to describe our profession often entangle us in restrictive and limiting views of ourselves. So in this article we would like to explore the metaphors that former chairs of the Conference on College Composition and Communication have used to describe and define us. We suggest that these metaphors have bewitched us into seeing our discipline as an individual on a journey, one who is seeking an identity of grail-like proportions, a perception that has brought us in true bildungsroman (bildungswoman?) fashion from adolescence to middle age in a few years, yet no closer to the grail. Will we only achieve the grail of identity through association with Father Literature? Brother Speech?

Before we go any further, we should say a word or two about the method of this article, that is, about our collaboration. A word that can mean cooperation with the enemy, as Donald Stewart observes, "a person who assisted the Nazis" (66). We are conscious of the treachery of language and hope to incorporate that quality into our discussion. One voice (text) injects (inoculates) our text (voices) with a supplemental text while another represents a "straight" text. Isn’t it interesting that "straight" implies "hetero," but a straight text is a homo-logic one? This alternative text is "gay," which implies "homo," but it’s really a hetero-logic text. It is fun, cheerful, subversive, and deviant. Already our language is turning on us. In so doing, we take a monologic or linear text
and revise it into a dialogic or recursive one. We will play with the techniques that Winston Weathers discusses in *An Alternate Style*, using double voice extensively. Bold italic serves as a visual signal to distinguish our two “voices.” *Perhaps we will even allow many voices to speak and become multilectical*.

The first part of our exploration spans the period beginning in 1985, when Maxine Hairston called the clan to battle, and ending in 1988, when David Bartholomae sought to exchange a “respectable middle age” (48) for an “unruly discourse” needing “discipline.” *Note the suggestion of adolescence; we’re already glimpsing the pervasiveness of the family metaphor.* Before turning to Andrea Lunsford’s address in 1989, we will examine the words of Hairston, Lee Odell, Miriam Chaplin, and Bartholomae, spoken first as Chairs’ Addresses to the CCC and published later in *CCC*, concentrating on the metaphors with which our discipline was portrayed. These four texts suggest, *tentatively sometimes*, a perspective of the discipline as an individual, sometimes adolescent, other times middle-aged, mostly in the process of growth or maturity and always linked irrevocably to her or his family history. *History or her-story, can it never be both? If language is multilectical, dialogic, then no single text or no single metaphor can share a single perspective. Rather, don’t many different views of the same metaphor struggle for preeminence?*

Then it is no accident that Hairston begins her talk with a reference to the Mandarin Wars in China. *A mandarin is a public official, one with high political status, and one “marked by elaborate and refined language or literary style”* (*American Heritage Dictionary, 2nd ed., 1982*). Once she has invoked the muses of history and poetry and the gods of war, Hairston then situates our discipline in a familial context when she writes that our problems “originate close to home,” in English departments (273). *Isn’t one of the first moves of a successful coup d’état to kill the poets? What did Harold Bloom say about killing the Father? “And the Child is the Father of the Man”* (*Wordsworth 160; L6*). She further promotes the family when she explores (implores? deplores?) the “complex psychological bonds” that we have with the members of that home, literature faculty (273).

Hairston suggests, too, the gender of the parties involved when she compares the plight of compositionists with the women’s movement: “and once more the situation is much like that of many women” (273). *Doesn’t it always come down to sex. But gender is a grammatical term, irrespective of sex, or is it?* Literature faculty are presumably the men to whom we turn for identity, in whom we find a willingness to powerfully determine our fates. *How can we differentiate between ourselves and literature faculty? What does the term “literature” mean? We all deal with texts.* Hairston foresees an independence, however, when “we will come of age,” stating that “we must cut our psychological dependence in order to mature.” She refers to a potential “separation,” without which we will “stunt” our growth. However, we have resisted this emotional/intellectual divorce. Hairston reminds us that we haven’t “cut
the cord. We still crave love." She takes us from adolescence to adulthood and back to childhood and infancy. Is the circle complete? How can we divorce if we haven't yet left home? To whom are we married? Our mother? Jocasta? Our father? What Antigone will be the product of this unholy union? Until we can situate our identity internally instead of externally in the approval of our family, she warns, "we will never have a reconciliation" (282).

With this talk of separation and reconciliation, Hairston dances along the boundary of a mixed metaphor. Has anyone seen the final act of The Seventh Seal?—that's the dance of Death in case you haven't. Yeats asked, "O body swayed to music, O brightening glance, / How can we know the dancer from the dance?" (214; ll. 63-4). How can we separate the meaning from the metaphor? Hairston sometimes indicates that we are adult women engaged in power struggles with adult males, and sometimes adolescents breaking parental ties. Whether adult or adolescent, we are invited to sever the tie that binds and constricts. In her closing words, Hairston urges us to "leave the house in which we grew up" (282).

During the next two years we indeed left our childhood home, at least psychologically. Both Odell and Chaplin assume the discipline is an individual growing older, being neither ennobled nor debilitated by the metaphor. Has the master trope mastered us? Instead, the metaphor seems to have become so fundamental to the discipline's persona that the speakers are unconscious of its implications. Is persona the feminine of person? Like wo-man and fe-male? Something not man, not male, not person? Odell in 1986 suggests the theme of the individual in the process of growth, speaking of "development," "the maturing of our discipline," and the "growth of our discipline," and again referring to the "maturing of our profession" (397, 401). In 1987 Chaplin quotes the Odell speech, but picks up the metaphor only once in an introductory phrase, "As we grow..." (60).

While neither Odell nor Chaplin overtly employ (deploy) the individual's maturing process, Bartholomae is conscious of and troubled by the metaphor that has by 1988 become commonplace. He extends the comparison of the discipline as growing individual to its farthest boundaries. While Hairston dances along boundaries, Bartholomae pushes against them. Maybe we're adolescent after all. He reveals the difficulty of the metaphor yet ensnares himself in the language of it. When he overtly commands (commends?) the language of maturation, Bartholomae also commits himself to a specific time and place when he invokes John Gerber: "In 1956...[we were in] a bumptious, ebullient adolescence" (48). Lamentably, he and his generation have arrived at "a solid, if not completely respectable middle age," making the same mistakes and desiring the same fruits of their wayward literature colleagues (48). Now the discussion is back to mother Eve. Are tenure and status fruits from the tree of knowledge? He criticizes the notion (potion?) of "composition as a mature discipline," presumably because "mature" carries with it a positive connotation that is questionable in light of a compromised middle age (48). Even so,
Bartholomae implicitly (complicity) endorses the use of the family context with repeated use of terms such as “our most precious legacy,” “the terms of our legacy,” and the advice “to acknowledge our roots in English” (49, 45). Does this mean we’re going to inherit the house we grew up in once we’ve killed mother/father/sister/brother Literature? To combine “generations” with “legacies” and “roots” implies that the individual’s growth process is repeated cyclically and that we receive or are willed, within the confines of the family unit, both identity and worth from a former “generation.”

The use of the family metaphor serves a compelling purpose and is used powerfully by Hairston. A humanistic allusion, it conveys the inherent complexities of the relationships within which compositionists are entangled. Families are fraught with tension and subtle exchanges and shifts of power. How many families do you know, especially in child/parent relationships, who have merely subtle exchanges? The relationships are ideally in flux, adjusting to stages of growth, enabling maturation. This serves as an appropriate if troubling model with which to compare composition’s position to the English department. Its strengths are also its weaknesses, however. By projecting the field into a troubled, usually patriarchal model, we set ourselves up to repeat the mistakes and to struggle with similarly unequal positions that the traditional family predicts. This is to say, our relationship to English departments and to a rhetorical tradition, stretching back some 2500 years, is complicated enough without projecting onto it the oppositions inherent in the family model as we generally experience it today: male/female, father/daughter, mother/son. The talk of legacy is disturbing somehow, too, unless we are willing to consider our birthright a negotiable and revisable one. As in Cain and Abel, Jacob and Esau, Rachel and Leah? We aren’t willing to accept the legacy of English departments uncritically, nor are we ready to acknowledge our roots in English without simultaneously remembering that English didn’t spring fully formed from nowhere. Even Athena had Zeus as a father. Legacy suggests a verifiability, a permanence, a resistance to reformation (an inbreeding?) that should make us all uneasy. No matter how rich the inheritance, we should carefully consider its power and hold over us. And the meek shall inherit the earth.

In addition, the metaphor has its immediate limitations. In four years the Chairs’ addresses brought us from adolescence to middle age, surely a speed at which any person’s identity would fragment. We’ve gone from fertile and dynamic to barren and stagnant. These metaphors also helped define us, helped us see ourselves as a group with worthwhile interests, helped us to become a discipline. The only question is, where do we go from here? We are talking ourselves into a quick old age, perhaps even into a premature hardening of the arteries. A derivative implication of this metaphor, and one that Bartholomae briefly explores, is the problematic nature of imagining ourselves as a discipline in search of identity. What are we looking for? The id, the ego, the superego? We have been cast in the mold of the questor, looking for
something that is out there—able to be touched, grasped, lost, stolen. This metaphor sets in motion a dubious pursuit: we picture an adolescent with backpack on her shoulder looking under rocks and in trees for self. Or perhaps even worse, a middle-aged person looking inward obsessively, drunk with his own compulsion.

We have undoubtedly inherited the family metaphor from William Riley Parker's 1967 College English article, in which he traces the genealogy of English departments, born of mother Oratory and father Philology with siblings Speech, Theater, and Composition. Don’t forget that English literature had its own familial war to wage over legitimacy. In fact, tracing our genealogy has lately become something of an obsession. From the work of James Berlin to that of Stephen North, we have sought to inscribe a family tree, recording births, marriages, children, divorces, even if these meta-disciplinary works haven’t always been phrased in terms of the family romance. Unfortunately, we have also interpreted the characters and relative worth of each family member. Berlin has called cognitivists “capitalists” and North has called the knowledge of teachers “lore,” both words with negative connotations. “What counts in the family romance is not, alas, what the parents actually were or did, but the child’s fantastic interpretation of its parents” (Bloom 3). We seem focused on the attempt to hierarchize the various groups in composition, rhetoric and composition, perhaps in the effort to build a canon of our own, the very thing Bartholomae warns us about. But when he accepts the family metaphor, he enables hierarchy. Every family has a head of household.

The family romance metaphor has had more than a textual power over composition studies. It has infected the reality within which we function daily and has enabled combative and authoritarian views of knowledge in our field, realities and perspectives that have no apparent necessity and limited value. Anne Wilson Schaef in her book Women’s Reality: An Emerging Female System in a White Male Society helps, empowers, us to describe the kind of metaphors current in composition: “In the White Male System, the purpose of communication is often to confuse, win, and stay one-up. In the Female System, the purpose of communication is to bridge (a term women often use), understand, and be understood” (134). While we don’t view communication quite so simplistically—certainly white men aren’t the only ones who use language to gain power, and there are clearly more than two possible systems; this perspective informs our field and is allowed to do so freely because of the hierarchy we posit ourselves into. For instance, the differences between Linda Flower’s description of a rhetorical theory and James Berlin’s portray this dichotomy. Flower writes, “My intention here is not to propose a specific theory, but to explore some ways we might use research—observational research, specifically—to create a well-supported, theoretical understanding of this interaction” (283). Berlin writes, “In other words, I am arguing from ideology, contending that no other kind of argument is possible—a position that must first be explained…. Ideology also, as we have seen, always includes conceptions of how power should—again, in the nature of things—be distrib-
uted in society" (478, 479). Flower wants to “explore,” “create,” understand, and interact while Berlin argues, contends, positions, and quite consciously wields power. **Ah, but Flower is arguing for her position as well. She wouldn’t be writing if she weren’t searching for a foothold in power.** Our point, of course, is not that one view is good and one is bad, only that these two people envision much different projects built on dissimilar metaphors. Flower’s conception allows theories and perspectives to be connected; in fact the bridge she discusses depends on the existence of differing perspectives. Berlin’s, however, posits a hierarchy, and his notion of power insists on other perspectives, but only weaker views that enable the strength of his position. **As a Marxist isn’t he trying to give this view power because it has previously been oppressed by the “real power” structures?** Both perspectives are valuable in the right place and time. **Seize the moment, Gorgias reminds. Change the metaphors when the situations changes. Dwell within the fluctuating kairotic realm.**

Moving away from the family romance but retaining the need for power, Andrea Lunsford revises the metaphors that Hairston, Odell, Chaplin, and Bartholomae had inscribed about our field. Her address, entitled “Composing Ourselves,” draws heavily on metaphors from the writing process itself. In fact she calls our field “writing” rather than rhetoric or composition (73). **I guess that makes our work meta-meta-disciplinary analysis.** Lunsford talks about tapestries and histories and excavations, but mostly she talks about stories: “We need to listen to these stories, to these composed lives. And we need to tell the stories of other teachers of writing, of many, many others” (73, 75). Because she is telling the story of our discipline, she implies that we are free from the powerful model that the family predicts. **She insists that “We are non-hierarchical and exploratory, intensely collaborative”** (76). This metaphor offers Lunsford and our profession the ability to revise, to speak through a spectrum of aims, to investigate in an assortment of modes. In her words, it allows us to exist in “the active, the continuing, the gerundive and participial” (78). Her metaphor represents us as multi-lectical and conversational and frees us **momentarily** from the static and nonnegotiable model of the family inheritance. **Remember that Bartholomae called for a multi-lectical discipline; just because he was ensnared by metaphor doesn’t mean his heart wasn’t in the right place.** Lunsford’s is a productive metaphor—ongoing and infinite. **Instead of questing for an identity, we are composing one by telling stories about our experiences. Instead of determining and fixing a common name, we are composing versions of ourselves and returning to the text to revise. We have become recursive.**

Interestingly (**ironically and poignantly**) Lunsford’s 1989 talk places us comfortably in English departments where the reading of stories and the telling of stories has been the central focus for decades. She does this without moving us necessarily into political (**patriarchal?**) turmoil. We can tell our history, **her stories**, without waging wars of ownership or embarking on quests for legacy. We can, as Lunsford says, compose our identity or identities without assigning roles, allowing us to draw on the stories of speech, of
literature, of philosophy, of psychology, without establishing blood ties to these groups. This metaphor allows us to view each perspective of our field as partial but important. *This is fine as long as we don't turn into the proverbial group of blind scholars describing the elephant, which, incidentally, Odell reminds us is the “major threat to the growth of our discipline” (397).*

The telling of stories insinuates its own metaphorical fetters, however, which William Cook investigated in his 1992 paper, “Writing in the Spaces Left.” Though Lunsford claims the right of writing teachers to compose themselves, Cook asserts that the pages upon which these compositions have been written are filling up. Left to inscribing the margins, minorities, the oppressed and the voiceless must challenge “official histories” because their stories have been erased and because they have been composed by the power groups. *On what page do part-time writing teachers tell their story? Who listens to writing instructors with one-hundred and twenty students?* These silenced others must speak over (revise) dominant texts, remind those in power that they have been forgotten. Cook explains, “Their ‘erased’ lives become the very center of new, resistant texts, texts which displace the univocal narratives of the nation with their multi-voiced musings on nation and identity” (10).

Stories aren’t immune from hierarchy. *They are chosen through blind review for academic journals and for election to the canon. Whose story about our discipline does Lunsford want to hear?* The process of joining the storytelling, Cooks reminds us, is a struggle for those who are oppressed and overlooked. *Overworked.*

Although Hairston, Odell, Chaplin, and Bartholomae all envision an independence of spirit, a fecundity of possibility, and a plurality of options for our discipline, we are dependent *momentarily* on Lunsford’s and Cook’s metaphors to free us from the self-composed prison of the family metaphor—even though the words of these four writing teachers, words dependent on the family metaphor, conceived an identity for us, empowered us to become a discipline. The image of the page upon which we write, upon which we compose an identity, allows us to revise, to re-vision our future.

*But where does this leave us? Just because we are free from a perception of ourselves, does that make us healthy? Able to face the sunlight? Does that make us any less neurotic? Derrida writes, “There is no such thing as a harmless remedy. The pharmakon can never be simply beneficial” (99). Even as we speak, the metaphor of the endlessly recursive writing process is turning against itself. “For it goes without saying that the god of writing must also be the god of death” (Derrida 91). The pendulum swings back and we face the necessity of eventually turning in a product, of dealing with an editor, of answering to our superego. So how has our language inoculated these metaphors? Can we ever escape the spell of words? We realize, of course, that we have built upon a quicksand foundation by using “new” metaphors to replace old ones and by using language, metaphoric by definition, to fix a constantly changing but cyclical identity. But we only hope to stay the description of our profession for a moment. *We delight in the*
Instability of language which forces us to constantly reassess ourselves both alone and in relation to others—past, present and future.¹

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Notes

¹We would like to thank Jay Jacoby and Barbara Couture who helped improve this essay with their helpful and encouraging suggestions for revision.

Works Cited


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**Winterowd Award Winners Announced**

The annual W. Ross Winterowd Award for the most outstanding book on composition theory published in 1992 was awarded to Lester Faigley for *Fragments of Rationality: Postmodernity and the Subject of Composition.*

The 1993 W. Ross Winterowd Award was awarded to Kurt Spellmeyer for *Common Ground: Dialogue, Understanding, and the Teaching of Composition.* Honorable mention was shared by C.H. Knoblauch and Lil Brannon for *Critical Teaching and the Idea of Literacy* and Valerie M. Balester for *Cultural Divide: A Study of African-American College-Level Writers.*

This annual award was generously endowed by Professor Winterowd. The selection committee was chaired by Lynn Z. Bloom. Professor Winterowd presented the awards during the Association of Teachers of Advanced Composition meeting at the CCCC Convention in Nashville.

Send nominations for the 1994 W. Ross Winterowd Award to Thomas Kent, editor; *Journal of Advanced Composition;* Department of English; Iowa State University; Ames, IA 50011.