Composition's Ideology Apparatus: A Critique

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James Berlin's theory of ideology has explicitly and beneficially complicated rhetoric and composition's orientation toward its objects of study: writing and writing subjects. It has underwritten a range of theoretical and empirical research on the cultural and institutional dimensions of writing. But the relation that Berlin's theory asserts between rhetoric and ideology results in a profoundly modernist theory of writing and writing subjects, an arhetorical theory. Specifically, Berlin very clearly situates rhetoric within ideology, understanding the former as a means for the dissemination of and resistance to the latter, which is culturally pervasive. His argument is informed by Louis Althusser's Marxist, structuralist theory of ideology as articulated in "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," and here too ideology is theorized as an overarching presence, one within which human activity is organized. In this essay, I want to examine Berlin's and Althusser's attempts to theorize ideology, and to argue that because their understandings of ideology are nondiscursive and arhetorical, they sanction a theorizing of writing as the notation system of thought and culture rather than as a participant in the production of thought and culture. They also preclude the theorizing of writing subjects as thoroughly textual entities.

This is not to say that I mean to set up the too-familiar opposition between (my) postmodernism and (Berlin's and Althusser's) Marxism, one wherein Marxism loses. Nor am I interested in eradicating theories of ideology in composition. I agree with Gayatri Spivak, who writes in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* that a theory of ideology "is necessary for an understanding of constituted interests within systems of representation" (252). Such a theory can help compositionists ask more fruitful questions about the production of culture than we have to date asked, and these questions might help us theorize writing subjects as functions of...
textual activity rather than as essential precursors to it. So theorized, writing subjects would be understood as both organizers and organizations of language. Their acts of writing would be considered acts of subject formation (and reformation). It is within this broader framework of textuality that more familiar discussions of meaning and representation—questions that theories of ideology address—will make theoretical sense when we understand acts of writing not as ontological afterthoughts but as the generators of such terms as "ontology" itself.

This framework of textuality is provided by nonhermeneutic rhetoric. Specifically, it could be provided by what Susan Miller calls "textual rhetoric," a theoretical stance toward the production, reception, and circulation of writing that acknowledges writing's complex implication in the making of cultures and the making of the subjects that inhabit them (see Rescuing 9–52). By reexamining ideology theory and the uses to which it has been put in composition, I hope to complicate our understanding of the relationship between our objects of study—writing and writing subjects—and the already-written contexts into and out of which they emerge. I want composition theory to begin accounting for the increasingly complex webs of textual relationships into which human subjects in western societies will have already entered long before they take their first formal writing lessons in school. I believe that this accounting likely will not happen without a theory of ideology, but I also believe that it certainly will not happen without a comprehensive theory of rhetoric. The fact that this textual rhetoric has yet to be fully articulated should not prompt us, however, to install an overreaching theory of ideology in its place.

"Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Class"
In "Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Class," Berlin defines ideologies as "competing discursive interpretations" of the world, each vying for power against the others. Ideology is "inscribed in language practices, entering all features of our experience" (478, 479). "A rhetoric," in turn, always carries with it an ideological perspective, or perhaps several; it is not "a disinterested arbiter of the ideological claims of others" (477). Berlin's attachment of grammatical articles to the term "rhetoric" (a rhetoric, the rhetoric) but not to the term "ideology" makes clear the essay's understanding of their relationship. By positing and detailing a specific rhetoric among many possible rhetorics, the essay situates rhetorical activity solely in local situations while foregoing a general discussion of rhetoric. Doing so allows Berlin to identify a manifestation
of rhetoric and then name as ideological the apparently generalizable features inherent in that specific instance. In other words, a rhetoric functions for Berlin as the specific effect of ideology. This means, for example, that something like “expressionistic rhetoric” can be so named, and it can be said to enact a program that values “the pursuit of self expression in intellectual or aesthetic pursuits” while simultaneously denying the possibility of collective or social action (487).

My point is not necessarily that Berlin is wrong about expressionistic rhetoric. Rather, it is that such a statement becomes possible only when rhetoric is understood as a form that carries a preexisting reality content, identified here as ideology. Berlin’s analysis depends on a narrowed definition of rhetoric as a historically specific application of ideological content. More to the point, it relies on the absence of a comprehensive rhetorical theory that might complicate ideology theory and that, in turn, might open up discursive space for new theories of writing and the writing subject. For Berlin, rhetoric is a feature in and of language, but language is not a constitutive feature of reality. If it were, ideology’s scope would perhaps be restricted to that activity which can be articulated by individuals, collectives, and social formations. But Berlin makes large claims for ideology, which forces him to make small claims for rhetoric, thus missing an opportunity to establish a rhetorical theory that might explain the formation of textually embedded writing subjects and acts of writing. Such a theory might avoid the implicit adherence to a reality principle that characterizes ideology theories: the assumption that there are motives outside and independent of language that manifest in and can be apprehended through the medium of language, the insistence on an unbracketed reality that makes ideology theories, according to Jean Baudrillard, “discourses of truth” (Simulacra 27). Ideology theory in this vein is an attempt to look behind, to get around, to see through what is apparent on the surface of language and to get at the real. It is a version of the rationalistic theory that underwrites what Michelle Ballif calls “the insidious foundationalism” of the social-epistemic position to which Berlin’s work adheres, and which harbors three related “pre-suppositions”:

that (1) there must be something: ideology, the social, “material” conditions, the individual, individual rights, freedom, the dialectic (for example), and (2) it must be able to be known (thus rational), and (3) it must be able to be communicated (thus language and subjects are already presupposed to be rational). (156)
But if instead we forego this version of ideology theory and its attendant demands and identify rhetoric as that which explains the production (or location) of topics—of which ideology theory is but one—then ideology becomes not a “something” but a discourse, a way of writing.

It might be possible to read “Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Class” as the prolegomenon to a conversation among theorists in the composition community. Such a reading allows us to see Berlin’s work as a text intended mainly to call attention to the relationship between rhetoric and ideology and to offer some initial ideas on that subject. Even were it so, this reading would not exempt the work from the kind of scrutiny I with to apply to it, an exemption based on the notion that such scrutiny misses the point. Furthermore, its reception in the field has focused on its pedagogical and political implications rather than on theoretical questions as such. Responses have tended to apply, extend, or complicate Berlin’s ideas about the classroom, or they have pointed to contradictions between Berlin’s theoretical apparatus and his political commitments. For example, Marshall Alcorn claims that “Berlin’s account of the postmodernist classroom labors to overcome a variety of contradictions that repeatedly subvert the theoretical rigor of his argument” (339). And Michael Murphy points to “the latent and largely disabling residue of progressivist libertarianism in Berlin’s work” that counters his otherwise “deliberate, self-conscious, and carefully theorized assault on the cultural orientation of traditional composition pedagogy” (217). But unlike Alcorn, Murphy, and others, I am interested primarily in the “theoretical rigor” of Berlin’s argument. So while I appreciate the fact that essays such as “Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Class” allowed composition theorists to bring a theory of ideology to their discussions about theories of writing, I find it troubling that, in the main, composition theorists have not examined the details of such a theoretical fusion. Finally, while it is the case that Berlin’s last published book, Rhetorics, Poetics, and Cultures, moves into new and challenging areas of inquiry—specifically the assertion of cultural studies as the organizing principle for a new version of English studies—it is equally the case that its author’s previous theoretical and political commitment to the subordination of rhetoric within ideology continues there, and therefore cannot be rationalized as the prelude to a discussion of rhetoric and ideology that, at any rate, has not yet taken place, at least not in print.
In *Rhetorics, Poetics, and Cultures*, Berlin asserts once again that in considering any rhetoric, it is “necessary to examine its ideological predispositions” (77). Thus, the subordination of rhetoric to ideology continues where it had left off in “Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Class,” as Berlin turns to Göran Therborn’s *The Ideology of Power and the Power of Ideology* for an extension of Althusserian ideology theory that includes “structuralist and poststructuralist formulations” (78). According to Berlin, Therborn incorporates the work of Michel Foucault and Antonio Gramsci into that of Althusser, which makes Therborn’s method “at every turn rhetorical, by which I mean he considers ideology in relation to communicators, audiences, formulations of reality, and the central place of language in all these” (78). But the difference between Berlin’s interpretation of Therborn and Berlin’s interpretation of Althusser is not as great as he would have it, particularly on the question of interpellation. In describing Therborn’s theory, Berlin notes that ideology “brings with it strong social and cultural reinforcement, so that what we take to exist, to have value, and to be possible seems necessary, normal, and inevitable—in the nature of things” (78). This is a reiteration of the ideology-as-mystification thesis that lingers in the background of Althusser’s work due to its distinction between science and ideology. I will address Althusser’s work in more detail below, but at this point it is necessary to note that Berlin’s reading of Therborn makes Therborn look like Althusser, insofar as both contain this residual, pre-Althusserian element. And actually, Berlin has cause to confuse the two. I don’t want to pursue the details of Therborn’s theory in this essay, but it might be enough to say that because Therborn’s theory uses Althusser’s contributions as a point of departure (“it begins from them,” he writes [*Ideology* 7]), it too contains some of the problems I will address below.

Nonetheless, Therborn is explicitly concerned with abandoning the science/ideology distinction, thus differentiating his project from Althusser’s (*Ideology* 8–10). And it is also the case that he wants to theorize ideology in conjunction with power, and this is where Berlin identifies an extra dimension that Althusser’s theory lacks: access to the discourse of resistance and deployment by already interpellated subjects. According to Berlin, the “strong cultural and social reinforcement” that attends to ideology also attends to power, as “ideology naturalizes certain authority regimes . . . and renders alternatives all but unthinkable.” In this ideology/power matrix, “the subject is the point of intersection and influence of various conflicted discourses,” as ideology/power never
consolidates its hold on the discursive field (*Rhetorics* 78). Because of
this incompleteness, the subject becomes more than a mere function of
one discursive regime. According to Berlin, the subject in this scenario
becomes "an agent of change" who "negotiates and resists codes rather
than simply accommodating them" (78–79).

Berlin here is articulating a hermeneutic theory of ideology that
posits a relationship of alienation between the subject and society, one in
which the former is imbricated in the latter but is not necessarily a
participant in the making of it. Under such a theory, writing can be
theorized only as the notation system of experience—and rhetoric only as
the dress of thought—in the subject’s ongoing struggle to “negotiate”
between acceptable and unacceptable codes. And the criterion of accept­
ability is one’s experience of reality, the codification or symbolization of
which is open to misrepresentation, which is precisely what the subject
needs to avoid. Seen through such a hermeneutic framework, the signs of
culture threaten to overtake the subject and must therefore be “decoded”
in order for that subject to determine the ways in which they impinge upon
the subject’s relation to reality and to other subjects. So, through better
interpretations that misrepresent less perniciously, the subject can come
to understand and perhaps eventually resist the claims being made on it
by the dominant forces of cultural (re)production. In other words, if you
know what’s really going on, you are in a position to fight against it. This
教学 of an interpretive disposition modeled on what Paul Ricoeur
calls “the school of suspicion” has become a popular pedagogy in
composition (32). In fact, one version of it finds expression in Berlin’s
statement of purposes for the “Codes and Critiques” writing course
described in *Rhetorics, Poetics, and Cultures*:

> The effort is to make students aware of cultural codes, the competing
discourses that influence their positioning as subjects of experience.
Our larger purpose is to encourage students to negotiate and resist
these codes . . . to bring about more democratic and personally humane
economic, social, and political arrangements. From our perspective,
only in this way can students become genuinely competent writers and
readers. (116)

As this passage makes clear, “discourse” and “experience” are two
different phenomena for Berlin. The former exerts a controlling “influ­
ence” on the latter but does not constitute it. That is, experience is not a
function or effect of discourse, though it can be manipulated by discourse.
This assumption of a space between discourse and experience (and, by
implication, between language and reality, word and thing) authorizes precisely the hermeneutics of suspicion that Berlin’s pedagogy calls for. To be a “genuinely competent” writer and reader, in this case, is to distinguish between discourse and experience and to know that there are cultural forces that try to keep you in the dark about that distinction.

As Charles Paine notes in *The Resistant Writer*, this pedagogy of resistance to dominant culture has historical precedent in a particular form of rhetoric instruction. He writes, “From Isocrates and Plato to Burke to contemporary composition theory, rhetorical training has sought to endow students with the wherewithal to resist the powerful discourses of a culture that seeks everywhere to inhabit them” (10). According to Paine, in its current form this tradition calls upon students to “resist the ‘subject positions’ imposed upon them” (16). But, he argues, one irony of this resistance pedagogy is that students might see the pedagogy itself as the thing being imposed, the invader to be resisted: “While we may think our students have merely conformed to the penetrations of commodity culture, we have to remember that those cultural beliefs, as far as our students are concerned, are *their* beliefs, and that our countercultural intrusions are the alien ones” (16).

Furthermore, in a recent critique of Berlin’s pedagogical project of decoding and resistance, Susan Miller notes that by “teaching texts rather than their making, by teaching awareness rather than rhetoric, and by teaching the power of meanings rather than the making of statements, we inadvertently reproduce a politics that is aware but passive” (“Technologies” 499). Miller suggests that composition may have taken this turn toward “cultural hermeneutics” in order “to give its work, and its workers, professional parity” in the field of English. If so, then composition may have done little more than ape the rest of English studies because, as she notes, “culture as an object of study—no matter how it is studied—no more motivates active literate practices than does reading great literature” (500, 499). If it mistakes ideological analysis for rhetorical production, composition helps arm students with new ways of reading the world. But reading the world is not the same as writing (in) it.

**“Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses”**

As my discussion of Berlin’s work suggests, even in the work of that compositionist most closely identified with ideology theory there is no sustained attempt to engage ideology theory critically. It has not been scrutinized, questioned, or evaluated before its application, nor has it been analyzed in terms of composition’s own theoretical interests in
writing and writing subjects. For example, the theory of the subject necessitated by Althusser's theory of ideology has not been questioned from a composition-specific perspective, yet his theory of ideology informs a great deal of theoretical work in the field (through Berlin and others). Althusser's subject is theorized explicitly, so it is important for composition theorists to understand and interrogate it closely before applying it or one of its many derivatives to our own concerns about how to theorize writing subjects. In what follows, I'll try to begin that interrogation.

"Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" combines psychoanalytical and Marxist terminology in an attempt to theorize ideology as something more than a merely superstructural phenomenon. This is the theoretical innovation for which Althusser is perhaps best known. Althusser contends that ideology does not represent people's real conditions of existence. Rather, ideology represents "the imaginary relation of those individuals to the real relations in which they live" (162; emphasis added). Through this use of Jacques Lacan's terminology, Althusser tries to attenuate Marxism's traditional "false consciousness" thesis by softening the hard distinction between base and superstructure. By situating ideology as a state or event within the realms of the symbolic and the imaginary, he can now theorize ideology as a structure that underlies both reality and the psyche. Ideology theorized in this way becomes pervasive, quasi-ontological, and the question of its origins and perpetrators becomes very difficult to address. Althusser's innovation marks a significant theoretical moment in the history of ideology theory, but it is also a problematic political moment because of the theory of the incapacitated human subject that it necessitates. Althusser's theory transgresses the heretofore stable boundary between individual and society, thus radically refiguring the space of agency, of the subject. Consequently, tension emerges between the theoretical and the political in the ISAs essay that is of consequence to composition theory, specifically to a theory of the writing subject. I say this because it seems to me that any composition theory—not only the kind for which I might argue—contains within it an implicit theory of the subject, if not an explicit one. But it is not self-evident that Althusser's structural theory of ideology articulates the kind of subject needed for a theory of the writing subject. In any event, our field has yet to do the necessary work of finding out.

Now, in *For Marx*, which predates the ISAs essay, Althusser does connect ideology to social agency, thus proposing a subject that composition theory might find useful. Althusser writes,
So ideology is not an aberration or a contingent excrescence of History: it is a structure essential to the historical life of societies. Further, only the existence and the recognition of its necessity enable us to act on ideology and transform ideology into an instrument of deliberate action on history. (232; emphasis added)

As the words I have emphasized indicate, this theory is closely and immediately placed in relation to action or practice. And in still another essay, "Lenin Before Hegel," Althusser cites Lenin's emphasis on practice as a crucial contribution to Marxist theory, pointing to Lenin's claim that philosophy is "a practice of political intervention carried out in a theoretical form" (107). These emphases on action and practice indicate that for Althusser ideology is a phenomenon about which something can be done, despite its pervasiveness. That is, ideology can be enacted or resisted by subjects, even though it is always in play. But what remains unarticulated in Althusser's writing is a thorough account of the methods by which resistance is enacted by and through subjects, either as individuals or as collectives. Now, to speak of such methods as they relate to language is to speak of rhetoric. And from composition's perspective, it is to speak of textual rhetoric and of writing and the writing subject. In other words, if it is true that ideology can be enacted and/or resisted, and if this occurs (at least in part) as the writing of texts, and if the writing of texts is understood as a rhetorical process of invention-arrangement-style-memory-delivery, then the compelling theoretical questions for composition to ask are, "How does rhetorical activity—the act of generating discourse; specifically, the act of writing—produce and circulate effects that, always and only in retrospect, come to be termed ideological? And what are the features of and requirements to be a subject that generates this rhetorical activity?"

Althusser Without Guarantees:
The Birmingham Centre's Theory of Ideology

So, for compositionists, the part of Althusser's theory that sees ideology as practice can be of interest because it becomes, in turn, a way to think about writing. On the other hand, the part of his theory that sees ideology as what amounts to an ontology should be of less interest for two reasons. First, ideology-as-ontology does not stand up to theoretical scrutiny, especially when language is taken into account. Second, it is unnecessary. Althusser tries to hold the two visions of ideology in tension, but we can see that the attempt to do so is itself an effect of a hermeneutic imperative to account for something beyond the process of signification. In the
1970s, Stuart Hall and others at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies tried to work through this tension and, following Althusser, distinguished between the singular and plural forms of the word as a way of pursuing the matter further. I don’t think they resolved the problem entirely, but their elaboration of Althusser’s ideology as practice gives composition theorists a way to begin thinking about ideology theory in rhetorical ways.

In an important but unfortunately out-of-print volume from 1978 titled *On Ideology*, originally published in 1977 as *Working Papers in Cultural Studies No. 10*, Stuart Hall and other members of the Centre collaboratively address the question of ideology from a variety of perspectives, focusing in part on such figures as Marx, Lukács, Gramsci, Althusser, and others. Their discussion of Althusser highlights “his concern for rationality and scientificity” and his project to rid Marxist theory of its residual but still powerful humanist and historicist tendencies (77). They note that although his definitions and uses of ideology vary, Althusser identifies ideology as a “level” in the social formation, residing along with the political level in the superstructure, while the economic level comprises the base. They point out that the relationship between base and superstructure forms a unity “in which we find that the economic determines, *in the last instance*, the political and the ideological levels but at the same time is *overdetermined* by each of them.” They also note that Althusser “distinguishes between the element in a social formation which is determinant (which is always the economic) and that which is dominant” (79). This for him is a way of maintaining the fundamental role of the base while acknowledging and accounting for the complexity of relations between base and superstructure. They argue that Althusser’s writings comprise “an attack on vulgar, economistic and technologistic tendencies within marxism” that reduce and oversimplify relationships between the levels of the social formation by imposing a “crass determinism of the base on the superstructures” (83). In contrast to formulations of ideology arising from these tendencies and which consign it “to the surface of appearances,” Althusser stresses equivalences between levels, arguing that each has power to influence the other, despite the fact that the economic is always determinant (83). This is perhaps an overly optimistic reading of Althusser, who seems to be trying to have it both ways, as it were, by stressing equivalent levels on the one hand and final determinants on the other. Nevertheless, this reading does highlight and elaborate the tension that will eventually lead them to Gramsci and the theory of hegemony. Still, if the authors of *On Ideology*
are right, then Althusser’s ideology theory is perhaps not so overarchingly structural/ontological after all. Granted, Althusser claims that it is an ahistorical and overdetermining force that is difficult to identify, but in fact it is never impossible to identify because the concept of ideology is articulated in *ideologies*, which themselves are embodied in institutions or apparatuses. Ideologies, then, can be located and resisted. In fact, according to Althusser, such resistance is the task facing theory and philosophy in the service of class struggle.

But this reading suggests that ideology as such is of a fundamentally different order than are ideologies. It suggests that we are talking about two different things, not two versions of the same thing. Simply put, “ideology” cannot address specific applications arising from specific sets of relations, but there are plenty of “ideologies,” and we need only look at both large-scale and everyday struggles between people and institutions to find them. The analytical and critical work of the Birmingham Centre—and of cultural studies in general—gets done on the terrain of “ideologies,” which is actually the terrain of hegemony. And ultimately, Gramsci’s theory of hegemony, which pre-dates Althusser’s take on ideology by some forty years, is of more use to cultural studies as an analytic for the interpretation of culture. Likewise, hegemony might in the end prove to be a more helpful tool than ideology for the theorizing of writing and writing subjects. Unfortunately, with the important exception of Victor Villanueva’s discussion of Gramsci in *Bootstraps* and Lynn Worsham and Gary Olson’s interviews with Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, composition’s engagement with any theory of hegemony has yet to occur.  

**Interpellating the Subject: Judith Butler on Althusser’s Ideology**

In his adoption of Therborn’s ideology theory, Berlin describes a situation in which subjects are confronted with competing ideologies in which they are imbricated. The fact of dominance and subordination ensures that negotiating will not be easy, will not simply be a matter of individual choice. In fact, the ability to choose will have to be struggled for, and these choices will be understood as also ideologically driven. But the problem of interpellation remains unresolved in Berlin’s description of the relationship between subjects and ideologies, and it is a problem that traces back to Althusser: if the subject is a “point of intersection,” a product or function of ideological activity, how can we also say that the subject is interpellated into ideology without supposing that it has some form of pre-ideological status or existence?
In *The Psychic Life of Power*, Judith Butler addresses precisely this question through an analysis of Althusser’s ISAs essay. Here she asks the following question of the relation between the hailed/interpellated/constituted subject and the “call” or “voice” to which it responds: “What kind of relation already binds these two such that the subject knows to turn, knows that something is to be gained from such a turn? How might we think of this ‘turn’ as prior to subject formation, a prior complicity with the law without which no subject emerges?” (107). In other words, she wants to address the nature of this presubject from which the subject is said eventually to emerge after the interpellative act, after the subject is hailed into discourse. Butler’s analysis is important for compositionists in so far as it makes vivid, once more, the key problem of Althusser’s ideology theory: its imperative to distinguish decisively between discourse and experience, between language and reality, between word and thing.

Butler tries to address this problem by calling attention to the theological terminology that sustains Althusser’s theory. She argues that for Althusser interpellation takes on the character of a “divine performative” in which “the ‘voice’ of ideology, the ‘voice’ of interpellation,” like the voice of God, cannot be refused (110). Butler suggests that the voice’s act of naming—interpellating—cannot be carried out without “a certain readiness or anticipatory desire on the part of the one addressed” (111). You must be ready to receive the Word, if you are to receive It at all. This possibility of a relation prior to interpellation, and of a preexisting desire on the part of the presubject, suggests to Butler that the interpellation scene is “belated and redoubled,” a reenactment of what has already been determined, and that is now narrativized in discourse, through grammar (111). There is no way, in other words, to render the emergence of the Althusserian subject without resorting to the grammatical subject. There is no way to describe that which is extra-grammatical because description entails grammar.

Butler’s theory of redoubling, however, carries a hint of nostalgia for the idea of a prediscursive subject, and so it might be better simply to say that without the grammatical subject there is no other relevant subject to speak of. True, this grammatical subject, like all signifiers, points to, leaves a trace of, some signified; but this means that the Althusserian theory of subject formation (that is, the interpellation of presubjects into ideology and discourse) turns out to be an origin story, the story of the first instance (rather than the last), the beginning of signification. And if contemporary theorists are still trying to work through this problem, then
we might conclude that contemporary theory is not much further along toward a new articulation of ideology theory than Althusser was in the late 1960s. On the other hand, finally admitting the intractability of the grammatical subject might compel those of us in composition to theorize differently than we have. It might compel us to develop Miller's textual rhetoric, whereby we would theorize the "vehicle" of language and the "technology" of writing as being the very sites of writing/subject formation.

**Ideology in Rhetoric**

To this point, comprehensive or ontological theories of *rhetoric* and *ideology* have not been made to coexist in one theoretical formulation. And perhaps they can't. Berlin's tactic of subordination, whereby rhetoric is subsumed under ideology, may be necessary to a theory that sought to establish *ideology* as the ontological ground of composition. To instead give *rhetoric* such pride of place is, in a way, to resist ideology, if one agrees with Paolo Valesio that ideology is actually "decayed rhetoric—rhetoric that is no longer the detailed expression of strategies at work in specific discourses" (66). In Berlin's work, the elevation of ideology theory happens at the expense of rhetorical theory, as rhetoric is identified in this scheme as merely the distributor of hegemonic goods. In order for this subordination to work—that is, to cohere theoretically—ontological theories of rhetoric (such as Valesio's) must be ignored and, more importantly, future comprehensive theories of rhetoric must be foreclosed. Or, we can bring this matter even closer to composition's object of study by noting, as Baudrillard does in *The Perfect Crime*, that theories of ideology (such as Berlin's) simply ignore the (f)act of writing:

I ideological and moralistic critique, obsessed with meaning and content, obsessed with the political finality of discourse, never takes into account writing, the act of writing, the poetic, ironic, allusive force of language, of the juggling with meaning. It does not see that the resolution of meaning is to be found there—in the form itself, the formal materiality of expression. (103)

To put it still another way: ontological ideology theory, concerned to articulate a hermeneutic vision of being, will not be able to understand textual rhetoric.

Berlin's work assumes that writing carries ideological meaning, and it focuses on the need to discern that meaning and to speculate on the ways
such meaning gets inserted into writing. By doing so, his work articulates the writing subject as an interpreting subject—that is, in a writing class one who participates in what Bruce McComiskey calls “production criticism,” a process whereby students “gain a solid understanding of how texts produce certain social meanings” but “are not encouraged to formulate particular critical stances toward (or subjects positions in relation to) the key terms, oppositions, and narratives they find represented in social institutions and cultural artifacts” (23). In such a scheme, writing can only come in two forms. First, it is the already completed text (often but not exclusively graphic) that as a carrier of meaning is to be “read” by the interpreting subject. Second, writing is the activity by which the interpreting subject generates the results of the subject’s search for meanings within the first form. Just as the “read” text carries meaning to be discerned by the interpreting subject, so the “written” text carries meaning to be discerned by another interpreting subject, the writing teacher, thus transforming that “written” text instantly into another “read” text. The infinite regress of reading in search of ever-elusive meaning is underway.

I am suggesting, however, a more theoretically tenable way to arrange this constellation of subjects, actions, and objects, one requiring theorists to adhere to two distinct yet complementary positions. First is the understanding that to write is to act on a kind of faith, to act on the belief that “meaning” will issue at the supposed end of a signification process (that is, when one’s work is read). This requires, of course, a corresponding belief in the end of signification, in a result of writing that is something other than more of itself. To write is to expect to realize values located outside of writing—values such as the solving of a problem, the expression of an emotion, the achievement of justice, or the conveying of an idea. Writing subjects must believe writing to be a meaning-full activity in order for them to do it. The second, simultaneous position for theorists is the understanding that the end of signification never happens, that there is no end of writing, no payoff of meaning or value that is not itself writing. This is the understanding that the belief enabling writing is just that, a belief. It is not a logical or rational assumption or conclusion.

Writing theorized in this way involves first a necessary misrecognition, in this case the belief that one is effecting meaning (that is, attaching the descriptive figures of the symbolic order to their described counterparts in reality) rather than manipulating form (arranging descriptive figures of the symbolic order in relation to each other). But it also involves the
recognition of this misrecognition. To hold both is to understand, following Slavoj Žižek, that ideology works at the level of doing rather than knowing (30–33). For compositionists, it is to understand that ideology is not found in some supposedly latent content of writing but rather in the act of writing itself. To sit before a blank screen or empty notepad and begin the process of arranging graphic symbols is already to have begun acting ideologically, regardless of what the text, the artifact that will in retrospect be called a “piece of writing,” might “say.” Theorized in this way, ideology and writing both occur on the discursive surface, not in the epistemic depths.

This theorizing insists, then, on a comprehensive theory of the surface. This comprehensive theory is the description of the means by which the action of ideology takes place. But any theory of the surface is bound to be a part of that surface, and so not a theory as such, but more surface features. It is just another arrangement of the symbolic order. To invoke a familiar term, it is caught in the play of difference. But if writing is the activity of arranging the graphic figures of the symbolic (as I am doing now; or, as I will have done when you read this) in an act of believing/pretending to “mean,” then textual rhetoric might be the act of explaining how it is that when one writes one acts as if meaning were to issue. The fact that it never has, never does, and never will, because the arrangement of symbols (or signifiers) is only ever “understood” through the further arrangement of symbols, is precisely what textual rhetoric might try always to account for.

And what of the writing subject? If ideology is realized in the act of writing rather than in its hoped-for effects at a particular point in time, what can be said of “the one” who effects this graphic, symbolic arrangement? One way to think about the writing subject might be to say that the space of agency to which one assigns the name “writer” is necessarily elusive, not available to direct observation or to theorizing. That is, “the writer” is always identified after the (f)act, after textual remnants have turned up, even when empirical observation—through, for example, protocol analysis—is carried out on “the writer” in the act itself. These textual remnants—pieces of writing, protocols—serve as the evidence that an act of writing took place, that an action, writing, was perpetrated by an agent, a writing subject. At first glance, such an observation seems to reiterate the issues laid out by Derrida in “Signature Event Context,” where time is used as a wedge to pry open the black box of writing, its secret, which is that it does not “communicate” “ideas.” And I must confess that I’m willing to believe that theoretical explana-
tions of writing remain as situated in the late 1960s and 1970s as our theories of ideology.

The difference—or, at least, the difference for composition theory—is that unlike philosophy or theory as understood in other areas of English studies, composition theorizes the act of writing in the belief that interventions in this unavailable (unobservable, untheorizable) act can and must be made. In other words, composition is interested in improving writing processes and products, whatever that might mean at a given time. So it must assume the presence of, on the one hand, an empirically identifiable act and, on the other hand, a pedagogically available subject that performs this act. Composition, like writers, must proceed on faith, in the full belief that writing is the production of meaning and in the full belief that the writing subject controls this production. But it must also renounce that faith, as I have been suggesting here, in order to explain the act of writing more accurately.

And, as I have been suggesting, ideology theory plays a part in this near-theological drama. Despite its theoretical problems, I think it is still possible to say that "ideology" understood as action or practice is needed for theoretical explanations of writing, which is to say the development of textual rhetoric. I have tried to show how ideology theory has mistakenly been used to frame or ground composition rather than to help articulate it rhetorically, thus making discussion of "rhetoric and ideology in the writing class" a discussion of rhetoric in ideology for the interpreting class. By going back to Althusser and highlighting theoretical problems in ideology theory itself, I have tried to show how and why this subordination of rhetoric to ideology is a consequence of those prior problems. In the discourse of ideology of which Althusser is the source, ideology's quasi-ontological status is almost axiomatic. Only its particular dimensions and contours are fruitfully debated. Yet, Althusser himself seems to argue against this position, particularly when the question of agency arises. My position, that "ideology" is a term to be deployed within a framework of rhetorical theory rather than a master concept explaining all features of existence, might help composition theorists better conduct their own future investigations.

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Notes

1. For example, see France, Mutnick, and Sidler and Morris.
2. This statement is part of her critique of Foucault. According to Spivak, his work’s inability to attend to “the subject-constituting register of ideology because of its tenacious commitment to the sub-individual and, at the other end, the great aggregative apparatuses” forces Foucault to assume “the empirical subject, the intending subject, the self even” (252).
3. In addition to Alcorn and Murphy as early engagements with, rather than applications of, Berlin’s work, see Harkin. Also, see Ballif, McComiskey, Miller (“Technologies”), and Paine as more recent responses to Berlin’s call. Ballif, in particular, is interested in the theoretical rather than pedagogical dimensions of Berlin’s work.
4. In fact, the language of “equivalences” and “levels” anticipates Laclau and Mouffe’s critical lexicon in Hegemony and Socialist Strategy.
5. But Bootstraps subordinates rhetoric to ideology in the same way that Berlin’s work does. Villanueva writes: “Rhetoric, after all, is how ideologies are carried, how hegemonies are maintained. Rhetoric, then, would be the means by which hegemonies could be countered” (121).

Works Cited


Ballif, Michelle. Seduction, Sophistry, and the Woman with the Rhetorical Figure. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2001.


