Ideology into Discourse: A Historical Perspective

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As Clifford Geertz noted over a decade ago, ideology is generally used by academicians as a "thoroughly evaluative (that is, pejorative)" term. The word has, in fact, been thought of historically as a form of "radical intellectual depravity" (197) even in fairly sophisticated intellectual contexts. Though this is still largely the case, the term ideology, as used in recent post-structural discourse, is not meant to refer to intellectual error or deviation from scientific objectivity. In discourse theory, for example, the reference to ideology has little to do with overtly held political doctrine or even a coherent system of beliefs. Instead, it is used to refer to systems of meaning, to the sum of ways in which we work and live, and to the symbolic ways we represent our existence to ourselves. Ideology is the very condition of our experience of the world, "unconscious precisely in that it is unquestioned, taken for granted" (Belsey 5).

The Role of Ideology

According to Catherine Belsey, ideology is "inscribed in discourse . . . it is not a separate element which exists independently in some free-floating realm of ideas . . . but a way of thinking, speaking, experiencing" (5). In post-structural theory, it is now a commonplace that, however innocent and neutral the form and substance of discourse appears on the surface, it is thoroughly imbued with the biases, constraints, opinions and variable judgments of a specific intellectual community. As Diane Macdonell says, "All discourses are ideologically positioned; none are neutral" (59).

In this climate, the idea that the history of discourses like criticism and composition is implicated in a network of ideological forces is not unusual. Michel Foucault's The Archaeology of Knowledge, for example, urges us to look beyond the limiting perspective of our own historical moment to search for the subtle ways politics and society influence our discourse. When we are under the sway of a particular episteme or paradigm, we are not likely to see the need to examine our own values. Our concepts of knowledge and truth will not seem to be constraints; rather, they will seem normal, commonsensical. This, in fact, is when ideology is most effectively hegemonic—when one's thinking feels natural, beyond question.

Yet, one does not have to be a Marxist to be impressed by Terry Eagleton's recent assertion that "any body of theory concerned with human meaning, values, language, feeling, and experience will inevitably engage with broader, deeper beliefs about the nature of
human individuals and societies..." (Literary Theory 195). In other words, composition and literary theory cannot help but be bound up with the political and ideological values of the age in which they are embedded. Like Kenneth Burke's anecdote about the cocktail party conversation joined in progress, our contributions to the professional conversation in English are greatly circumscribed by the context established by the discipline's already privileged discourse.

As we become initiated into our academic groupings through their discourse, we unconsciously absorb a given discipline's accepted epistemology and its political and ethical attitudes. It is this process, according to the Marxist philosopher, Louis Althusser, that enables the values of the larger society to be reproduced in educational institutions. In Althusser's re-reading of Marx, ideology, with discourse its major vehicle, installs us in an imaginary relationship to the real way we are constituted within the university. To most department members, scholarship and teaching seem apolitical, but Althusser asserts that it is a function of ideology to create the illusion of disinterest. Ironically, the explicit values of our traditional literary and rhetorical discourse, such as autonomy and neutral inquiry, discourage us from a full understanding of the traditions and paradoxes inherent in our work. So it is our own belief in the apolitical objectivity of our discourse that masks our complicity with values we would not consciously choose.

Naturally, this position is not enthusiastically embraced by humanists who still hold to the traditional belief that the individual's "unfettered consciousness is the origin of meaning, knowledge and action" (Belsey 67). We want our theory and practice to be guided by disinterested ideas, by intellectual standards uncontaminated by competing ideological pulls. We assume that compelling academic values like integrity and objectivity will be compromised if our professional thinking and behavior is deeply influenced by institutional and departmental politics. If our theories about criticism and composition were forced into their present channels by historical contingencies of power and survival, then we might feel less autonomous, more "fettered." So we profess intellectual independence, repressing for our own peace of mind the intimate connections of culture and power that Althusser, Foucault, and others have uncovered.

The implications of such thinking are provocative and potentially illuminating. We can expect theorists to turn their attention to (re)writing the history of rhetoric and criticism, using Althusser's and Foucault's ideas as fruitful heuristics. Such studies will examine journals, scholarly papers, and professional documents without slighting the social and political environment in which these texts took root. I would like to suggest one possible avenue these revisionist studies might take by speculating about the relationship between two discourses—one in criticism, the other in composition—as they have evolved over two generations.

But first, I would like to propose the following perspective, sug-
gested by the ways discourse and ideology meld in English departments: our departmental historians have, until quite recently, ignored the relationship between composition and criticism because they have assumed that each is a radically distinct discourse, each with separate historical roots. What they have underestimated is the extent to which both were subjected to institutional and historical forces that conflated the differences that would normally exist. Over time, both discourses demonstrated comparable epistemologies and pedagogies, mirroring each other's concern for technique and methodology.

**Power and Evolving Discourses**

From an ideological perspective, the English department that emerged from the last century was already saturated with values and attitudes from the larger world and burdened with concepts about language that were to influence English studies for two generations. These newly formed departments did not yet have enough authority within the university to create a discipline with values different from those already privileged by the new intellectual model in 1900: the sciences. Consequently, English studies looked to German philology for its model and adopted its ostensibly apolitical, rigorous, and meticulous methodology. Steven Mailloux points out that this politically astute imitation eventually made possible the successful institutionalization of English (633). American society then, as now, was mystified and entranced by all things scientific, and the English department's adaptation of the discourse of philology was certainly made to sound scientific. English literature was studied and taught systematically, with scholars mainly interested in collecting, cataloging, indexing, and tabulating data. These insecure departments, eager for institutional credibility, would not tolerate discourse with either impressionistic or sociopolitical overtones. Both kinds of discourse existed but were effectively disenfranchised from taking part in sanctioned conversations in scholarly journals and conferences.

This theoretically limited enterprise was, by contemporary standards, more pedestrian science than literary humanism. Yet, its unproblematic quietism and socially irrelevant discourse were quickly accepted in the conservative universities of the time as appropriate scholarship. Composition and rhetoric were not. Still nervous about their own status, literary scholars defensively treated composition and its instructors with disdain. Since rhetorical theory had, for decades, been drained of intellectual content, it had little chance to develop an acceptable discourse. It was, therefore, anathema for anyone hoping for professional advancement. Alienated on the margins of the department, composition instructors had few alternatives to joining the conversation already in progress. Unmoored from a vital rhetorical tradition that might have given it substance, composition theory was reduced to formulaic exercises based on arguable distinctions in usage and style. Not surprisingly,
usage handbooks were beginning to be used extensively because they provided instructors charged with the teaching of grammar at least the semblance of authority.

There were alternative voices, of course; there is always an oppositional discourse. Composition progressives like Fred Newton Scott railed against the "incessant writing of outlines" (Stewart 735). But his voice in the conversation was ignored, his discourse rejected. His more progressive theories about writing would only be translated into practice if they could comfortably be inserted into the prevailing sociopolitical dialogue of the department, that is, if they were ideologically compatible. As it was, Scott's ideas would have to wait almost three generations for a more sympathetic and politically conducive climate to develop.

Instead, for the first four decades of this century, composition instructors had no professional option but to imitate the positivist gestures of literary scholars, in the process merely paralleling philology's scientific methods. A typical class, for example, might focus primarily on constructing an \textit{a priori}, multi-leveled outline, followed by drills in grammar and perhaps a recitation of rules on paragraphing. Although some progressives in 1912 saw this "as a farce if not a tragedy" (Hopkins 5), this concern with the technical and superficial continued unabated for fifty years. As has been characteristic until recently, the vast majority of writing instructors held literature and its historical apparatus in awe. They often lacked the will, desire, or means to see their classroom work as inherently valuable except as a service to the university or as an initiation rite into the sacred grounds of literature. Since they could not officially acquire training in either rhetoric or composition, writing teachers worked from the valued center they knew: they shadowed the behavior of their literary colleagues. For example, in a desperate attempt to give substance and status to composition, writing instructors borrowed the conventional trappings of historical investigators by adopting the research paper, to quote Knoblauch and Brannon, as their "holy of holies." This gesture was hollow, however, since uncovering new information was never the main purpose. Critical thinking was rarely stressed, and critique was a tertiary concern. The enterprise was mostly quoting conventions and bibliographies, a pale imitation of philology's discourse.

All through the twenties and thirties, the pedagogy of composition and literature urged students to imitate and respect professional discourse that was unproblematic and asitualional. In this positivist framework, most problems were simply methodological. And although literary study was hardly less detached and mechanical, composition's theoretical status declined even further, beyond its already marginal status. This debasement prevented serious inquiry into writing, making it an intellectual wasteland without theory and opposition; consequently, composition was frozen at an impotent and formulaic stage, its instructors as professionally marginalized as its discourse.
Voices in literary criticism gradually began speaking out against the authority of this intellectually anemic historical model. During the twenties, for example, I. A. Richards and T. S. Eliot became harbingers of a new discourse that was steadily gathering force. Some years later, the persuasive rhetoric of Cleanth Brooks, John Crowe Ransom and Allen Tate did, in fact, shift the profession's conversation not only away from history, but away from all contexts—readers and writers included. In the forties and fifties, literary study was revamped around the close reading of canonical texts. Tate eventually won acceptance for his belief that the critic should try to objectify criticism through rigorous formal analysis. For these new voices, the poem was only to be understood as poem, not as a symbolic explanation of experience, not as social critique. In retrospect, it is clear that this distancing of the content of poetry from reality deliberately made sociopolitical matters irrelevant. New Criticism thus inaugurated the hermetic perspective, one that narrowed the attention of literary criticism to explications of difficult poetry and that focused on resolution of paradoxes, tensions, and ambiguities.

Conventional literary historians were quickly vanquished by this more rigorous discourse that valued the apolitical. The strategic philosophical move that allowed critics to ignore the trauma of history was their assertion that literary language is of a different ontological order than ordinary language, in that it is both autonomous, neutral, and free from contaminating subjectivity. The internal coherence and equipoise of poetry thus provided an illusory escape from politics and ideology. This "anti-political defense of poetry," according to William Cain, "dovetailed with the academic needs of English studies" (98).

In the early forties, those needs were primarily to establish English as an autonomous discipline, with a discourse distinct from, say, history and chemistry. Critics wanted to position themselves as specialists, trained in the secrets of a discourse that could uncover knowledge unavailable to other disciplines. Literature would, therefore, be uniquely worthy of study. This intellectually and institutionally astute justification, coupled with the large increase in the student population after the war, enabled English departments to become large and powerful, and, thereby, unlikely to skeptically question the assumptions largely responsible for their influential status. And so the formalist dogma, according to Mailloux, was quickly "reproduced and disseminated within a growing profession" (636). In both their theory and practice, the New Critics quickly solidified their monopoly on professional discourse.

As in earlier decades, composition instructors, still removed from the centers of influence in the department, were unable to articulate a separate theoretical framework. Instead, they again merely reproduced the values of the dominant literary discourse. The hegemony of formalist thinking in literature also shaped writing programs and, in the process, diverted composing from ethical
or social considerations, focusing it instead on the literary/expository essay, and its adequacy of evidence, its logic of organization and the propriety of its surface features. Writing instruction became synonymous with style and editing. The discourse of New Criticism was thus adapted to composition in the guise of current-traditional rhetoric. Both aped the precision and systematic objectivity of what James Berlin calls "the scientific and technical world view" (62). Both focused exclusively on the text, slighting audience and writers; both held positivist views of language and reality; both represented apolitical, asituational ways of responding to experience. But, of course, the compatibility of their epistemological stances did not carry over into departmental equality. Writing instructors were still exploited, and composition was still fictionalized as inherently utilitarian, while literature was privileged as a humanizing force.

From a post-structuralist perspective, this hierarchy is fragile indeed, since one can just as easily take the opposite perspective: seeing New Criticism's political inertia and orthodoxy as inculcating the mind-set of mass society, and perceiving composition as becoming a radical transformative act. It is also easy to ascribe political motives to literature specialists, accusing them of constructing and vigorously maintaining these fictional oppositions between literature and nonliterature, between the academy and the real world, as tactics for stabilizing their own departmental status. But New Critics professed innocence in any political maneuvering. They were simply asserting what was obviously the case: composition was constituted by ordinary language and was therefore inferior and radically other. Literary study, it was repeatedly asserted, would save us from an alienating technological world, while composition and those who taught it were collaborators with that demeaning world, not allies of art. In retrospect, it is difficult to know if this posture was willfully naive or not, but apparently little notice was given to Kenneth Burke's insight that "wherever you find a doctrine of 'nonpolitical' esthetics affirmed with fervor, look for its politics" (28).

A New Discourse

At the end of the sixties, after a generation of almost total supremacy, the absolute reign of the formalist perspective was seriously contested, causing in Foucault's sense, a rupture—not simply a sudden leap in thinking but a radically new way of looking at reading and writing. The sociopolitical turmoil of the time was a catalyst for this apparent paradigmatic shift, raising academic consciousness of the connections between the English department, the university, and the larger society. The probing questions about the ethics of America's societal values and the legitimacy of political authority inevitably spread to a scrutiny of previously unexamined assumptions in criticism and, simultaneously, in composition.

Progressives found both discourses to be flawed, since both failed to meet new demands for social relevance and personal participa-
The authority of English studies was eroding dramatically as its central tenets were challenged on all fronts. The public loss of faith in America's institutional values had a ripple effect that eventually found its way into the university, casting doubt on the neutrality and ethical status of our critical and rhetorical dogma. In retrospect, the flood of theoretical articles and books in both fields during this time is cogently explained by Elizabeth Bruss' observation that theories proliferate only when established rationales are in doubt, when traditional guidelines have broken down. Bruss goes on to list the social causes for this disenchantment: a sense of personal isolation, frustration with aloof social structures, mysterious politics and a valueless technological pursuit of mastery. She notes that intellectuals were suspicious of "fixed hierarchies, received traditions and covert understandings of all sorts" (18). It is not hard to see explicit parallels between these social grievances and the discourse of English studies in 1965.

Criticism's claims of objectivity were uncovered as a mask for perpetuating the status quo, while the formal tyrannies of the deductive essay were judged by reformers to be out of step with the active participatory impulses of the early seventies. Progressives in English studies, frustrated by the negative admonitions of New Criticism's intentional and affective fallacies and composition's arid error-hunting, undertook a positive search for a praxis more in harmony with their deeply held ethical and political values. Developing such a discourse is, as Bakhtin notes, not a project for a single voice, crying in the wilderness: "Language is not a neutral medium that passes freely and easily into the private property of the speaker's intentions; it is populated—overpopulated—with the intentions of others. Expropriating it, forcing it to submit to one's own intentions and accents, is a difficult and complicated process" (294). Nevertheless, strong feelings of commitment and solidarity among thousands of university instructors across class and gender barriers gave unusual discursive power to their oppositional struggles. The enthusiasm and diversity of the theories that were developed through struggle suggest how suffocating the hegemony of the formalists actually was, and how much it held a repressed liberatory spirit in both disciplines in check.

Reader-response theory is typical of the extent to which the discourse of close reading was challenged. Rejecting the authority of Wimsatt and Beardsley's "affective fallacy," response theorists declared that the poem is what it does; therefore, readers were encouraged to articulate their moment-to-moment subjective responses. As Jane Tompkins notes, these affirmations of the reader's importance "attacked the foundations of positivism itself" (224). Theorists meant to signal a fundamental break with the past by problematizing the nature of reality prior to language, thus declaring "the objectivity on which science bases its superiority a fiction" (224).

Louise Rosenblatt's endorsement of the poem as "an active event in time" (12) and reading as "an active, self-ordering and self-
corrective process" (11) finds easy parallels in the composing-process theories of Janet Emig and Donald Murray that were just beginning to gain acceptance 15 years ago. Reception and process theory, in Eagleton's terms, "redramatize the democratic participatory forces unleashed in political society" (The Function 93). Both theories foregrounded the temporal and experiential nature of reading and writing; both highlighted the importance of context; both conceived of the search for knowledge and truth as a dialectical process; both refused to efface personal and social concerns; and both refused to fragment the self with separate and different sets of values for the academy and for society. Reformers wanted literature and writing to engage "the full range of their humanity" (Berlin 777).

The epistemological similarities here are striking and could be extended to the student-centered, collaborative pedagogies associated with these discourses. There is, however, a significant difference between the literary and composition parallels in the seventies and the previous parallels. Because of the fissure in departmental authority, composition instructors were able to enter the departmental conversation as theorists, delineating a philosophical framework capable of moving outside the shadow of literary studies, judiciously borrowing from rhetoric, psychology, linguistics, and philosophy. Without the policing action of a unified critical discourse, composition theory was able to flourish. Not without opposition, of course, but there was and still is so much dissent in literature's own house that there was little energy left to suppress a discourse growing in strength and influence in the university.

This historical sketch of composition suggests that without a theory one's professional destiny can easily be left in unsympathetic hands. Theory is a necessary check on classroom practice, helping us all to avoid mindless contradictions, but it is much more. It is a matter of political survival. You can't contribute to the on-going conversation of a discipline if you are not even let into the room.

The Future of Our Discourse

Clearly, composition theorists today are better able to influence the direction of their own theoretical discourse than ever before. The discourse of English departments is, of course, still dominated by literary specialists, but composition's growing scholarly achievement has gained a measure of independence for its theorists. This strong, new position has been, for example, a bulwark against the "back-to-the-basics" movement connected with the present conservative ideology of some educational leaders. Instead of merely following literature's lead or succumbing to political pressure, composition specialists have mounted a convincing rationale for not regressing to the skills and drills of a discredited past. With credibility comes the power to resist.

Although Maxine Hairston's arguments about "breaking our bonds" are understandable, especially in a historical context, inde-
pendence from literary study does not seem to me to be the *sine qua non* of composition's discourse. In retrospect, it can be seen that New Criticism atrophied by building walls against other disciplines. Integrating both reading and writing into a discourse that could combine craft with critique seems a most promising strategy. Ann Berthoff, for example, cogently urges us to build philosophical laboratories in which literature and composing are compatible, reinforcing ways of making meaning. And Frank Lentricchia's socialist reading of Kenneth Burke in *Criticism and Social Change* is yet another model—one that unifies criticism and rhetoric around Burke's desire for an enlightened community. Lentricchia's sense of responsibility for the reformation of the larger society prompts him to believe that criticism and rhetoric can work together in developing in students the kind of critical consciousness that might transform society. Such an effort would, Lentricchia hopes, help us "integrate the separate levels of our lives: to make us whole again beyond confusion" (151).

This optimistic possibility suggests another, final observation: recent attention to ideology suggests that we are powerfully contained by our disciplinary discourse, that we are burdened and belated voices in the conversation of English studies. But we are not helpless. Even though it appears as if our departmental discourses are part of an ideological web, these uses of language do not have to enmesh our thinking completely. Foucault's work strongly suggests that knowledge is shaped less by ideas than the institutional dimensions of discourse. But even this observation does not force us into a crudely deterministic sphere. The ideas of Althusser and Foucault have been sensibly modified by Michel Pêcheux and others to include not only contradiction but also communal struggle. Pêcheux, for example, analyzes three ideological positions we can take toward our discourse: we can identify with the professional image held out to us, we can simply deny it, or we can act antagonistically, working to transform and displace the values of the ruling discourse (Macdonell 38-41). This last position can give us feelings of optimism about ideology, suggesting that for progressive literary and composition theorists, an informed self-consciousness about the complex sources of our thinking and writing can inspire us to intervene in the departmental conversation with critical but hopeful voices willing to share discursive power.

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**Works Cited**


