Some Observations on Freire's
Pedagogy of the Oppressed

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It may seem silly to return to a book published in 1972 that, by now, has been read by everyone who is likely to read it, that appears as a standard reference in NCTE journal articles, that has become staple fare in graduate seminars on composition theory, that has even been acknowledged in such "popular" works as Jonathan Kozol's Illiterate America: in short, a book that has attained, by the standards of academic publishing, an iconic stature—cited everywhere, whether read or not, because hearsay knowledge alone authorizes reference to it as a seminal argument for "critical" literacy. The question "What does Paulo Freire say in Pedagogy of the Oppressed?" can hardly be a serious one under the circumstances.

But other questions promise less hackneyed answers. For instance, how is Freire's book actually situated in the midst of Ronald Reagan's America? What can an argument about literacy as an instrument of political enfranchisement and social change contribute to an educational setting where public policy values literacy either as a vocational skill (like welding), which renders its bearer minimally serviceable at some level in the economic hierarchy, or else as a badge of membership in Western Civilization, where speaking the English language (correctly), reading the Great Books (correctly), and intellectualizing ethnocentrism enable privileged groups to distinguish and protect themselves from "outsiders"? What is a book that frankly celebrates the literacy movements of Cuba and Nicaragua doing in a country that, these days, might well prefer to invade Cuba and Nicaragua if only it could discover a plausible justification? What is a book whose bibliography offers a who's who of Marxist political philosophers doing in a place where back-to-basics, nation-at-risk educational praxis is ratified by sundry appeals to the pragmatic, can-do spirit of Benjamin Franklin, the postlapsarian anxiety of John Calvin, or the Japan-bashing militarism of American business interests? Not least, how has such a book achieved so glamorous a status in composition studies in light of the field's prevailing commitments to classical discourse theory, traditional historicism, and objectivist research? And what may its value be even for the educational left, so long as "academic" (read: disengaged) Marxism sulks impotently in small corners of universities, while a deconstructive intellectual fashion trivializes any call to social action?

Several facts about Pedagogy of the Oppressed make its easy familiarity
among rhetoric and composition specialists more than a little incongruous. The most obvious of them is that its revolutionary political and educational agendas are starkly opposed to prevailing American values and beliefs, even as they are institutionalized in the National Council of Teachers of English, a comparatively progressive body by American standards but nonetheless blandly centrist on the character and future directions of schooling. What might the official NCTE response be to Freire's list of the features of oppressive school practice? What might be the response of the rest of the country, were it to satisfy its curiosity about Kozol's references? (It hasn't yet and probably won't.) According to Freire's concept of "banking education," the depositing of "correct" information in passive student minds as a means of reproducing a dominant socioeconomic order embodies the following characteristics:

- "The teacher teaches and the students are taught."
- "The teacher knows everything and the students know nothing."
- "The teacher thinks and the students are thought about."
- "The teacher talks and the students listen."
- "The teacher disciplines and the students are disciplined."
- "The teacher chooses and enforces his choice, and the students comply."
- "The teacher acts and the students have the illusion of acting through the action of the teacher."
- "The teacher chooses the programme content, and the students (who were not consulted) adapt to it."
- "The teacher confuses the authority of knowledge with his own professional authority, which he sets in opposition to the freedom of the students."
- "The teacher is the subject of the learning process, while the pupils are mere objects." (46-47)

Sound familiar? The Department of Education might well envy the succinctness with which its own program for renewed "excellence" in the schools is here replicated, were it not for Freire's insistence that this agenda offers everything we ought to fear in a country that claims to venerate freedom. Freire's alternative agenda—problem-posing education in which students and teachers participate, through dialogue, as free subjects in the ceaseless reconstituting of their social reality—must surely be an unpalatable, not to mention potentially illegal, counterproposal, dangerously subversive of the interests of the state and the prerogatives of the academic establishment.

Indeed, a second fact about Pedagogy of the Oppressed is that it opposes the principal commitments of that establishment, including composition studies, to objectivist inquiry and static historicism in the service of authoritarian administrative, curricular, and instructional pri-
orities. Objectivist research turns human beings and their life-worlds into sterile models and statistical averages, the better to monumentalize a social order in which meritocratic educational hierarchies (supported by an enormously profitable testing and measurement industry) and autocratic, one-directional "channels" of communication (supported by an equally profitable textbook industry) are allowed to flourish. It encourages the myth of specialized knowledge that entitles researchers, administrators, and teachers themselves to turn instructional practice into a form of benevolent paternalism: "Whatever the specialty that brings ['professionals'] into contact with the people, they are almost unshakeably convinced that it is their mission to 'give' the latter their knowledge and techniques" (124). Meanwhile, the static historicism of traditionalist rhetorical theory encourages a cozy reading of the past as vindication of hegemonic values of the present, a manner of thinking that Freire calls "naive" as opposed to "critical," in which historical time is equivalent to Nietzsche's "inherited grayness," a weight of tradition and established practice to which the present looks with meek gratefulness for standards of normalcy, proper behavior, and belief. "For the naive thinker," Freire argues, "the important thing is accommodation to this normalized 'today.' For the critic, the important thing is the continuing transformation of reality, for the sake of . . . continuing humanization" (65).

A third fact about Freire's book is that its arguments have emerged, not from the fashionable academic debates of the American scholarly left, but from practical involvement in the lives of subjugated Third World peoples. To read Freire sympathetically is to find not a merely chic introduction to social constructionism or dialogics, but a moral imperative, as well as a conceptual starting-point for educational activism and social change. The success of Freire's literacy programs among the peasants of northeastern Brazil during the 1960s earned him a stay in prison and a strong recommendation (which he wisely accepted) to leave the country. His liberation pedagogy is a hazardous undertaking, designed to jeopardize established institutional order in the name of socioeconomic justice. Freire's teaching life has implied rejection of the safety of scholarly disengagement: he stands somewhere and enacts his commitments in the world. Freire speaks forthrightly of the "reality of oppression," as though there truly are world-situations that are intolerable affronts to human freedom; and of the "struggle for liberation," as though there were something concrete to be done about them. His book is supposed to be as dangerous as his commitments, an invitation to critical consciousness and deliberate revolutionary praxis.

Freire's position opposes, therefore, more than the comfortable self-interest of the powerful and privileged; it also opposes the amoral linguistic indulgences of academic "deconstructionism," which ventures far enough to critique the subtle manipulations of discourse but not far enough to "denounce the world" insofar as discursive practices enable or validate oppression. There is no paralytic intellectual reflexiveness in
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Freire to undermine political action, although there is sufficient awareness of the egocentrism of commitment to stimulate continuous critical self-evaluation. "The truly committed must reject the banking concept [of education]," he writes. "They must abandon the educational goal of deposit-making and replace it with the posing of the problems of men in their relations with the world" (52). Absent here is the rhetoric of noninvolvement that the American scholarly community, the left no less than the right, generally prefers as the signature of its "objectivity" and intellectual "generosity"—a pose that means comfortable inactivity for some and discrete commitment to the status quo for others, either a release from the responsibilities of choice-making or an unproblematic, indeed often unconscious, satisfaction with one choice.

If traditionalists tend toward the latter condition, deconstructive critics are inclined to the former, which they rationalize by means of an (oddly) aggressive "stance" on the privilege—they would say inescapability—of standing nowhere. From such a perspective, Freire is entitled to speak his word, but not to believe it, still less to act upon it, and not to advance it with any conviction that might belie its unstably figurative nature. If he is to speak about dialogue, he may do so only in a dialogical, not in a committed, way. Freire's answer, however, is that there is no negotiating the necessity of dialogue in the world; it stands as an imperative enabling directed social action: "Human existence cannot be silent, nor can it be nourished by false words... To exist, humanly, is to name the world, to change it. Once named, the world in its turn reappears to the namers as a problem and requires of them a new naming. Men are not built in silence, but in word, in work, in action-reflection" (60-61). The educational activist accepts the paradox of maintaining critical reflectiveness while making choices in the world, continuously scrutinizing the assumptions that underlie action, to be sure, but also taking positions at cost to the philosophic (if otherwise imaginary) purity of "absolute" dialogue.

And so, again, the question: how is Freire's book situated amidst the political and intellectual realities of contemporary American life? One must concede that by his own line of reasoning Freire's educational praxis, emerging from the concrete socioeconomic circumstances of Brazil and Chile, provides no blueprint for transformative action amidst vastly different cultural conditions. At best, his book offers a context of values and assumptions that might inspire and, in a more limited way, guide motivated citizens to undertake educational reform in the interest of a closer approximation of social justice than contemporary life provides. One starting-point for that reform is a serious critique of the concepts of "functional" and "cultural" literacy that now dominate the American imagination, ideas particularly well suited to rationalizing the status quo by emphasizing the need to "train" outsiders to be (properly subordinate) insiders while purging ethnic and other threatening differences in the name of a mythic cultural cohesiveness. Freire's is a dissenting voice, representing the hope that Americans will not lose their will to scrutinize and
reconstitute educational reality because of an impoverished capacity to envision alternatives. What is certain is that educational practice will change and that human beings will change it; Freire offers ethical energy and direction, an awareness of difference and freedom of choice needed to change educational practice in benevolent ways.

It would be reassuring to know that the academic establishment stands ready to sustain this sense of difference in its own conversations. But one is obliged to wonder. To the extent that Pedagogy of the Oppressed has achieved a merely popular, iconic stature among composition specialists, it exists only as a trivialized, domesticated reading. A small circle of activists seeks an authentic transformation of Freire's arguments: Ann Berthoff, for instance, whom Freire has praised as one of the few Americans to have fully grasped his meanings, and Ira Shor, who is working to situate Freire's thematic investigations and dialogic encounters amidst the social conditions of the community college. But beyond the agitations of a few individuals, representing at best a minor ripple of opposition in the contemporary academic establishment, Freire's ideas belong merely to the lore of composition studies, not necessarily understood, believed, or acted upon, but widely promulgated in the service of a currently popular sociological or dialogical rhetoric.

Social constructionism (shorn of its implications for political action) is all the rage in composition theory these days, having acquired the same curious momentum that "process" theory enjoyed through the 1970s as a sign of the intellectual center of the discipline. The 1988CCCC convention in Saint Louis was fairly aglow with talk about social reality, discourse communities, and praxis. One can be quite sure, however, that when roving, and normally warring, bands of cognitive psychologists, text linguists, philosophers of composition, historians of rhetoric, Marxist critics, post-structuralists, and reader-response theorists all wax equally enthusiastic about "the social construction of reality," there is a good chance that the expression has long since lost its capacity to name anything important or even very interesting.

It will be sad if a similar fate overtakes Pedagogy of the Oppressed, which contains at its center an enduring faith in the power of the word—as differentiated, active meaning—to transform speaking subjects and the worlds they speak. The book intends to be taken seriously. The question is whether it can escape the homogenizing process that we turn loose upon different and differentiating texts when we have powerful enough incentive to prefer the world as it is.