

Eluding Righteous Discourse: A Discreet Politics for New Writing Curricula

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In one of Roland Barthes' interviews, the interviewer notes that "[Barthes'] relation to politics is extremely discreet," to which Barthes replies:

Discreet, but obsessed. I would first like to make a distinction which may seem somewhat specious to you, but it is quite valid to me: between "the political" and "politics." To me, the political is a fundamental order of history, of thought, of everything that is done, and said. It's the very dimension of the real. Politics, however, is something else, it's the moment when the political changes into the same old story, the discourse of repetition. My profound interest in the attachment of the political is equaled only by my intolerance of political discourse. Which doesn't make my situation very easy. (*Grain* 218)

For the writing program administrator or faculty member interested in creating a writing program that attends to the inextricable bonds between ideology and discourse, Barthes' intriguing distinction between "the political" and "politics" may be useful. After all, Barthes has long been recognized as a theorist who insists that ideology, not only in writing but in all cultural productions, is inescapable. One of his earliest books, *Mythologies* (1957), seeks to uncover the ideological forces at work in things we might assume to be "natural" about everything from writers to wine, from toys to laundry detergents. When Barthes confesses an "intolerance of political discourse," we know that whatever he means, he is not one to side with those who claim that the political dimension of language should, or can, be kept out of the classroom.

Nevertheless, we cannot ignore the fact that, here and elsewhere, Barthes disparages politics as repetitive, predicatable, and ultimately boring. To watch a campaign debate or a session in Congress is to know what he means. No matter which side is speaking, the language is almost always what Barthes calls "arrogant," rather than exploratory, in its relationship to knowledge. In other words, political discourse--about writing programs, for instance--tends to assume that it has already found

the answer. *We should do this, we should do that.* The presumptuous reiterations that characterize politics confront Barthes, situated on the left, with a thorny contradiction:

The heart of my personal problem is that there is an arrogant leftist discourse: I'm divided between my situation within a political site and the aggressions of discourse coming from this site. (*Grain* 219)

Likewise, I have found myself split between my desire for a writing program that will acknowledge the ubiquity of "the political" and my distaste for an agenda which aggressively limits classes to writing papers on issues of "politics."

And I am not alone. From what I have gleaned recently at conferences and in journals, there are a good number of us who feel nothing but antipathy for Bloom, Bennett, Cheney, D'Souza, et al., yet who also believe we need not insist that writing courses focus on racism and sexism (as in Linda Brodkey's proposed course at the University of Texas) simply because writing courses are "always already" political. Janet McNew, for instance, notes that the freewheeling use of the term "politics" by poststructuralist academics has confused many inside and outside the academy, who assume that the "politicized" classroom must be exactly what we all know the classroom should *not* be: a site of political indoctrination. McNew asks that we reconsider our terminology in an attempt to clear up the misunderstandings: "Often I think we could usefully and not deceptively substitute other terms—*ethics* or *values*, perhaps—for *politics* in some of our discussion" (42). In other words, as Barthes indicates, connotations associated with "politics" suggest reduction, banality, and forced cooperation, anything but what we hope to inaugurate by increasing student awareness of "the political" in all realms of life.

Perhaps the distinction between these terms is not so specious after all.

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One of the issues that I have often discussed with colleagues and have confronted as the director of a writing program is the extent to which the reading and writing in a composition class should deal with explicit politics. Now that we have recognized the crucial role that *reading* plays in one's progress as a writer, our writing courses clearly cannot escape the serious issues confronting literature courses about diversity, canonical texts, and the political dimension of our choices. While my colleagues and

I usually agree that composition research has demonstrated rather conclusively that students cannot simply be taught writing "skills" apart from content, we may be far from agreement on what that content should be. What I find at times compelling and at other times ludicrous is the suggestion, generally made by those on the Left, that because all classrooms are inevitably political, we should emphasize issues of politics such as race, class, gender, oppression, resistance, empowerment, and environmental destruction. This argument can be made with considerable eloquence, and I have occasionally been convinced of its merits. A few years ago, I helped co-design a new course for developmental writers at an urban university in Brooklyn. The reading list consisted of books selected to address, one by one, the struggles of African Americans, women, the poor, foreigners, resisters of the Argentine military, and Jews imprisoned at Auschwitz, followed by a second semester on social and natural environmental crises in New York City neighborhoods, on Native American reservations, at Hiroshima, and in the world at large. Perhaps we should not have been surprised to hear so many students and faculty members, after the first two months of class, wearily ask those of us who designed the course: "Aren't we going to deal with anything besides *oppression*?" This was not the complaint of privileged mainstream students who don't care about the "other" but of the very "minority" students whose difficulties many of these books explored.

My own sense of the problem indicates something more than simply the attendant depression that may accompany reading books which depict harsh realities, in which case one might merely counsel patience and turn the students' consideration toward how certain injustices might be confronted and even overcome. Or, as one of my colleagues indicated at the time, one might help students approach these texts not as records of oppression but as stories of normally silenced voices who are finally heard. Yet I sensed something else in the complaint, something of Barthes' voice in the interview cited above, not displeasure with the subject so much as displeasure with the *discourse* that we repeatedly asked students to enter as readers and writers: the discourse of politics, of taking sides, of arguing why something is wrong and how it should be put right. "In this paper, I will discuss the reasons why Wayne Williams should not have been convicted in the Atlanta child murders" or "In this paper, I will describe the social policies that create such hardship on women in the inner city" or "I believe that racism is a threat to our entire society" and so on.

Please do not misunderstand. The criminal justice system, the plight of the urban poor, and the horrors of racism are all important topics for reading, writing, and discussion; concerns like these are often a part of the work in my own classroom. Nevertheless, I must ask: Does commitment

to the political dimension of language and education require writing program curricula that concentrate solely on issues of politics? What limitations are encountered when student writing is restricted to essays that argue for or against various political positions? If we limit students to a discourse of politics, then I believe we may divorce them from possibilities that are much more subtle, complex, and exploratory. After all, we're talking about writing courses, not courses in political science; presumably, the goal is to expand the range of our students' abilities with written discourse to a wide variety of forms and contexts, of which politics is only one. I do not recommend that we eliminate the language of politics from the writing class but that we not limit ourselves to politics alone. This may sound like a retreat to the traditional notion that some subjects are divorced from the political realm or that some forms of writing somehow transcend the political; but again, let me repeat that I, like Barthes, acknowledge the ubiquity of "the political" and see no need (or possibility) of escape from it. The political gets inscribed in any number of ways, one of the most formulaic and redundant being the discourse of "politics," that is, arguing explicitly for a particular position on public issues.

Rather than deciding that our writing programs should emphasize historical or contemporary debates in politics, we might attempt something along the lines of Barthes' paradoxical approach to politics in his own writing: "discreet but obsessed." In this view, we would be discreet about converting our composition classes into contests over "politics" but would nonetheless remain obsessively attentive to "the political" in whatever writing the students perform. Since "the political," broadly conceived--in the form of assumptions, biases, selections, and repressions--runs through all writing, teachers and students must surely attend to the political influences at play in any texts examined in class, be they texts by professional writers or those written by the students themselves. This is simply to insist that we read all texts as *rhetorical* documents, as attempts to persuade the reader to enter the "world" that the text has constructed. As Wayne Booth indicated in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* over thirty years ago, even fictional texts are generated by rhetorical concerns. All writers have values they desire us to share or at least to consider. The political, then, emerges along the whole spectrum of discursive practices, from diaries, letters, interviews, stories, biographies, plays, journalism, criticism, theory, and so on, as well as from essays that argue explicitly for the correctness of a certain public agenda. There is no reason to limit student writing to issues of politics in order to do justice to the political character of language.

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Attending in our classrooms to "the political"--what Barthes calls "a fundamental order of history. . . the very dimension of the real"--means to critically observe, discuss, and participate in the highly nuanced social negotiations that transpire between readers and writers. As acts of composition, both reading and writing require that we invent (however unconsciously) the kind of reader or writer we will become during each new textual encounter. In other words, we must play a role. Rather than insisting that the role of "advocate" for or against a particular public issue define the whole spectrum of student discourse, we might, as Judith and Geoffrey Summerfield suggest in *Texts and Contexts*, assign a wider range of roles for students to inhabit--from journalist to fabulist, from diarist to essayist, from polemicist to scientist, to name only a few. We all know that tenuous, liminal state in which we struggle when first "trying on" a new social role, be it as adult, teacher, parent, panelist, job applicant, and so on, until we gradually acclimate, and the role feels "natural." Similarly, many of our composition students are acclimating not only to college and to adulthood but also to a developing sense of themselves as writers; thus, they can benefit from writing assignments designed on the notion of role-play, which allows an infinite number of contexts and variations. In this approach, the aim is not simply to teach a *particular* rhetorical maneuver, such as arguing for a political position, but to teach rhetorical maneuvering itself, how to shift from one discourse to another as occasion demands.

Let me briefly outline just one of the possibilities. Suppose we ask students to take on various roles in their responses to a single text. For instance, one assignment might call for students to play the role of book reviewers who write reactions to the reading for a local newspaper. Such a task would require that students not only read the text closely but also familiarize themselves with the characteristic habits, moves, and tones established by critics who write reviews. In other words, student writers would have to absorb the conventions of this particular role in order to appropriate or revise them for their own ends. The next assignment might request that students write letters to the "editor" in response to their classmates "published" reviews of the reading. (I use quotation marks because the scenario is, of course, fictional.) Here again, students would need a sense of the range of strategies generally taken by those writing in this rather condensed form, so that they might find ways to make their own uses of the genre. This sequence of assignments might be extended by any number of other writings: the "author's" reply to her reviewers; the "reviewer's" reply to his critics; a transcribed "interview" conducted with the author or reviewer about the text at hand; and so on. Such things, after all, are what happens in the world of reading and writing, and I see no reason why students shouldn't begin to explore the territory by inhabiting the roles within it.

Rather than insisting that students "find their own voice," assignments based on role-play help students to *find voices in contexts*. This, I believe, is one of the primary requirements of acknowledging the inevitability of "the political": the recognition that no one reads or writes as a detached observer but rather that we all participate in a social dynamic, that the ways we read and write are both generated and constrained by values and by relationships with others. Role-play enacts a process not of beginning with politics but of getting there; not of writing with politics foremost in mind but of reading with an eye always alert to political possibilities. In this way students learn to locate the political even in writing that appears distant from politics, rather than being told from the outset that their entire course will be composed of issues of politics like race, class, and gender. These issues cannot be escaped, but they need not lead us to restrict our students to a single form of discourse in the composition class.

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In conclusion, I would like to return to the student complaints about repetition in writing courses devoted to forms of oppression because these complaints remind me of another need our students have, one that should not be ignored. This is the need to take pleasure in reading and writing, in addition to learning how to perform these activities with more skill or to learn about themselves and others. As Horace contended nearly two millennia ago, good writing should both instruct *and* delight. Yet again, I no sooner begin speaking about pleasure than I imagine certain voices charging me with a reactionary regression from matters of more serious import, much as Barthes was misread by the Left during the last decade of his writing when they accused him of leaving behind his political concerns for the sake of mere pleasure and aesthetics. My desire is not to abandon exploration of political injustice but to take into account the political value of pleasure in reading and writing. As Barthes notes:

I'm always sorry that the dimension of pleasure is not more perceptible in the language of students, who have in other regards such a true impression of life and society. It has been remarked, with a glance in my direction, I believe, that *these residues of hedonism should be liquidated*. Not at all, they should not be eliminated; pleasure should not be reduced to this residual status in the first place. (*Grain* 163)

What many critics have missed is Barthes' attempt to reinscribe pleasure *within* the political rather than outside of it; his revaluation of pleasure is not an escape from political concerns but a consequence of them.

To ask what gives pleasure and then to seek it, to create space for real pleasure among teachers and students of writing, is to respond sensitively to political, not merely personal, needs and desires.

One of the ironies of the new developmental writing course I described above was that the insistent study of oppression made many of the students feel oppressed. Not that the concerns of such courses should be eradicated, but that they should better anticipate the limitations established when the discourse of politics forms the parameters of all classroom activity. We need to remember, before we get caught up in a crusade to convert composition courses into introductions to politics, that reading and writing assignments in which students take pleasure do not necessarily signal abandonment of political realities. The pleasure of writing-in-role seems to come from entering a fictional space in which the context for writing is very sharply defined. Students find themselves paradoxically freed to make all kinds of imaginative moves *because* of constraints that limit the field; yet this attention to constraints is simultaneously work of a political nature. Writers who are aware of the boundaries within which they must compose—or which they may decide to challenge—are writers who have begun to confront the politics of composition, that is, the choices by which they define themselves through texts.

I understand the desire, now that many of us seem to recognize the impossibility of somehow setting the political aside, to be up front with students about our political concerns, rather than to pretend that teachers are "neutral" about such matters and always read with an objective eye. At the same time, we should not underestimate how delicately we must tread if we want our writing programs and courses to offer equal discursive opportunities to students of various political leanings and interests. In asking that we make room for pleasure in the writing class, I do not mean to suggest that our job is to produce happy, contented student writers of the type that composition textbooks endorse when they display supposedly foolproof methods for "the writing process." Writing is almost always a more or less uncomfortable act; my vision of the pleasure to be had through role-play assignments does not presume that this approach will necessarily make student writing any easier; however, it can make writing less alienating, more connected to what they already know about people and the ways of the world. As Barthes speculates:

Can one—or at least could one ever—begin to write without taking oneself for another? For the history of sources we should substitute the history of figures: the origin of the work is not the first influence, it is the first posture: one copies a role, then, by metonymy, an art: I begin producing by reproducing the person I want to be. (*Roland Barthes* 99)

From this perspective, our first task is to provide opportunities for students to "reproduce the people they want to be," to invite them to play along a spectrum of rhetorical occasions. Once they begin to negotiate these roles, once their values begin to take shape in their writing, then we have the opportunity to explore the diverse powers of "the political" as opposed to the banalities of mere "politics."

In providing leadership and designing curricula for writing programs, those of us who wish to respect the relationship between ideology and composition should attend to these crucial yet delicate distinctions.

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