

Marginal Prospects

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"I wouldn't want *your* job." I've heard those words so often they hardly bother me anymore. To have my job, to oversee a program with 11,000 students in 500 sections every year, means you need to tolerate a rather busy life, the kind of life I've led for almost thirteen years. Testing students, talking with new teachers, staging workshops, writing memos, phoning deans . . . but you already know. In the summer, when my colleagues send me lighthearted notes from Santa Fe or the south of France, I'm sitting at my desk. Three days before Christmas, I'm at my desk. It's six o'clock on a Friday night, and naturally I'm at my desk.

Yet I've come to think of composition as the place to be these days. One might say that while my colleagues are traveling, their knowledge stays right here, locked up in the university itself. Whatever prestige it may enjoy, whatever social power, the university has increasingly become an isolated, isolating culture—the culture of specialized disciplines, more or less thoroughly balkanized. But I want to make the case that composition has the chance to travel, to move from discipline to discipline, and to go beyond the university into the lived worlds that constitute "civil society"—the worlds of everyday interaction in our homes and on the street, in our neighborhoods and churches and temples. If the disciplines produce a knowledge painstakingly sequestered from events and concerns "out there," then composition could re-root that stranded knowledge in the lived world once again. To think along these lines, however, is not just to see ourselves in an unfamiliar light—as suddenly indispensable because we remain outsiders—but also to understand the university in a more comprehensive and less starry-eyed way. If we are ready to abandon the image of "comp" as low-level service work, then we might play a small but important part in something like a renaissance, not only a rebirth of the university but also of society as a whole.

Composition as the Anti-discipline

For a long time now in various articles I've been arguing that if composition someday becomes a respectable discipline with a place alongside History, Criticism, and Political Science, we will have missed a crucial opportunity. Of course, I know how strongly the currents of sentiment now run in the opposite direction. Few other academic institutions, after all, enjoy so marginal a status in so many ways. We are, for instance, economically marginal. Most of the teachers in my own program are either graduate assistants, part-time adjuncts, or full-time instructors excluded from the tenure stream and paid half the salary of an ordinary entry-level colleague. But composition is marginal in less tangible ways as well. In a hierarchy of academic disciplines, with physics at the very top and literary studies somewhere near the middle—though safely above the "dirtier"

fields like Labor Studies and Nursing—composition, if considered as a field in its own right, would sink nearly to the bottom. It goes without saying, additionally, that even inside of English we are quite clearly declass  . If prestige is our concern, then *College English* and CCC cannot truthfully be said to circulate in the same universe as *Critical Inquiry* or *Cultural Critique*. Nor are we the equals of literary studies in some other regard, such as by virtue of our august lineage. True, we can always summon up the ghost of Aristotle, but communication in the fourth century BCE bears as little likeness to communication now as the quasi-tribal city-state of Athens bears to an industrial nation-state. Worse yet, the few moderns of real eminence that we sometimes try to claim as distinctly ours—I’m thinking here especially of Kenneth Burke—never saw themselves as “compositionists,” and they have seldom been products of the Ph.D. machine from which most of us recently emerged.

Yet we have, nonetheless, a great deal to learn from our place on the bottom, though I don’t mean about how to “better ourselves,” how to get published beside Jane Gallop in a trendy postmodern anthology, or how to win a few dry words of praise from a theory maven like Hillis Miller. I mean instead that our placement gives us the chance—and the powerful motive of class resentment—to survey the academic apparatus with a skeptical eye. Despite our desire to be treated with respect by our literary colleagues at the MLA and the waiters at the Marxist cash bar, composition might instead take on the role of the *anti-discipline*, the one venue within the university from which a genuine alternative might arise—an alternative to a hierarchy that thrives on fragmentation. Although the term “class resentment” may sound rather mean-spirited, a close cousin to the ancient vices of Envy and Pride, I believe that it plays an indispensable role in the ongoing drama of social life, and I’m hardly the first person to say so. Truth be told, there is no intrinsic reason why the study of literacy should matter less than the study of literature, but it does. And when I consider that the privileging of literary art works to the detriment of so many people, whose acts of language are supposed to be less evolved than the “The Idea of Order in Key West,” I cannot help but look on my own resentment as a humanizing force to the degree that it prompts me to identify with the “losers” rather than the “winners” in a society more and more competitive and less and less concerned about the human results.

But I also understand that class resentment, for all its crucial importance to the process that Marxists speak of as “ideological awakening,” can produce a rather rigid and ungenerous spirit, especially when it becomes closely allied, as it did in virtually every real-world Marxist regime, with a desire for revenge and domination. As Vaclav Havel is supposed to have once said, those who storm Bastilles will be condemned to rebuild them. Improbable as it might seem right now, we may someday manage to overtake literary studies in the race for prestige and funding—a development that looks a bit less farfetched when we consider the recent explosion of jobs in our field. But I still can’t regard such an ending as an altogether happy one, with the evil pretender overthrown and the virtuous exile on the throne at last, if only because the throne remains . . . well,

the throne. Let me put it another way: class resentment runs up against its limits at the exactly the point where people need to imagine something genuinely new, an arrangement more spacious and enabling than a simple inversion of the status quo.

And here—at the point of exhaustion for our practitioners of deconstruction and critique—composition might do its most useful work. For composition might become the “anti-discipline” in a rather different sense than the one I’ve described so far. Although I value skepticism, the marginal status of our discipline also permits us to use knowledge in a different way, not just to break things into pieces, as so many of our colleagues like to do, but also to put them together again: to ask how different ways of seeing might converge within some larger whole, a whole presupposed by the nature of thinking itself. As a *techné*—the skill of taking things apart—analysis or criticism clearly has its place, but that place is always secondary and circumscribed. The very act of dismantling the world first demands that a world already exist, as a meaningful, consistent, coherent life-world. And this life-world, from which thought always arises as an echo or reflection, is an artifact that humans themselves have made through a process, a *poiésis*, we might speak of as . . . “composition,” a term we should no longer limit, I believe, to what people do with pens on paper. While it seems to me that our involvements with the world are more complex than the metaphor of writing allows, the world gets composed in some fashion or another. Even the sciences, which define their work primarily in terms of their commitment to a reality independent of human motives, assumptions, and values—even the sciences have witnessed again and again the need to adjust their “world picture” in response to new evidence. And if people had no need for this sort of adjustment, if reality could be known in an unmediated way, then everyone would be a scientist and everything they did would be a science. But science must be learned and must be taught precisely because the sciences are not reality, strictly speaking, but only one means of approaching the real.

Even science presupposes, in other words, the existence of a pre-scientific, everyday life-world, and for all their close attention to things as they really are, scientists have given no more thought to that world than their counterparts in the other disciplines. But this neglect offers us an opportunity we can scarcely overestimate: since no one else has asked the big questions so far, nothing’s stopping us. How exactly does this everyday life-world get made, and by what practices and processes? Why is it that our trust in the coherence of things, a coherence that makes speech and writing possible, is never disappointed in spite of the ceaselessness of unpredictable change? Perhaps “composition” in this new, expanded sense remains pretty much uncharted ground because we compose and recompose the world so often and so naturally that we never recognize our fundamental work except at times of crisis, the times, for example, when we start to fear that existence really is inexpressible or absurd. We might say that the process of composition does its work, it more or less completely conceals itself, whereas analysis, by halting the endless flow of impressions, makes possible a narrowing of attention. By isolating a single moment within a continuum of

moments, analysis creates an "object" that appears to exist outside of time, but once analysis comes to a close, we start composing again and the object recedes into the background of sheer presentness. If analysis is the right hand of understanding, so to speak, then composing is the left—the "dark" part we never see so long as we are looking at particulars alone. And perhaps this is why our marginal field always seems to be in search of its real matter. Mistakenly, we have presupposed that the moment of isolation, when a hardened "form" appears, is actually the moment of knowing. But the moment of knowing may come earlier, when details long unrelated start to cohere into shapes we ourselves could never have foreseen.

Life-world Rhetoricians

If what I am arguing makes any sense, then we will need to think about knowledge in novel ways, not by starting with its objects, methods, or products, as scholars and teachers ordinarily do, but with the relations to the world as lived that every discipline tacitly inaugurates. We will need, in other words, to practice rhetoric, though also in an "expanded" sense: I have in mind a marriage of phenomenology, ethnographic research, cultural history, psychology, political science, and systems theory. Once we start thinking in this novel fashion, however, we might see the various disciplines in an unexpected light—not simply as ensembles of revealing paradigms but also as strategic reductions of a much larger, more complex reality. The sociologist, the psychologist, the historian, each learns first how to exclude nearly everything presented by lived experience. (Which is why formal learning often feels so difficult and painful.) Only after the student has internalized an "occupational psychosis"—the term is John Dewey's, via Kenneth Burke—is he capable of doing the discipline's work, which amounts to thinking through the implications of particular "authorized" paradigms (Burke 38). Of course, once a person has spent twenty years or more working with—and working in—his preferred paradigms, they begin to look as wide and as real as the world. But a few paradigms cannot a whole world make, and this explains why our current situation, in which knowledge keeps growing exponentially, may do more social damage than otherwise, sacrilegious as this possibility might sound to those who suppose axiomatically that knowledge is a good in and of itself.

When we think about the incoherence produced by the current explosion of specialized knowledge—when we think as life-world rhetoricians—we become more aware of the losses that accompany the gains, losses that remain obscured until we look at consequences as lived out by actual individuals. Certainly there are gains: the "up side" to our strategic reductions is precisely that by seeing things selectively, a person learns to see up-close and in depth. At the end of the twentieth century, though, the virtues of this truth-by-microscopy should be obvious to everyone. But what happens to the world of everyday experience, and of civil society—the only world, in fact, that we all share—when our education teaches us to turn our backs on so much, so persistently? And what happens to the people who never become true specialists, by far the greater

number of our fellow citizens, who encounter in their passage through the university a disorganized pastiche of this and that—a little economics, a little psychology, and a little critical theory and a little chemistry? It would be nice to imagine that the different disciplines speak to each other in some fortuitous way, so that the student who learns about the “free market” in an economics class might object to that idea once we teach her to read *The House of Mirth* as a critique of Gilded Age economics. But I suspect that the experience of most students is far less coherent than this. More typically, the disciplines sustain among themselves a conspiracy of silence rather than a conversation. No professor in economics really minds that Marx gets taught in those crazy English classes because no *bona fide* economist thinks of Marx as an economist any more, just as no one in psychology departments thinks of Freud, another icon of English studies, as anything other than a failure in his attempts to understand the workings of the mind. But this conspiracy of silence is no accident. As I will argue at some length, well-guarded borders serve the collective interests of the disciplines as enclaves of specialist knowledge. But as I also want to argue, this same conspiracy works against the interests of our society as a whole, and against us as individuals. Rather than ask our students to “invent the university,” in David Bartholomae’s famous phrase—to become honorary participants in the system of specialist knowledge—I would rather see our students reinvent society, using the knowledge of specialists to address concerns in which everybody has a stake. If composition can begin to do that, then who cares if we ever win a seat with the “real” players at the table?

The Knowledge Bureaucracy: A Culture of Concealment

Compositionists have never had a seat at the table, but precisely the self-evidence of this fact has prevented us from asking why. I suppose we prefer to think badly of ourselves instead of scrutinizing our exclusion as a key to the whole institution. What exactly is this “university,” which has looked with so great an indifference on the education of nonspecialists—a task I take to be our principal concern? One sure way to misconstrue the university is to accept the self-promotion that masquerades as soul-searching in journals like *Academe* and *The Chronicle of Higher Education*—publications half-intended to convince outsiders, and half-intended to convince to ourselves. And if you fear this assessment is a bit too harsh, then please join me in what the philosophers call a “thought experiment.” Imagine for just a moment that you yourself are a revered and protected academic luminary. Let’s say that you went straight from the Ph.D. at Hopkins to a job at Yale, and that you’ve published six books in twenty years. Over the course of your career you’ve placed almost sixty articles into progressively more prestigious journals, and you now give papers only on request at places like Oxford and the Sorbonne, which pay you thousands of dollars for a few hours work. You teach one course each semester, to graduate students exclusively, and each term the department chair gives you a smart, attractive young assistant who handles your correspondence and does much of your primary research for you. On occasion, you’ve even slept with one assistant or another, though you have always treated him or her in a warmly parental way

once the moment of enchantment has passed. For a long time you have recognized, at least implicitly, that you are almost universally admired. And more recently, whenever you think about yourself, and you think about yourself fairly often, you see your name in a history of literary criticism alongside names like Frye and Leavis, Croce and Dilthey, Coleridge and Sidney, and so on back to Aristotle. You regard yourself, in other words, as a real participant in the making of a Tradition, which you may or may not be willing to describe as "Western" and as "civilization." Although you know that you will die as all humans do, you will die convinced that absolutely every critic who lives after you—or, at any rate, every critic who counts—will have to come to terms with your ideas.

Within the context of the humanities, such a person embodies fundamental values. We can imagine the revered luminary as deconstructionist, but he might easily have taken some other path. He might have become a Marxist, for example, and in that case, rather than see his name enshrined alongside Frye and Leavis, he might imagine it next to Gramsci and Adorno. Or he might have been a scientist, in which case he would have published no books, perhaps, but something like 500 articles. And instead of thinking about his work in terms of a Tradition—or a "project," as the Marxist critics like to say—he might envisage himself as having solved a certain "problem" or having helped to usher in some "innovation." But the most important thing to notice for my purposes here is not the work itself, and not the person either, but the perspective afforded to the ones on top, a perspective that takes for granted the justice of the system, its openness to change and the soundness of the thinking that it promotes.

But now, imagine that you're a fifty-five-year-old associate professor, twice turned down for promotion. You have one book to your credit, a revised version of your dissertation published fifteen years ago and out of print for the last thirteen years. Since that time, you've written eight articles and you've managed to place four of them in small journals at some distance, on the scale of prestige, from the first tier of national publications. For many years, you have continued your accustomed pace of research and writing, but lately your commitment has fallen off. Although you still subscribe to a few of the major journals in your field, you find yourself less and less engaged by the conversations you encounter there, and you sometimes have a hard time following the dense and highly abstract reasoning of the various eminent writers. In spite of all this, however, you still think of English as your profession and you still serve on a number of committees crucial to the functioning of your department.

Against your own conscious intentions, you contemplate the institution of English with painfully mixed feelings. Long ago, as a graduate student, you believed that you were really entering the profession. You imagined yourself as part of a community and you hoped that you might have a modest but significant role to play. But somehow, along the way, you got blocked. Part of the problem had to do with your 4-3 teaching load, which made it increasingly difficult to get back to your "real work." And part of the problem had to do with a change in critical fashion, a change you found hard to adjust to in your research and writing. Little by little, people in your department started to treat you

differently, not with disrespect but with a courtly indifference. More and more, you got assigned to the introductory classes; perhaps the chair assigned you to teach comp, or even a class in remedial English. If you were a scientist instead of an English professor, some of these particulars might differ, but only incidentally. Perhaps you were trained as an ethologist, and now, with the rise of genetic technology, you are too young to retire but too old to retrain. So you teach an especially heavy load. Or perhaps your last research project simply came to completion a few months too late, while another research team made the kill. Six months is not much time, but it can be quite enough to prevent you from sitting with the winners.

Now imagine yourself as a newly turned-out Ph.D. When you arrived at the university eight years ago, you still believed that English had primarily to do with the reading of novels and poems, and only slowly did you come to understand that the subject of graduate English studies is English studies itself. For a while, you sat quietly at the back of every class, and whenever you found the courage to speak, the Famous Critic, whose latest book you should have read but never did, responded with a look of confusion, as though you were speaking Turkish. It didn't take you long to see, however, that the Critic's brow unwrinkled and his eyes grew clear when certain other students spoke. These were the ones he turned to constantly throughout the hour; these were the ones who were conversant in the language they referred to as "theory." And so, finally, to save your self-respect, you learned theory too, and you learned it so well that you at last became one of the students the Famous Critic acknowledged eagerly, not only in class but even in the halls. Later, you wrote your dissertation with the Eminent Foucauldian on the gaze and the formation of the early modern subject, and Cambridge snatched up the manuscript even before you had gotten it done. Oh yes, and throughout all this time you were teaching, first composition courses and then, as you moved up, "real" courses, that is, courses in your field.

But then everything went terribly awry. Strangely, no one wanted to hire you, even though the letters in your c.v. described you in hyperbolic terms: the most brilliant student ever, world-historical potential, visionary, and so on. After your first year on the market came to an end, the department gave you a composition job on a full-time basis. You will never forget the strain of that time, teaching four writing courses a semester while you fought your exhaustion on the weekends in order to get something else in print. Then the next year came along and you had lowered expectations. The MLA arrived and there were two interviews at places you would never have considered only three years earlier—and one of these made you an offer. So now you are leaving New York behind for the empty spaces of the Dakotas. Do they have trees out there? Will anyone have heard of *A Thousand Plateaus*? At least you won't have to teach writing any more.

The three imaginary persons I have just described are each "ideal types," in the argot of sociologists: composite figures derived from many real-world examples. Beyond the ideal abstractions, one might identify countless true stories

that end more happily. And yet like all abstractions, the ones I have sketched out point to commonalities of lived experience. Learning how to be an English studies professional requires the beginner to emulate those who have "made it" in the ways embodied by Hillis Miller and scholars like him—Barbara Johnson, Fredric Jameson, Jonathan Culler. And this mandatory emulation, considered sociologically, is not tangential, as we might think. At least when we contemplate professional life from the standpoint of the individual career, "making it" matters more than anything else. Whether we like to say so or not, the academy is highly stratified and also highly competitive. We may speak about "collegiality," but the winners in the race for preeminence are the ones who finally get to shape the profession decisively. And no matter how often the eminent profess indebtedness to this mentor or that institution, we can be sure that they privately attribute their success to hard work and their native ability. As for those who never quite arrive, the perennial associate professors—no doubt they often blame themselves, just as most unsuccessful aspirants do. Perhaps they didn't "work hard enough," perhaps they "lacked the talent" or the "intelligence." But then, still lower in hierarchy, we can find any number of jobless Ph.D.s whose careers have already ended. And although we might expect people in this last group to be the most angry and dispirited of all, they preserve their institutional loyalty, like many lifelong associates, at the expense of their own self-esteem—they are loyal, we might say, to the dream of success, even if the reality keeps eluding them. At every step along the path to the Ph.D., the young hopeful has identified so thoroughly with a mentor who has "made it" that he finds himself simply unable to believe that his mentor, in a certain sense, set him up for a fall. Could it be that the Eminent Foucauldian never really had faith in you, but simply wanted students in his graduate class to keep from teaching undergraduates? Needless to say, such a question can be painful to entertain, which explains why so few people ever entertain it. No one who takes pride in his intelligence to the degree that most academics do wants to see himself as a sucker, and so the inequities on which the whole system rests persist only as kind a professional unconscious—a primal scene of violation ordinarily repressed to facilitate day-to-day functioning.

We in English think so much about culture that we forget about the preeminence of structure—the institutions and the practices that ensure the persistence of culture itself. No matter how hard a young scholar may work, there are only so many spaces at the top, and the existence of a top and bottom tells us more about the nature of English studies, and the place of composition on the margins, than many years devoted to the inspection of particular disciplines or to particular schools of thought. Typically, when we try to explain what English studies involves, we refer to the objects of its inquiry or its methods, but these, as aspects of our profession's *culture*, change with the changing winds of fashion, while the *structure* remains more or less intact. To speak of English as a "community" in the manner of Stanley Fish or Patricia Bizzell goes a little farther toward explaining how things really work than simply attending to methods, since it begins to account for knowledge structurally—but it only goes a little

farther because our departments and disciplines are communities in only a figurative sense. In genuine communities, people share a common geographic space, common resources, and to some extent, a common past and future, while they differ in many other respects—in race, age, income, religion, occupation, values, and so on. Plainfield, New Jersey, where I live, qualifies as a community—but the same should not be said of an English department. The truth is that English departments, in their structure and day-to-day operations, are very nearly the antithesis of “communities” as we normally imagine them.

Another way of thinking about English and the other academic disciplines is to understand them as professions. On this account, professors of English are like doctors or other professionals who live by selling specialized knowledges to their clients. But here again, as in the case of community, the comparison is largely figurative. Most professionals sell their services directly to their clients, while the intervening institutions—clinics, for example, or the American Bar Association—play a relatively minimal role. For professors in English, by contrast, the ones who have really made it anyway, the clients hardly matter while “the profession” itself absorbs the greatest share of our attention and energy. But English is unlike a profession in other respects as well: few associations of professionals are so rigidly hierarchical as the university, except perhaps in the special case of teaching hospitals. But if English is neither a community nor a profession, then what could it possibly be? And the answer I will give is “a bureaucracy.” The closest analogues to the university are organizations like the Catholic Church or the Justice Department. The academy possesses, after all, the characteristics that Max Weber described as typical of bureaucracies: official functions, a sphere of unique competence, a pyramid of authority, and so on.¹

Of course, I recognize how deeply most of us resist the proposition that we as professors are the bureaucrats of knowledge.² Aren't we really counter-hegemonic intellectuals, or pedagogical outlaws speaking subversive truth to power? And aren't the academic disciplines the last, best sanctuaries of free inquiry in our commodified age? The answer to these questions, in my view, is “No.” Given the steeply hierarchal structure of the university, we should hardly expect to find “academic freedom” there in any conspicuous way, nor is there much room for dissenters. Here again, let me ask that you join me in conducting a thought experiment, one involving an entire English department this time and not just a few individuals. Though the story I will tell is a fiction, of course, I believe that most readers will recognize the details as essentially true to life. My story, then, begins in a better-than-average department when a prominent postcolonial feminist scholar applies for a job as a senior theorist. And because the scholar in this case could hardly be more eminent—with a titled chair in one of the Ivys—the search committee should by rights be elated. But in reality, the reality we all know, the application threatens to become a major embarrassment, since the candidate brings along with her 27-page c.v. a reputation for behavior of the most self-indulgent and overbearing kind. So widely known are this scholar's displays of vulgar arrogance that the search committee had already

passed her over in silence while drawing up the list of senior figures the department would invite to apply. And yet once they received the application, the committee feels obliged not only to announce its arrival to everyone, but also to offer her the senior job, or if not that job, then another one even more prestigious and well paid. While an outsider might find all these details rather droll, if not actually absurd, most of us can appreciate the tensions at play. Quite simply, no one on the search committee feels sufficiently authoritative to turn down the candidate—and no one feels sufficiently powerful to fend off recriminations from her allies on this continent and several others.

Still more remarkable—and revealing of how the academy really works—is the behavior of my fictional department when the matter comes up for the required vote. In the hallways and at various gatherings prior to the vote, large numbers of colleagues express their dismay. The only exceptions seem to be a small number of up-and-coming colleagues who stand to gain much from close associations with the scholar, whose name never ceases to get cited in all the trendiest journals. The department, as I say, has strong misgivings, yet when the time arrives for public discussion, only two or three colleagues find the courage to speak against the candidate, and then in only the most muted terms. Once again, no one wants to go on record as opposing so prestigious a figure, and so the real campaign of resistance takes place several hours later, following a near-unanimous “yes” vote, when colleagues secretly e-mail the associate dean, pleading with him to do what they had not dared—that is, to kill the application. But this, it seems to me, is the way all bureaucracies operate, with the power emanating downward from the top so decisively that a single “world class” scholar can “outvote” very nearly a department’s worth of middle-level scholars.

As long as we suppose that events like this one are incidental to the academy’s “real work,” then the nature of that work will continue to elude us. While it is certainly true that the study and criticism of writing, literary or otherwise, has been the ostensive reason for English departments to exist, these activities might take place in a variety of settings: they do not in themselves require a national organization like the MLA, rankings among institutions, rankings among individuals, a system of differential rewards, the proliferation of coterie languages, and so on.³ Because the activities in which we engage might take place in many different settings, we cannot accept those activities as a sufficient account of our institution. Let me put it even more crudely: the study of literary texts is secondary—more or less an alibi—whereas the bureaucratic structure is not. One can imagine, for example, that English departments might someday abandon literary study altogether, replacing it with the analysis of technical communications or popular culture. The old subject would be gone while the departments themselves might thrive, with more and more eminent faculty cranking out a superabundance of knotty scholarship. And the same might be said of higher learning generally. Given what most studies indicate about the long-term retention of matter learned in university settings—in fact, there is almost no retention at all—we might at least consider the possibility that the point of a higher learning in its present form is the legitimization of yet another

hierarchy, not just the one that separates professionals from the "educated" laity, but also the hierarchy separating all of us from our "uneducated," working-class counterparts.

I would like to caution, however, that when we see things in this way we should not assume that we have surrendered ourselves to cynicism. On the contrary, I would say that any constructive change in our social lives will require us to think truthfully about why we behave in the strange ways we do, regardless of the cost to alibis and illusions. Right now, for example, at the very moment when many professors of English believe that they are shaking to its very foundations the mighty edifice of the bourgeois liberalism, the average book issued by Columbia or Duke sells a couple thousand copies. It makes no sense, in such a case, to continue to work as we have so far: if we want to undertake activities of greater real-world consequence, then will need to engage a larger audience when we write—there's simply no other way. But such a change would not be easy even if the will and means were already at hand because the structure of the academy has produced a culture in which communication gets distorted or suppressed in complex and sometimes quite invisible ways. These distortions are not, however, unique to the academy: they are typical of communication in every real-world bureaucracy. The culture of bureaucracy is fundamentally a culture of concealment, of calculating adaptation. And this may help to explain why composition, with its concern for understanding and accessibility, has for so long made its home in the basement. In a culture of dissembling, who could look more naive than the person committed to the notion that we should try to make ourselves clear?

To my mind, no major theorist has developed a better understanding of bureaucracy than the anthropologist James C. Scott. Although Scott has forerunners in many places—among them the George Orwell of *Burmese Days*—he was the first to grasp the importance of "calculating adaptation" to our dealings with one another in relations marked by non-negotiable imbalances of power. Long before the critiques of liberal humanism had become virtually obligatory, people like Orwell were quite keenly aware of the ways in which coercion, and not reason or goodness or truth, gives shape to our "formal" relations. But Scott's unique contribution has been to recognize that the exercise of power, which is always unequal and always underway, creates two separate spheres in the modern world—the sphere of visible, "formal" action, which he describes as the "public transcript," and the sphere reserved for oneself and one's intimates, where the "hidden transcript" unfolds. As soon as we begin to think along these lines, however, almost everything about our society takes on a different character. We begin to notice, for example, that much of our written history is nothing more than the "public" side of things, and therefore somewhat less than half the story. We begin to notice too that almost everything that counts as "knowledge" and "reason" is "public" in much the same way. Those old high school textbooks on government, for example, could not have been expected to explain how our Congress and our President actually get things done. Imagine what would happen to the textbook that admitted quite straightforwardly that the passage of

a bill ordinarily begins with contributions of significant sums from a PAC to the National Committee of one party—or to both parties at once.

Needless to say, almost every adult in America knows that legislation gets going in exactly this manner. Although academicians sometimes like to think of their lay counterparts as the quintessential cultural dopes, recent polls demonstrate unequivocally that the great majority of our fellow citizens understand that money talks while “the will of the people” goes silent. So why do the textbook writers keep on saying what they say? If Scott is right, then people are not simply oppressed or oppressors, fighters of the good fight or sneaking collaborationists. Within every hierarchy, pretty much everyone, pretty much all the time, must be thought of as participating in a dialectic of public presentation and private concealment, and of overt control and implicit resistance. The legitimacy of the civics teacher depends on the legitimacy of much more than the teacher—the school, the educational establishment from kindergarten through college, the town or county government that employs the teacher, and the governments of the state and the nation. We can hardly expect the teacher to undermine the sources of his own authority, but at the same time, he himself may resent these sources and resist them to some degree, just as his own students both comply with his instructions and resist them when they can.

Publicly, the teacher is more or less obligated to tell the students that our political process is rational, fair, responsive and so on. But privately, alone with his colleagues or his wife, he may express markedly different sentiments. He may throw his daily paper on the floor and cry aloud in his disgust at the Beltway bureaucrats. To call this behavior hypocrisy, though, is to miss Scott’s crucial point about modernity: our world is fundamentally hierarchical and fundamentally undemocratic.⁴ Under these circumstances, no one can fully say what he thinks or do what he wants to do. Instead, people see the so-called public sphere as the arena in which they must pursue, not their freedom or fulfillment, which are largely out of reach, but their survival and their safety. They do what they have to do in order to get by. And this insight too is common knowledge, except perhaps among the intelligentsia, who mistake their own success for testimony to the basic justness of the system, and who confuse with genuine freedom their own deftness in adapting to the will of superiors. Outside of the academy, by contrast—if we can judge from a huge body of popular writing—people tend to see themselves as “survivors,” skillful players at a game they did not make or choose to play.

In my view, Scott’s description of social life today has at least one great advantage over its primary rivals, the Marxist and poststructuralist paradigms—and that advantage is its ability to account for the experience of “worldlessness” which seems so much a part of the current scene. For most Marxists, something like distinct classes still remain in place, and with these classes, clearly defined allegiances. About our hypothetical high school civics teacher, the Marxists might say that as a member of the bourgeoisie, he buys into the dominant ideology; or else, if we want to count teachers as proletarians, then the teacher himself has been seduced by the myths of the capital-holding class and its

illusion-generating apparatus. By contrast, most poststructuralists believe that a world—some sense of a common ground—has never existed and never should. At every turn, we face multiple possibilities, but every choice, according to our “post” theorists, will reinstate its opposite, its “supplement,” in an endless cycle of indeterminacy. While people of a prior generation would have responded to the gospel of endless exile by descending into utter dejection, their successors tell us that we should learn to accept our worldlessness in a “playful” spirit.

Precisely because both of these accounts express a partial truth, neither stands alone persuasively, to my mind. In one respect, at least, the Marxists are right: inequality remains an ever-present fact of modern social life. But the poststructuralists are right in their own way as well. Almost no one can think of himself or herself unequivocally today as a “worker” or a member of the “underclass.” If we are “positioned,” as they say in poststructuralist circles, then we are positioned within multiple and overlapping contexts, apprehended by each of us in radically different ways. But this doesn’t make the notion a meaningful world any less appealing. I believe, in other words, that the Marxists want more coherence than there actually is, while the poststructuralists want less—want none—because they fear that coherence is always totalitarian. And yet whether our world happens to look coherent or not, we are profoundly constrained in ways that neither the Marxists nor their “post” counterparts have adequately recognized.

For both parties—the Marxists and the poststructuralists—the real villain in the world today is inevitably “capitalism,” always vaguely imagined as a monolith, everywhere essentially the same and essentially bad. But capitalism takes on many different forms today, with many different consequences, just as it has for three centuries. Early mercantile capitalism was quite unlike the capitalism of Dickens’ time, or the capitalism of the corporations. As a descriptive term, “capitalism” allows for no greater precision than “education” or “the family.” But Scott lets us do better. Although I cannot speak for Ted Turner or Bill Gates, I suspect that few wealthy people today act with the unqualified sovereignty of J. P. Morgan or John Rockefeller, men who owned their companies and ran them pretty much as neo-feudal demesnes. Today, corporations generally operate along markedly different lines—*bureaucratic* lines much like the ones that define our conduct in the academy. There is a “top” in the corporate world as well in ours, and people on the top exercise their authority within a structure that sorts workers out in terms of their abilities and rewards. Senior corporate administrators make decisions on the basis of information that flows upward from the lower levels, and quarterly reports must stand the scrutiny of stockholders who depend on their own cadres of advisors. Under these conditions, even a CEO operates within a dialectic of control and constraint, visibility and concealment.⁵ On the job, the CEO may feel no less threatened by his shareholders and vice-presidents than the middle-level manager feels threatened by the management above him or by the salesmen and the workers on the production line below him. I don’t mean to suggest that the CEO and the mailroom clerk enjoy something like pragmatic equality. To think so would be absurd when CEOs sometimes

earn several *hundred* times the salaries of entry level personnel. Nor do I mean to argue for the system's "rationality," as the Weberians call it. I mean instead that the market in and of itself is only one part of a much larger phenomenon. In some of its incarnations capitalism can be profoundly liberating, just as Marx understood. The real problem, in my view, is with bureaucracy, which tends to consign more and more of our affairs to a minuscule elite—a tendency that assumed its most devastating form (so far) in explicitly socialist societies. If capitalism has done anything, it has complicated relations of power enough to prevent state-sponsored bureaucracies from achieving preeminence. But at the same time, many businesses have become ensnared in bureaucratic structures of their own making.

Apart from these inequities of power, the problem with bureaucracy in a larger sense arises from the culture of concealment it promotes, a culture that gradually evacuates our public lives. If bureaucracies operate, as I believe they do, by producing forms of "official" knowledge at odds with the lived experience of almost everyone, then their proliferation gradually contracts the domain of meaning and commitment—the domain within which our thoughts can be consonant with our actions. If we never have the latitude to study what interests us, then why should we value education? When a person feels authorized to express only what the institution sanctions as true, why would she ever take an interest in writing? And when the "life of the mind" becomes adaptation to a menacing authority, why would the learned be solicitous about the education of beginners? Under those conditions, as we all should know, it's every man for himself.

The Pedagogy of Critique: Why Nothing Happens

So where does this leave us—"us" meaning compositionists? At the very least, my argument should suggest that most of the models now available for describing the "social construction" of knowledge are naive in the extreme. They reflect what Scott might call the view from the top. From that Olympian height, familiar to world-class scholars and upper-echelon administrators, it seems obvious that the purpose of a university is to promote learning (or thinking, or critical consciousness), just as the purpose of the legal system is to protect the citizenry, and the function of our government is to carry out the will of the people. But if you accept my argument, then you might concede that none of these propositions may be true. The fraudulence of the justice system and of the government—their manipulation by the privileged—seems to me so evident that I needn't say anything more. But among our "official" institutions, the university still enjoys a degree of public confidence that we encounter almost nowhere else today. People trust and value the university because it still appears to provide some measure of upward mobility. But in fact, the university offers opportunities largely to those who already have them, as study after study confirms. Looking up from the bottom, one might say that the principal purpose of the modern university is to ration access to social power by means of a competitive ordeal that has become absurdly ritualized. Just imagine, if you can, how many thou-

sands of *cum laude* English majors are right now selling insurance, managing restaurants, practicing law, or writing news copy—performing, in other words, none of the tasks they were trained to perform.

If we want to understand the social construction of knowledge in more clearheaded ways than we have so far, then we need to consider that the disciplines have operated throughout this century within discrete spheres of “official” authority—authority sponsored either by the state or by the corporate sector, or by a combination of the two, as the chart below describes⁶:

The Disciplines and Their Sponsors			
	State Sector	Corporate Sector	Civil Society
Technology	Physics	Chemistry	
		Forestry	
		Agronomy	
	Biology	Engineering	Medicine
Administration		Economics	
		Business Administration	
	Political Science		
	Sociology	Psychology	
		Corporate Law	Civil Law Social Work Labor Studies Labor Law
Cultural Normalization	English		
	History		
	Philosophy		
	Art History		

The term “sponsorship” comes from Deborah Brandt’s recent work on literate practices—practices which always owe their existence to powerful institutions. Of course, the disciplines too must be sponsored in this sense. As we all know, research in physics has depended quite heavily on the sponsorship of the Cold War state. On the other hand, the discipline of chemistry has been largely a client of the corporate sector. In the case of disciplines like agronomy and forestry, the state and corporate sector have tend to exercise joint sponsorship. But the sponsorship of the social sciences and humanities differs from those crucial to the sciences. For the most part, the social sciences have enjoyed the closest relation to the state. A young physicist, for example, might start his career by working at the government labs in Los Alamos, New Mexico. Then that physicist might be transferred to the Bell Labs facility in Albuquerque, a corporate concern. By

contrast, most political scientists or sociologists have seen themselves as “leaders” of the administered society, members of a distinct professional-managerial class. Typically, the young political scientist has aspired to become a foreign service officer or a paper-pusher in a federal agency. By the same logic, a professor of political science aspires to write for journals like *Foreign Affairs*, journals meant to guide “policy makers” and those who carry out their decisions.

But what about the humanities—where do they belong? We can convince ourselves that the humanities speak for ordinary people in some way, but in fact their rise and persistence has been closely tied to a thoroughly state-building agenda: the development of an American high culture, on terms to be adjudicated by the best and the brightest. Whatever existential value the humanities might possess for individual learners, they have served for much of this century to promote normalization in the realm of behavior and belief, as they still do: hence our continued emphasis on the “canon,” standards of interpretation, and so on. In the course of their ascent, the academic disciplines had to exclude the great majority of their fellow citizens, but at the same time, they drew everyone into a new economy of values. “Lowbrows” were free to watch TV, for example, but departments of English helped to ensure that no one confused “I Love Lucy” with a genuine “work of art.” While we like to think that things are different today, we ought to ask ourselves if the economy of values has changed much in its basic contours. When we turn “Beavis and Butthead” or “The Simpsons” into grist for the cultural-critical mill, aren’t we really extending our authority over a domain we were formerly content to relegate to our “inferiors?”

To some readers, none of this may come as a surprise, but the chart above helps to underscore one social fact that generally passes unremarked upon: almost none of the academic disciplines have direct or organic “ties to civil society”—that is, to real historical communities, neighborhoods, and so on. As an enclave of specialists, the university has always had to seek legitimation by underscoring its distance from precisely these primary, “unofficial” institutions; and it has always had to demonstrate that academic knowledge is somehow superior to or more penetrating than the “common sense” of the ordinary citizen. Yet the degree of separation from organic interactions was less extreme earlier in this century. The sociologist E. A. Ross and the anthropologist Margaret Mead both wrote for large “lay” audiences, but in the postwar years, with the full flowering of the administered society, many academics abandoned that goal. After Ross came the ultra-theorist Talcott Parsons; after Mead came the structural-functionalists, who dismissed the very idea that the mechanisms of a social system could be learned by asking the natives themselves. Only the professional could know the truth.

The situation of the humanities is even more complex than the situation of the other disciplines because the humanities have always had the weakest links to lay culture, since they produced no new, exciting technologies and played no significant role in improving the conditions of everyday life. So why did the humanities exist at all? Taking our cue from Bill Readings, we might conclude that the very need for the humanities testifies to the *structural weakness*

of American society a century ago.⁷ Precisely because the mechanisms of overt control left so much of daily behavior unmolested, the control of culture or ideology presented itself as the next best thing to a coercive power still out of reach. Today, of course, the regimentation of everyday life has become much more extensive and profound than in times past, so much more that cultural normalization no longer plays the crucial role it once did, especially with the defeat of ideologies that might rival "social progress," the "free-market," and "objective truth." Nowadays we all act in much the same way no matter what we think. Whether one happens to be a Marxist, a Nietzschean, a Neoplatonist, or a fundamentalist Christian, one will probably awaken around 6:00 in the morning, take a shower, dress, and arrive at work around 8:30 or 9:00. One will ordinarily work for 8-10 hours, returning home to eat dinner around 6:30 or 7:00, followed by an evening of television and snacks. Every two weeks, generally speaking, one receives a paycheck, and from this check one deducts the costs of a mortgage, groceries, cable, and so on. Given the extent of this regimentation, who can really be surprised that ideas have become "free floating," in the parlance of poststructuralists—have grown weightless in their utter inconsequence? And who can fail to see the futility of "cultural critique" except as a more alienated and resentful style of consumption—unhappy but consumption all the same?

In a certain sense, everyone already understands that a change of this kind has taken place. And perhaps this is why party politics, and political programs generally, have lost so much of their cogency for most Americans. But in that case, what happens to the university, and to an enterprise like composition? I suspect that for most people in our field, the way out—a renewed sense of mission—lies with some version of "critical consciousness" or critical reason, practiced in the name of Freire, Habermas, or the Frankfurt school. Yet if my account so far is right, then critical analysis can only demonstrate the pragmatic irrelevance of critique itself, which leaves nothing changed except ideas in a world where new ideas are readily embraced because they have become merely commodities or styles. No matter how "unruly" critique may seem, no matter how "counter-hegemonic," its real-world effects seldom go beyond the production of 20-minute talks for the MLA and another line in the publications section of a curriculum vitae. Nothing could be safer than "contestation" and "resistance": an alienated and embittered citizen is perhaps the most tractable citizen of them all.

But the celebration of academic criticism as a form of political action, though futile by its own explicit standard—the capacity to transform our social order—is also profoundly conservative in a rather different way, not simply in the kind of knowledge it makes but also in the kind of power relations it perpetuates. After all, the much maligned tenured radical is sometimes little more than a repackaged version of the old pipe smoking professor in tweeds. Clad now in a leather flight jacket or a baggy sweater, such a person still imagines himself as a cultural leader, a modern-day Socrates in a world of mass-culture Glaucons, all his intellectual inferiors and all needing a well-reasoned kick in the pants. But no less than their pipe-smoking predecessors, many so-called "left intellectuals" find themselves unable even to suppose for a moment that ordinary humans,

exercising their judgment and acting in ways of their own devising, might achieve something lasting or good. And so, finally, the class interest of the left intellectual often lies with the professional-managerial elite, though now reconceived as a "political avant-garde."

The Pedagogy of the Administered: Reconstructing Lifeworlds

It seems to me that composition can do nothing to escape from this impasse so long as it continues to ally itself with the professional-managerial class—and to embrace the image of our fellow citizens as the hypnotized, or as outright savages. In my view, this denigration of the lay citizen is the principal means of domination now that overt violence has become passé. The more we attempt to "liberate" our students by proving to them their own incapacity and error—which I take to be the goal of our Freiristas—the more completely we reinstate a deadening, and dying, status quo. What we need to do instead is to recognize that the state and the corporate sector have become powerful by weakening civil society over the course of the last century. Economic disruption caused by endless industrial growth has persistently torn our real communities apart, and once these were sundered and their traditional ways of life overturned (good or bad as those ways of life may have been) only institutions increasingly distant and organized along bureaucratic lines—the schools, the police, and so on—could stave off a complete collapse, in a vicious circle endlessly repeated, even to the present time. Every economic disruption, every market collapse, has strengthened the power of the state against society; and every political failure, every abridgement of popular sovereignty, has given the corporate sector a lengthening reach over our affairs.

The university itself is quite clearly allied with the destruction of civil society—that is, with the discrediting and erasure of our various local knowledges. When students study politics, they typically study political theory, not the actual processes of political life in their city, region, or state. When they study economics, they study abstract economic laws and principals, not the pragmatics of doing business in their own communities. When they turn to history, they encounter, not the primary documents, but the narratives constructed for them by professional historians. And when they study English lit, they read the monuments of England and New England more than anything else, with the occasional American modernist thrown in. Only rarely might a student from, say, California learn something about the literature and arts of California. The "culture" of the university, if we want to use that much overworked term, is not the culture of a place, but the culture of a class, the professionals and managers. Almost never, consequently, do our students learn how to perceive themselves in concrete ways as members of real-world communities. Although I cannot prove it, I would be willing to bet that the average university graduate could not explain how her own home town is governed—could not identify the representative from her own congressional district or describe the justice system in her own county. Nor could most of that student's professors. But the trouble here goes farther than an erasure of the local: if the privileging of abstraction makes the social world as lived invisible, the fragmentation of knowledge into

micro-disciplines undermines any sense of connection between world affairs and our individual experience from one day to the next. How many recent college graduates could speak about the causes of the hard time they themselves have had in trying to land a decent job?

It seems to me that few of the academic disciplines are prepared to correct this problem. On the contrary, most disciplines have structurally based vested interests in the continued fragmentation and rarefaction of knowledge: English in particular, since anyone can read and enjoy a work of literature without the mediation of professional critics. But composition might play a rather different role than the other disciplines. As far as I know, composition is the only place where students can bring together economics and history, philosophy and biology, anthropology and ethics. Composition is the only place I know where students might have the opportunity to translate abstract formulations into everyday language, and to test totalizing claims against the evidence of their own senses. Composition is, as well, the only place where they might be free to think "meditatively," to propose and imagine rather than merely to critique.

We need to recognize more clearly than we have that the future, if this society has a future, lies with those who can imagine something better—those who have not yet lost the power to imagine or to hope. But imagination by itself is not enough. The schooling of imagination also needs to cultivate other indispensable qualities—curiosity, patience, and a toleration for uncertainty. And here again the writing class may be the only place where such qualities stand some chance of developing. Other classes in other departments might ask students, as we do, to read about the breakdown of the cities or the ecological crisis, to assess the history of the family or predict the likely results of the global economy. But in all the other courses these students might take, they will play a familiar and enervating role—as the dutiful consumers of expert knowledge. Only in a writing class, so far as I know, might they have the chance to discover what it feels like to be the maker of one's own truth, the maker of one's own life. While I admit that English 101 is hardly the place where the tyranny of expertise will face its last stand, I am convinced that the significant changes never happen in a big way, all at once and on an enormous scale, but always moment by moment and one person at a time, which is also how we teach and how we learn.

Notes

1. The classic account appears in Weber's "The Essentials of Bureaucratic Organization: An Ideal-Type Reconstruction."
2. For a discussion of the history behind our resistance, see Richard E. Miller, *As If Learning Mattered: Reforming Higher Education*.
3. To see how things might be differently arranged outside the university, see Anne Ruggles Gere, *Intimate Practices: Literacy and Cultural Work in U. S. Women's Clubs, 1880-1920*.
4. Of course, Scott is not the only person to think so. See Ronald L. Glassman, "Conflicts between Legal and Bureaucratic Systems of Authority." But perhaps the most comprehensive and lucid recent treatment of this subject is Charles Derber, *Power in the Highest Degree: Professionals and the Rise of the New Mandarin Order*.
5. I have taken the phrase "dialectic of control" from Anthony Giddans, *Central Problems in Social Theory: Action, Structure and Contradiction in Social Analysis*, page 6.
6. Needless to say, the relations between society, the state, the corporate sector, and bureaucracy are quite complex. One recent work that I have found useful is Bernard S. Silberman, *Cages of Reason: The Rise of the Rational State in France, Japan, the United States, and Great Britain*, especially pages 411-25. Silberman thoroughly discredits the Weberian idea that bureaucratic organization is intrinsically rational. Instead, he sees the emergence of bureaucracies in the modern world as an ad hoc response to the "experience of uncertainty" occasioned by a widening separation between society and the state (418).
Though I am indebted to Silberman, we disagree on a number of key issues. First, he believes that bureaucracies have been largely successful in mediating between society and the state. I feel, however, that bureaucracies have strengthened themselves, and the state as well, at the near-fatal expense of civil society. Second, Silberman supposes that there are two different kinds of bureaucracies: 1) organizational (state) bureaucracies, and 2) professions, operating more entrepreneurially. But I believe that professions should be seen as a social formation distinct from bureaucracy. Historically, professions are much older than bureaucratic social organizations, and they have existed without such complex and hierarchical arrangements. Third, Silberman tends to treat capitalism as a phenomenon of civil society, but I believe that the market has become a sector of its own, separate from both civil society and the state.
7. As Readings argues in *The University in Ruins*, the nation-state created the university, and, by the same token, the nation-state's impending decline "has effectively voided" the university's "social mission" (89).

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