

*Opening Plenary Address*

## **The WPA as Worker: What Would John Ruskin Say? What Would My Dad?**

Douglas D. Hesse

Twenty years ago, I was in the family room of our house at 204 William Drive, about a dozen blocks from this hotel, when the phone rang from Dad.<sup>1</sup> He was going to retire on his sixty-fifth birthday, and he was calling with a proposition. He and his partner were willing to sell me their business, greatly discounted, to keep it in the family. I'd worked with Dad and Fred for about ten summers starting when I was in seventh grade. I knew the work well. In fact, I'd just helped over Christmas. I reckoned that I was one of the few tenured full English professors in America who'd spent winter break slinging wrapping paper and turkey carcasses and desiccated pines into the back of a garbage truck. Dad was offering to sell me B&H Sanitary Service, DeWitt, IA.



Of course, I knew straight away that I wasn't interested. But I told him that I needed a couple of days to think about it. I wanted to be respectful.

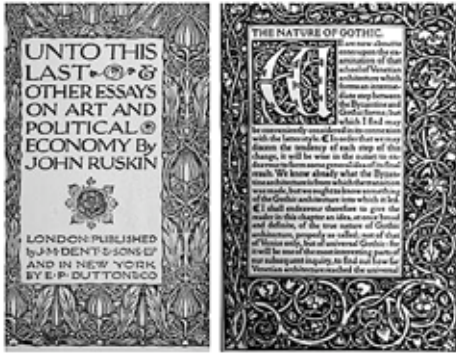
My dad never really understood teaching. Like many people, he fixed on the three-month vacation, the day ending at 3:00, the double-dipping local teachers who painted houses in the summer on the cheap. Now, he granted that I worked hard as a teacher; he saw me grading papers at Thanksgiving. But he deemed me an exception. After all, I'd demonstrated a real work ethic in the hot August alleys of DeWitt, Iowa. Other teachers? Doubtful.

If Dad didn't understand teaching, he surely didn't understand professing. When I got my PhD, he said earnestly, "I suppose you know all you need to know." He wondered about connections between teaching, conferences, and publishing—a job seemingly without boundaries, many of them self-inflicted. When I became a WPA, he saw it akin to my becoming a school principal. Now, Dad was—and is—highly supportive, even proud. Driving this week from Colorado to Illinois, I stopped to see him and Mom, sat on the front porch of my childhood, talked about returning to Normal after eight years gone. They recalled wistfully when I lived just three hours away and could meet them for dinner in Davenport or Galesburg. I was wistful, too.

Dad's experience of work was quite different from my own. But then, my own view of work, particularly teaching writing and most pointedly, being a WPA, is different now than it was twenty-five years ago when I attended my first CWPA Conference in Oxford, Ohio. I wonder about the career aspirations of people who, from grad school, want to be not English or writing professors but WPAs. What does the profession look like to them? In the same way, I suppose, people may have long aspirations to be a dean or a provost. But I'd suggest that, while being a dean or provost is an exalted and well-compensated and powerful position and even a career, it's not a profession. Rita's generous invitation and provocative theme give me the opportunity to share some rambling observations with you.

I'm wrestling tonight with the notion of *worker* which conjures to me *laborer*. Of course, anyone who earns a paycheck is a worker, and there is no doubt labor involved in being a WPA, even if it's more balancing budgets than hoisting hefty bags. But I'm thinking about the difference between having a job and having a profession. I'm thinking about how the identities we claim affect not only others' sense of us but also our sense of ourselves. For example, I might ask what it means for a physician to identify herself as a worker, her practice as a job rather than as a profession. What does it mean for WPAs?

II



At the end of May, I was invited to join a small task force, about fifteen of us, hosted by the Association of American Colleges and Universities in Washington, DC. The occasion was to draft “Future Faculty Models,” definitions of faculty roles that might befit a higher education system in which tenure is dwindling and contingency explodes.

Adrianna Kezar from USC, who has organized some of the best research on non-tenure track faculty, was leading the meeting. I suspect I got asked because I’d worked with her a few years back, and I’d kept in touch about MLA and Denver University initiatives. I was one of two professors in that room on Dupont Circle, everyone else being a dean, provost, or executive director of a professional association. We cycled through familiar themes of rising costs and falling funding, of education shifted from public good to private benefit, of competencies, of MOOCs, and of monetized testing. We discussed differentiated appointments. We taxonomized the vast terrain between adjunct law faculty, adjunct Spanish, and the clinical professorships that now dominate med schools. At one point, we were brainstorming qualities that were essential to any faculty position. I casually threw out “an identity as a professional teacher.”

This proved controversial. Many people in the room were eloquent in speculating that a central identity as a teacher wasn’t perhaps essential, especially as higher education was evolving. Sure, it was incumbent on all to know and care something about teaching. But teaching might be done by practitioners whose primary identity was something else. Now, I found the implications problematic, though I will say that these were smart and well-intentioned people.

But discussion countered my comfortable senses of disciplinarity. If *teacher* needn’t be the core identity of folks leading college classrooms—rather, just a transitory role among many—then what might that mean for WPAs? A sharper identity as managers and brokers? Teaching and writing are professions, and I think that it’s at our peril that we lose track of that professional identity, selling our birthright for a mess of managerial potage. OK, this sounds pretty harsh, but I think the stakes are high.

In a series of essays published in 1860 as *Unto this Last*, John Ruskin wrote a blistering analysis of the industrial age. Its title came from the biblical parable of the workers in the vineyard, which I've frequently found useful. That's the one where the guy hires some workers in the morning, some around noon, some in the afternoon, and some at the eleventh hour, promising them all the same pay. Even during Sunday School at Grace Lutheran Church, this bugged me. The workers hired first mount a protest—quite reasonably, it seems. They worked longer. They should get more. The vineyard owner replies, "I will give unto this last, even as unto thee." Fifty years later, Ruskin's essays picked up popularity. Gandhi translated them into Gujarati, for example.

In "The Roots of Honour," Ruskin wrestles with the question of the merchant's responsibility in a new industrialist/capitalist age. He identifies the merchant as one of "five great intellectual professions" in a "civilized nation."

The Soldier's profession is to defend it.

The Pastor's to teach it.

The Physician's to keep it in health.

The Lawyer's to enforce justice in it.

The Merchant's to provide for it.

He contends that each has a duty to die for the nation on "due occasion."

The Solider, rather than leave his post in battle.

The Physician, rather than leave his post in plague.

The Pastor, rather than teach Falsehood.

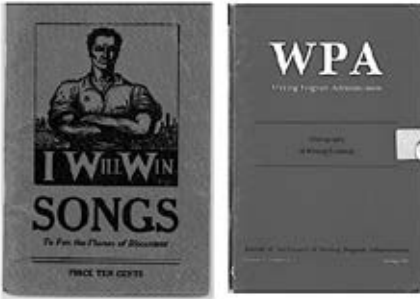
The Lawyer, rather than countenance Injustice. (241)

But what circumstances would constitute duty to die for the Merchant? Ruskin explains that even more directly than the soldier or pastor, the merchant is responsible for his employees' quality of life, responsible not only for producing "the purest and cheapest" goods but also making their production "most beneficial" to their makers. Merchants must therefore treat workers as they would their own sons and daughters.

So is the WPA soldier, doctor, pastor, lawyer, or merchant? Now, The Portland Resolution seems to claim the WPA as inhabiting many professions. But I'm going to muse that we seem to enamor ourselves as merchants these days, with writing programs as our products, and I think we need to consider the consequences. Oh, I know that we're hardly the capitalist profiteers that Ruskin had in mind. In fact, we generally think of ourselves as working at the designs of top administrators and trustees, as

intermediaries in the great chain of employment. So, it might be that we're more aspirational merchants than actual ones, measuring success by the reputation and well-being of our programs.

### III



I want to take another run at the WPA as Worker, stepping twenty years into the past once again, this time to 1994. It's February. I've driven to O'Hare airport to pick up a friend who is returning from the Lillehammer Olympics. When I get home that evening, there's a note to call Chuck Schuster. When I do, he invites me to

edit the WPA journal. I'm flattered and say yes, though I'm utterly naïve.

WPA in those days was fairly Mom and Pop, and the journal was no different. With the help of graduate students—first, Bill Weakley, then Anne Grenseth, and then Louise Freeman-Toole—I did all the production, from dumping files into PageMaker to taking disks to printers. When the boxes of journals arrived, we hand-stamped a stack of manila envelopes with the Normal, IL, postage permit and then the CWPA return address. We affixed address labels that Jeff Sommers had sent from Ohio, then stuffed and sealed and carted the lot to the post office about seventy-five yards over that way. A mailing took a dozen hours.

I rehearse the process because this is the sort of work we've all done. It's picking up donuts before a morning meeting. It's standing over a photocopier at night running off papers for the next day's orientation. It's restoring chairs to rows after workshops. For many years, CWPA held a holiday party at MLA, and there was ever the frugal adventure of smuggling wine bottles, trundling sacks of sandwiches through hotel lobbies with the likes of Bill Condon and John Heyda. Even when we outsourced the party, we went to blue collar joints like Chicago's Billy Goat Tavern, a Cheezeborger and Old Style for everyone.

Now, maybe this is bad use of WPA time. Stacking chairs isn't writing articles or chatting with the business college dean. Perhaps, even, such labor preserves the condescending perspective of writing program administration as caretaking work, feminine, to use an old parlance. Perhaps, even, to go Biblical on you, WPAs are too happy to play Martha rather than Mary and thus, we take our eyes off bigger prizes. I do think there's some truth.

Still, it has seemed to me that there's value in this kind of work which does seem particularly characteristic among administrators to WPAs. It might just be my working class diffidence, but I think that a certain kind of valuable *ethos* derives from being a steward to a writing program. It helped Jimmy Carter when he started picking up hammers for Habitat for Humanity. That said, men probably derive a more useful ethos from doing these things than do women.

When I mailed out my first issue of *WPA: Writing Program Administration*, I received a nice handwritten letter from Ken Bruffee, the journal's first editor. Bruffee was encouraging but also apologetic; he wasn't renewing his CWPA membership because he was moving along in the profession and in life. He wanted me to know it was nothing personal. He did have one bit of regret, though, that I'd changed the color of the journal from red to yellow. He explained that the red cover had been chosen very deliberately as a worker's color, to echo the 1930's Works Progress Administration and more directly, the International Workers of the World *Little Red Songbook*. As someone not only interested in history but also in song, I was chagrined.

Bruffee was seeing writing teachers as something like the Wobblies, exploited and undervalued, working the university kitchens and loading docks. More to the point, he identified the WPA him or herself as one among those teachers, inhabiting their roles more significantly than those of manager or merchant. Our publication was red in solidarity.

Volume 3.1 was the issue marking a transition from newsletter to journal. Bruffee wrote:

*WPA is necessary to writing program administrations and to the larger educational community, we believe, because it helps define an important field within our profession. . . . WPAs also serve an institutional function quite distinct from that served by presidents, deans, chairs, provosts, and the like. Most writing program administrators continue to be writing teachers, differing from other writing teachers only in the nature of the people we teach. We teach not only college and university students, but often other college and university teachers as well. We are called upon sometimes to teach other administrators, trustees, and legislators, and even the general public. As a result, WPAs are not just teachers who administrate or administrators who also teach. We administrate in part *by* teaching. We teach in part *through* administration. (7; emphasis in original)*

We've rightly, perhaps smugly, embraced Bruffee's characterization of the relationship between teaching and administration. I'd just urge that we pay more attention to the aspect *writing teacher*. After all, almost any col-

lege administrative position can claim a teaching element. Historically, it's been their primary identity as writers and teachers that marked the singular status of WPAs.

How true is that today?

The broad trajectory of writing program administration since 1979 has been from teaching and minimal management to development to advocacy. The progression is accretive, not substitutive. Each new focus layers on previous ones, like acetate overlays in old anatomy texts. The result is both more work for WPA as well as different kinds.

The managerial function was and is simply concerned with matters such as staffing and scheduling, handling placement and transfers, maintaining basic course goals and features, and so on. It allowed WPAs to choose identities as teachers and writers, including in areas not defined by administration.

The development function emerged with the perception that the individual classroom was not, finally, the unit for transmuting theory and research into pedagogy. Instead, the program was especially given the intractable transience of writing teachers. The WPA became a combination Peace Corps Volunteer and Missionary. On the one hand, she tried to better teaching and learning by bringing advanced practices to classroom villages. On the other hand, he preached the burgeoning religion of composition studies. Some teachers were happy to be in the church, some were there under duress, and some followed heretical doctrines: the Gospel of Modes, the Synod of Grammar. The WPA, then, became the chalice through which, not Rome but rather Urbana-Champaign, sought to convert the masses.

The more recent advocacy function focuses on the position of the writing programs on campuses, within higher education, and in the minds of publics and policy makers. Again, our motivations have been significantly altruistic. We understand how resources, working conditions, and expectations affect learning conditions. For example, writing programs are constrained when others on campus avow that they should foremost teach those kids how to use a damn comma.

But I don't think altruism is our only engine. A lot of us now must attend to program brands. These are the days of entrepreneurial education and innovation, of value propositions meshed with marketability, inflected by our own egos. Some years ago, Barbara Cambridge and I did a program review for a prestigious liberal arts college.



In the exit interview with its president, we were suggesting that the college might best concentrate on several fine initiatives it had developed rather than pursue new ones. He interrupted us by saying, “College X is like a shark; if it stops swimming forward, it dies.”

There’s some truth in the formulation, I think, but swimming can become its own end.

The rising tide of academic administration has no doubt lifted WPA boats. But I think we need to consider an overriding impulse to self-perpetuation to the point that the WPA’s self-identity shapes, however subtly, how we define our programs. In graduate programs, coursework in administrative concerns now joins, even displaces, coursework in rhetorical theory, textual analysis, even writing itself. How many rhet/comp students take workshops in creative writing or journalism? I’ve had conversations with good and trusted friends like Shirley Rose and Kathi Yancey about the rise of an administrative industrial complex within doctoral programs. Jeanne Gunner mused about this in a plenary speech in Charlotte some twenty-four years ago; more recently, Donna Strickland characterized *The Managerial Unconscious*. Shirley and Kathi point out, quite persuasively, that since an immediate or eventual administrative role is ultimately a feature of many comp studies jobs, it’s only practical and ethical to credential grad students for them. But are we meeting a need, or are we actually creating that need?

I’ll be blunt. How much of our work is thrust upon us versus self-inflicted? Might we be like Venkman and Egon and Ray, tasked by Gozar to choose the form of our destructor, our own version of the Stay Puft Marshmallow Man?

Might we further, in fact, privilege the kinds of writing program goals, and practices that are most susceptible to administration, goals and practices that need us as guides and supervisors? Absent the administrative imperative, how easily would we settle on academic discourse, genre, or argument? Mind you, I’m not arguing that our foci are unworthy. I’m just musing that documents like the WPA Outcomes Statement, whose revision I just happily teamed to produce, might be different if the writing experts who did it weren’t WPAs.

My simple point, a head-smacking doh!, is that writing program administration is centrally concerned with writing program administration. Con-



sider the number of surveys and questionnaires that circulate amongst us today, attempts to describe practices, working conditions, beliefs, and so on. We quest for implementable knowledge. How to do placement? How to develop a minor? How much to pay assessment scorers? What digital portfolio platform? Is this focus important? Absolutely. But this focus defines and reifies the nature of WPA work, and my talk is an ironic contribution to this WPA-centrism.

I've been circling around the point that how we've collectively conceived the WPA position has defined the nature of our work and shifted professional identities from teachers and writers to administrators. This might not be healthy for writing in the long run. It also might not be healthy for us.

#### IV



John Ruskin's writings on political economy were rather a sidelight during his lifetime. He was known better as an art critic and theorist, though even these writings have an economic status. In *The Stones of Venice*, Ruskin explores developments in architecture, relating aspects of building form and aesthetics to the process of their construction. His essay "The Nature of the Gothic" is particularly significant. Commenting on building cathedrals, Ruskin makes a case for creativity even at the cost of order, arguing that unfettered workers make more pleasing designs:

Wherever the workman is utterly enslaved, the parts of the building must of course be absolutely like each other; for the perfection of his execution can only be reached by exercising him in doing one thing, and giving him nothing else to do.

I would not impeach love of order. . . . Only do not let us suppose that love of order is love of art. (185)

Now, WPAs hardly exercise ourselves at only one thing. But I do think we've privileged the building of more orderly writing program cathedrals, and I wonder about the ways we might not be figuratively enslaving both our fellow teachers but also ourselves. Hey, we're not making art, someone might well argue. We're not alone among professions experiencing system-

atic order as the highest imperative. Witness physician diagnostic and treatment protocols. Across the board, we're not far from the anxiety of analytics. Do we in writing remember and prize our interpretive roots?

I've been suggesting that WPAs would do best to see their professionalism as vested in teaching and writing, enacted in affiliations to students, colleagues, and literacy, not in subscriptions to mercantilist bureaucracies. We might think more intentionally about the kind of working life we lead: Are we disciplined albeit well-compensated workers serving programmaticity, or are we professionals artistically and imperfectly serving writers and writing? Yes, I know that's a false binary. Pursuing the work of teaching and administration of writing as an art, however, raises a conundrum. Such work is seductive, sucking up all available shards of time. If you're somewhat pathological, like me, work pervades every aspect of your being, defines you, ultimately discards you.

That wasn't such a bad thing to another eminent Victorian, Thomas Carlyle. In *Sartor Resartus*, Carlyle narrates a crisis of faith that culminates in his chapter "The Everlasting Yea." Carlyle espouses the gospel of work: "Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with all they whole might. Work while it is called Today; for the Night cometh, wherein no man can work" (149).

With all due respect, and looking at the last quarter of my career, I say to Carlyle, "No."

There's a lesson to learn from my father. He bought a garbage truck in 1970 because he was tired of working the graveyard shift painting tractors for Caterpillar after a day of delivering gas and diesel fuel to Clinton County farms. He wanted more stability and agency, even if that agency also meant working in the rain, working with the flu, working when your knees and hips and shoulders were shot until, literally, you stepped off of the truck on the day you turned sixty-five. While he liked being a small businessman, his choice was less romance than necessity. Who seeks prestige handling dumpsters? Neither did he aspire to make an empire, though he did buy a second truck. He picked up trash four days a week, sent out bills, paid his debts, worried about finances, and went fishing every Monday. His work was not his life. He knows that, to some large extent, mine is. He doesn't understand that. I wonder if I should.



## NOTES

1. The text here is as I delivered it on the evening of July 17, 2015, in Normal, IL, which means it's a conversational artifact of a certain time and place—though I trust still making sense. Missing are twenty-two slides, some of which displayed quotations, some of which added information but weren't easily reproducible, and some were mostly decorative and entertaining. I'm happy to share them if you email me, an offer and possibility that obviously will dwindle with time.

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