

Where the Action Is:
Doing Versus Being in the Academy

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I would like to begin with the October 1999 issue of *PMLA*.¹ The cover features a striking image, explained by this note: “A composite picture of the Sun combining images in different ultraviolet wavelengths. The images were recorded by the Extreme Ultraviolet Imaging Telescope, aboard the Solar and Heliospheric Observatory, a spacecraft codeveloped by the European Space Agency and the United States National Aeronautics and Space Administration” (1023). You must realize, then, that the folks who take *PMLA* seriously are far ahead of anyone likely to read *JAC*, for, after all, the MLA gang is contemplating the mysteries of the universe while you are searching themes for CFs and FRAGs. It’s astrophysics as compared with *Harbrace*. In fact, as we learn from a cover blurb, literatures about the environment is (are?) “a subject on the rise.”

I got into this racket forty-three years ago, during the hegemony of the New Criticism, and in those four decades I have seen literary studies go through metamorphosis after metamorphosis—from the New Criticism to structuralism to myth criticism to deconstruction to cultural criticism. Along the way, Neo-Aristotelianism, Freudian criticism, Marxist criticism, feminist criticism, and queer theory have occupied the attention of literary ladies and gents and filled the pages of literary journals. In the editor’s column of the October *PMLA*, Martha Banta says,

To whet appetites for what lies ahead, here is a list of the special topics already on the *PMLA* schedule: . . . Globalizing Literary Studies . . . Mobile Citizens, Media States . . . America: The Idea, the Literature . . . and Imagining History. (1028)

I’m drooling. I can hardly wait.

Anyone who commits the fallacy of calling these various fads “paradigm shifts” is making an egregious error. From the New Criticism to environmentalism, the foci of literary studies have been those heuristics

whereby the pages of journals could be filled, whereby the MLA program could be rounded out each year, and whereby literary scholars could maintain the illusion that they were *doing* something. In fact, the salient characteristic of literary theory and scholarship is just this: they *do* very little or nothing.

For this institutionalized do-nothingness there is, of course, a historical explanation. In fact, one can easily see two related causes for what I have called the “purification” of literary studies, a cleansing that resulted in an English department culture from which history, biography, the essay, and other non-poetic texts were excluded and in which *doing* something in the world “out there” is at least *infra dig*, if not below contempt.

The Romantic discovery of the imagination caused the split between literature as *doing* and literature as *being* and provided the rationale for the hierarchy in which *being* has been made infinitely superior to *doing*. Let me put this in the starkest terms. In our October *PMLA* appears an essay by Terry Mulcaire, “Public Credit; or, The Feminization of Virtue in the Marketplace.” If I had the patience (and if I assumed that my readers might have the patience), I would quote the abstract of this paper; suffice it to say that the punch line is that Whig writers such as Addison and Defoe defended the values of a liberal market society “by representing them as desirable—or, in other words, as aesthetic values” (1030). Now, I’m not claiming that this essay is without interest (forgive the pun), but what I do want to point out is that in the professional scheme of things (that is, in the humanities as conceived by the establishment), another explication of canonical works has infinitely more value than a study of, say, the literacy problems among community college students. The literary critical essay *does* virtually nothing. It is printed, read by a small number of literary folk, and forgotten.

Why is the scale of values in English departments—and the humanities in general—so skewed? I won’t burden you with the argument I developed in *The English Department: A Personal and Institutional History*, though I unashamedly recommend that book to you. I’ll simply give you my conclusion: in a new twist on the old faculty psychology, Coleridge dreamed up *two* imaginations, the primary and the secondary, and the primary Imagination became a god-like faculty, *creating* original works (that is, poetry, fiction) while the secondary Imagination was relegated to a servile position in the scheme of things, *fashioning* such utile, practical works as essays, letters, biographies, histories, and so on. The Romantics, in my view, provided “the philosophical and spiritual

basis for the two great splits in English-department humanities: the one between imaginative and [I wince at the necessity of using the term] nonimaginative literature and the other between creative writing and composition” (*English* 135).

Corollary to the supremacy of what Coleridge termed the primary Imagination is the dogma that the “applied” and the “practical” have inherently less value than the ideal. No one has stated the case better than Northrop Frye:

In literature, questions of fact or truth are subordinated to the primary literary aim of producing a structure of words for its own sake, and the sign-values of symbols are subordinated to their importance as a structure of interconnected motifs. Wherever we have an autonomous verbal structure of this kind, we have literature. Wherever this autonomous verbal structure is lacking, we have language, words used instrumentally to help human consciousness do or understand something else. (74)

“A structure of words for its own sake”—this dictum, now more than forty years old, still characterizes establishment attitudes toward literature and, I would argue, literary scholarship: the literary critical essay is a structure of words for its own sake about a structure of words for its own sake. Thus, the strange value system: writing a poem is a higher calling than writing an essay; creative writing is sublime, and composition is mundane; writing a study of a poem has more value than doing a study of the literacy of a population.

In fact, as you and I know, “applied” scholarship is *infra dig*, and “pure” literary scholarship is noble. Thus, the aristocrats in our business spend their days either doing literary studies, thinking about doing literary studies, or admiring literary studies. Yet, paradoxically, the action is in applied scholarship, not pure scholarship of the *PMLA* variety.

“But,” you protest, “what about that hot new topic, ‘literatures of the environment’? Isn’t that more than a structure of words for its own sake?” As Jean Arnold says in a letter in the “Forum on Literatures of the Environment” in the October *PMLA*, “When humanities students put on their ‘green glasses’ to look at texts, excitement stirs, as the classroom yields its discursive space to issues of pressing contemporary importance” (1089).

Yeah! Now I see: *Moby Dick* in the context of “Save the Whales,” “Typhoon” and meteorological conditions attributed to global warming; *Huckleberry Finn* as a source of insight regarding nineteenth-century

riparian problems. And the theme assignments that ecoliterature generates: “In a well-developed essay, discuss ‘The Song of Hiawatha’ as a statement about humankind’s relationship to the natural world.”

Yeah! And ecoliterature is another prompt for the kind of “term papers” that clog the pages of *PMLA* year after year. As an undergraduate, the aspiring literary gent or lady learns to write short term papers about literature; in graduate school, he or she learns to write longer term papers; the PhD candidate concludes his or her education by writing a great big long term paper: the dissertation. As an assistant professor (if lucky enough to land a job), the writer seeks to have that big long term paper published by a “respectable” university press—and then, tenure. The aspirant goes on to write more and more term papers to be published in journals and by university presses. Through the years of training, the lit person has learned to *do* only one thing: write term papers. Thus, the heuristics that generate topics for term papers are supremely important. Hence, literature as ecology.

In the summer 1999 *MLA Newsletter*, Edward Said worries that the relation between “what we do as teachers and scholars of literature and ‘the world’ is a vexed one, much debated as the uncertainty about the scope of literary study and the status of the literary object seems to grow” (3). He concludes, however, that the paradox between “the world and the teaching situation needs to be maintained, not resolved under duress of any sort.” It seems to me that there is an obvious solution to the dilemma created by the poem on the page and the page as an artifact in a hurly-burly world of politics, doctrines, dogmas, malice, love, sexuality, and everything else that goes into the frustration called living: give *doing* as much value as *being*.

As I said a moment ago, the action is in applied scholarship, not the pure scholarship of the *PMLA* variety. And here’s what I mean by applied scholarship: trying to answer questions about what we *do*, how we *do* it, and how we can *do* it better.

We teach, and teaching is *doing*. But note this strange paradox: the English department establishment either ignores or actually sneers at the kind of scholarship that tries to solve the problems of teaching literature, let alone composition.

In the Winter 1997 *MLA Newsletter*, Herbert Lindenberger, then president of the MLA, entitled his column “Yes, We *Do* Take Teaching Seriously.” The title buoyed my spirits. At long last, the big guns of MLA were beginning to think seriously about what they *do*. However, when I finished Lindenberger’s brief disquisition, I found my spirits were once

again sagging. What I found is that “truly distinguished teaching” does not lend itself to “easy definition” and that “the teacher of literature can convert students to a commitment to serious thinking about who and what they are, to convince them that, as a result of their study, their lives have changed irrevocably” (3). I was left with questions. If literary studies can attempt to unravel the mysteries of *Finnegan’s Wake*, why not also try to clarify a few of the mysteries of teaching? Does literature actually change the lives of students? How? Why? How do we know?

One of my colleagues said to me, “Studying literature gives students the ability to think critically.” When I brightened and told her this posed an interesting problem, she was stunned. When I suggested that we collaborate on a study of the influence of literature on critical thinking, she replied, “But critical thinking has so many definitions that we could never study it.” Another of my colleagues justified teaching Hispanic literature, saying, “It makes students more tolerant.” And I asked how she knew this. “It’s possible,” I added, “that your course makes Anglos intolerant.” All I was suggesting to these colleagues is that if you’re going to make a claim about the “uses” of literature, about what literature *does*, you must be prepared to back that claim with applied scholarship.

Applied means empirical: clearly stating a problem and using the methods of the human and exact sciences in the attempt to solve that problem. You can see the double bind that literary scholars have got themselves into: they want to justify the study and teaching of literature on the basis of its *uses* for human beings, but their value system outlaws the means whereby they could demonstrate that usefulness.

Before I segue to another subject, I do want to mention the forthcoming *PMLA Millennium Issue*. The proposed areas of interest for that advent are “The Field of Study,” “Teaching,” “General Issues in Literature and Language,” and “Departmental Life.” The prompts for essays on teaching are disheartening:

How would you characterize the shifts in teaching philosophy that have occurred during the past hundred years? What major changes do you foresee?

What has been your most important teaching experience?

Which works have most influenced your teaching?

What will be the most significant impact that recent technology will have on teaching? (*MLA Newsletter*)

These prompts, of course, encourage the sort of literary fustian that Lindenberger used in his brief essay on teaching.

Now the moment for which you've all been waiting: my thoughts about composition and the hegemonic literary establishment. I begin with a representative anecdote. If, while sipping coffee with colleagues in the conference room of the English department at USC, I had asked "Who's that?" when one of my literary pals mentioned Abrams or Brooks or Culler or Derrida or Eagleton or Ferguson or Greenblatt or Hartman or Iser or Jauss or Kristeva or Leavis or Miller (Hillis), I would have been considered an ignoramus. However, if I had innocently mentioned Applebee or Bizzell or Connors or D'Angelo or Ede or Flower or Graves or Hairston or Irmischer or Judy or Kinneavy or Lauer or Miller (Susan), the literarist would look askance at me, wondering why I would bring irrelevancies to the Kaffeeklatsch. James Slevin uses MLA statistics to estimate that seventy percent of all post-secondary English classes are composition (5). Composition is normally the responsibility of the English department; yet a small proportion of English faculty take composition seriously and know anything about scholarship in the field.

For historical, institutional, and political reasons, the field of composition is divided, and one temporary way to sort out the issues is to make a rough cut between Romantics and Rhetoricians. Because the Romantics have purified composition of its immediately practical applications, they are comfortable in the English department culture (although, of course, they are certainly the underclass in that culture). By and large, Romantic composition serves *being* rather than *doing* and thus retreats from the action necessary to make the world work and for the writer to survive in that world.²

My greatest argument with Ann Berthoff and other Romantics regards the foundational notion that composition is the making of meaning. Now, it is certainly the case that when we use language we make meaning—willy-nilly, inevitably—but no one begins to write (or talk) with the *purpose* of making meaning. That is, language is symbolic action, and action implies motive or purpose, and that is the foundation of a valid theory of composition and of an effective composition pedagogy. However, "making meaning" squares perfectly with Romantic epistemology, from Coleridge through Emerson to I.A. Richards, with a side excursion to Matthew Arnold.

In *What is English?* Peter Elbow has tackled the problem of how to teach the making of meaning (131-34). The answer seems to be feedback from peer groups. Elbow explains, "Because students in a writing class

usually have to revise the drafts they get feedback on, self-interest leads them to see how useful it is to get accurate movies of readers' minds" (133). This is the sort of frustration that "the making of meaning" leads one into—but it's a beautiful, Platonic frustration. Since writing is not intended to *do* anything (except, of course, express the writer), the goal of pedagogy and of peer-group work is somehow to get into the eternity of other psyches, students there communing while the academy and the world roll on through history.

In *Writing with Power*, Elbow discusses "the open-ended writing process," which he clearly values above "the direct writing process" and "the dangerous method," both of which result from a rhetorical situation and thus generate writing that is intended to do something. According to Elbow,

The open-ended writing process is at the opposite extreme from the direct writing process. It is a way to bring to birth an unknown, unthought-of piece of writing—a piece of writing that is not yet in you. It is a technique for thinking, seeing, and feeling new things. This process invites maximum chaos and disorientation. You have to be willing to nurse something through many stages over a long period of time and to put up with not knowing where you are going. Thus it is a process that can change you, not just your words. (50)

(As a teacher of writing, my first question to a student about his or her text is this: "What do you want this piece of writing to *do*?" That question generates a dialogue that allows both me and my student to read and critique the text as a piece of real-world discourse. It allows us to treat the text rhetorically.)

The mission of the Romantics is to rescue the imagination, which, according to them, has been exiled from composition. Berthoff has been perhaps the best known and certainly the most strident of champions of the imagination. She says,

By proceeding philosophically—by reclaiming the imagination—those learning to write and to teach writing will discover that language is itself the great heuristic. Language enables us to make the meanings by whose means we discover further meaning. We don't just think *about* concepts; we think *with* them.

Berthoff, who has had a large following, represents one powerful segment of the field. For purposes of my argument, I'm more interested in the reasons for her popularity than in the substance of what she has to say.

Berthoff is powerfully under the influence of Coleridge via I.A. Richards (or of Richards via Coleridge), and she wants to reclaim the imagination as the “most powerful speculative instrument English teachers have” (4). This puts *us* in a double bind, for who (especially in the English department scene) would argue against imagination? Berthoff fails to contextualize—to historicize—her call for a return to the imagination (as if rhetoricians were anti-imagination and unimaginative), but what she really means is a return to the solipsism of the Romantic imagination. Let me put the issue another way: her English department advocates (such as T.Y. Booth) find her “theory” (stance? philosophy? rhetoric?) totally compatible with the foundational beliefs of English departments; even her scorn for “the rhetoricians” and the social scientists is in keeping with the attitudes of “English.”

Yet, rhetoric always looks toward the action: doing something for some purpose in a scene—which is not to say that self-discovery and texts for the sake of texts are outlawed. It is to say that rhetoric values the *craft* of writing for a purpose, and that means *composition-rhetoric* includes the *craft* necessary to the whole range of purposes for writing.

In terms of composition, the scope of action is vast, encompassing self-expressive purposes (for example, the lament, the meditation, the limerick, the expurgatory tirade, the confession), referential purposes (for example, explanations of processes, points of view, and philosophical systems; instructions for assembling a new gadget or achieving satori or making cassoulet), argumentative purposes (that is, real argument as opposed to logomachy; argument the goal of which is not to “win” but to achieve consubstantiality), and, of course, persuasion.³

The lowly and damning terms *utility* and *utilitarian* apply to many of the texts generated by various purposes for writing. (Perhaps the terms apply to most texts.) Thus, composition teachers are duty-bound to help students gain the abilities to produce effective “utilitarian” texts, and these abilities include all of the *skills* that are the basis for the *craft* of writing. (I like to draw an analogy between the writer and the cabinet-maker: the master writer might not be a Peter Mattheissen, but he or she can produce texts that are well constructed and gracefully and clearly written; the master cabinetmaker might not be George Hepplewhite, but he or she can construct a graceful and flawlessly crafted china cabinet.)

For example, excellent materials on the principles of document design are readily available (Felker; Felker et al.; Felker and Rose). These simple principles allow writers to make their texts more accessible to readers (for instance, by using subheads, by putting series in lists rather

than in one paragraph, by avoiding nominalizations). Document design is not sublime; it is not romantic; however, it is very useful to writers who want their texts to *do* something in the real world.

A responsible composition program would make available elective units in writing funding proposals and business letters, among other forms. In the newly emerging corporate university where the CEO (erstwhile, president) audits departmental income as assiduously as he or she once scanned the annual report of scholarly activity, an English department that invested some scholarly and pedagogical resources in proposal writing might well undergo a change for the fiscal better, the attention to utilitarian writing bringing about a new attitude among literarists, who normally devote themselves exclusively to what I have called “term papers.”

Imagine this scene. A new departmental recruit, an assistant professor longing for tenure and wanting to show his interest in the scholarship brewing and gurgling in his department, asks a great glittering senior colleague, “What are you working on now?” When the answer comes, the young aspirant is stunned, speechless, standing slack-jawed and wide-eyed: “I’m working up a funding proposal to get money to study the reading habits of teenagers in the neighborhoods surrounding the campus.” The scene, of course, is pure fantasy, or pure irony, or both. But the anecdote is not without important meaning and is worth pondering.

A responsible program would also teach argumentation, though it is at the furthest remove from the values of the literary establishment and of the sort of composition instruction that results from romantic solipsism. Because argumentation takes one into the *agora*, into the realm of public policy and ethical choice, it is the most utilitarian of genres (modes, forms) and hence the one that romantic compositionists neglect (or shun or avoid). One develops arguments by looking outward, at the scene and at the audience, not inward, gazing at the navel of one’s own psyche. Argument is quintessentially rhetorical and fundamentally useful.

Now it’s time for me to fold my tent and make my way down the trail. But before I go, I must rehabilitate myself and at least make my ethical argument, which probably should have come at the opening of these remarks. I am not simply a mechanical person, a robot. I am as sensitive and caring as any of the Romantics. And to establish that point, I relate this brief anecdote.

One desolate Friday evening, I was unable to settle down. Schoenberg’s “Moses and Aaron” made me nervous; *The Faerie Queene*, usually so soothing, gave me the jitters; even the Sunday *New York Times* crossword

puzzle failed to rescue the evening. And then, inspiration! (Like my Romantic contemporaries, I too am susceptible to mysterious flashes of genius.) Yes, inspiration! “Parsnips!” I muttered. “Yes, parsnips!” The sweetly melancholy remembrance of the parsnips that were so much a part of my childhood. There flowed from me this verse:

Ah, parsnip, pallid winter root,
 Thou symbol, yes, thou very fruit
 Of fallow fields and frozen ways,
 I alone will sing thy praise
 Before I whack thee quite in two
 And pop thee in this evening’s stew.
 Oh, vegetable melancholic,
 When people dine and drink and frolic,
 Thou liest in the basement bin,
 A beetle bumbling blind therein.
 Thou suffer’st yet the vilest taunts.
 You’re never served in restaurants.

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Notes

1. A version of this article was originally published in the journal *inside english* 27.2 (2000): 4-6+.
2. This discussion is adapted from Winterowd, *English* 8-16 passim.
3. I hope that I am not accused of pigeonholing here. I realize that categories of discourse are, by and large, arbitrary and that types and purposes overlap and intermingle. See also Kinneavy’s discussion of referential purposes and Burke’s discussion of consubstantiality.

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