DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 410 570 CS 215 902

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TITLE Composition and Literature: Now We're Talking to One Another.
PUB DATE 1997-03-00
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (48th, Phoenix, AZ, March 12-15, 1997).
PUB TYPE Opinion Papers (120) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *English Departments; *English Teachers; Higher Education; *Language Role; *Literature; Scholarship; *Writing (Composition)
IDENTIFIERS *Academic Discourse Communities; *Composition Literature Relationship; Educational Issues; Faculty Attitudes

ABSTRACT

Problems of "dialect" exist in the field called "English," which is constituted by both composition and literature. The "ghettoization" of composition has created a hostile underclass, and many compositionists try to "pass" as literarists or at least unconsciously adopt the vocabulary and rhetoric of the literarists, in the process deserting and demeaning their native "culture." On the other hand, literarists have no need to speak the language of the compositionists. Hillis Miller, for example, knows that composition-rhetoric is a field rich in theory and scholarship and that it is essential to the humanities in general. In "Nietzsche in Basel: Reading Writing," however, Miller writes a perfectly conventional academic essay urging compositionists to teach "transgressive writing" that breaks out of imposed strictures. Kurt Spellmeyer, in "Common Ground: Dialogue, Understanding, and the Teaching of Composition" attempts to define the "agora" where both literarists and compositionists can amicably set up shop, a sort of English-department mall. The pedagogical goal that Spellmeyer wants to reach is Miller's "dialogical, open-ended essay." But like Miller, Spellmeyer seems to be addressing a caricature of compositionists. Both, however, are doing what comes naturally: Miller speaking from the eminence of a brilliant career in literature and Spellmeyer attempting to "talk the talk" of the establishment. Not wanting to change dialects, many who speak compositionist nonstandard ask their English department colleagues who are speakers of literarist (MLA) standard to grant them their own language and to view that language as a prestige dialect. (NKA)

Composition and Literature: Now We're Talking to One Another

W.Ross Winterowd

1997 4C's

In 1983, the U of Chicago P issued Composition and Literature: Bridging the Gap, edited by Win Horner. To characterize the disjunction between literature and composition, I prefer a sociolinguistic metaphor to Horner's technological "bridging." I talk about problems of dialect in the field we call "English," which is constituted by both composition and literature.

The ghettoization of composition has created a hostile underclass, and many compositionists try to "pass" as literarists or at least unconsciously adopt the vocabulary and rhetoric of the literarists, in the process deserting and demeaning their native "culture." On the other hand, literarists have no need to speak the language of the compositionists.

A case in point is Hillis Miller, a generous and open literarist who knows that composition-rhetoric is a field rich in theory and scholarship and that it is essential to the humanities in general. In "Nietzsche in Basel: Reading Writing," he uses his own "dialect" to advocate the teaching of reading and writing together, but says that doesn't diminish the role of composition or imply that students learn to write by reading.

> [F]ar from weakening the role of programs in composition, my position would greatly strengthen it by recognizing that the teaching of composition is not just an instrumental sideline in higher education. It is not

> just the teaching of correct grammar, spelling, paragraph structure, and so on that should have been mastered already in high school. On the contrary, learning to write teaches habits of reading that are fundamental in any course or discipline, not to speak of political or social life outside the university. (277).

Now then, who would recognize that teaching composition is more than teaching spelling, punctuation, and verb agreement? Certainly the people I associate with in CCCC, the Rhetoric Society of America, Association of Teachers of Advanced Composition, and so on don't think that comp is just teaching "mechanics." It must be the case, then, that Miller believes his literary colleagues have such a nescient and destructive perspective. However, the audience for his essay does not consist of the literary elite, but of compositionists, for whom Miller elaborately explains that "the teaching of reading and writing from grade school through graduate school is one of the most powerful ways a culture's ideology is imposed."

> Louis Althusser, in a celebrated essay, speaks of the way what he calls "state apparatuses," including schools, enforce an ideology, defined by him as the imaginary version of our real relations to our fellows and to material reality. These apparatuses do this enforcing by hailing or interpellating someone to be

> the person the state wants him to be. A police officer says, "Hey you!" and I instinctively respond, "Who, me?" The teaching of both writing and reading is a splendid example of that interpellation: "Hey you! You have split an infinitive and spliced with a comma!" "I'm sorry. I'll never do it again." (278)

Well, now whomever Miller is addressing knows that what compositionists are doing is not ideologically neutral and that we thus are a good deal more than split infinitive and comma splice police.

Paradoxically, compositionists would agree with Miller's ideas about education — so far. Until we find him stating that "Grammar, logic, and rhetoric, the interwoven sequence of the trivium that has now been combined in our single modern discipline of composition, presume definite standards of coherence" (280). As Miller proceeds to tell "us" what we presume, his tone is as important as his message; thus, I quote:

> A shapely discourse should have a beginning, middle, and end, like a good Aristotelian plot. Everything should hang together. Nothing extraneous should be included. All should be governed by a single idea or ground that might be called the "logos" of the whole discourse. The distinction between literal and figurative language is assumed, along with the priority of the former over the latter. Figurative language is

> an adornment added through metaphorical transfers to a literal base whose meaning is guaranteed by its referentiality. The literal language of a good composition refers, truthfully, either to the external world or to the subjectivity of the one who composes the discourse. That subjectivity remains as a sovereign, separate, paradigmatically masculine, ego in control of word choices determined by what "he" wants to say. The word "composition" suggests a consciously controlled act of putting together. (280)

The caricature is as puzzling as the ones that precede it. Does Miller imply that the "shapely discourse doctrine," with its corollary of the self-possessed writer, is part of composition doctrine, or does he imply that those "others" in the departmental coffee room, the literarists, believe that compositionists are so epistemologically démodé?

If we accept Miller's premises, composition theory and practice are in a real mess. Miller's proposal for reforming theory and practice is predictable. Since language is metaphorical and unstable, since texts are indeterminate, since the quest for total coherence is hunting the snark, since the writer's self is a construct rather than a reality (whatever that might be) — since we are now in the age of deconstruction, "Real change [in composition] will come only through changes that go all the way down to the ground, so to speak, changes in language that

challenge all that system of assumptions about language I have described" (281).

If Miller is arguing that we should abandon the five- paragraph essay, sentence diagramming, fill-the-blanks exercises, scrupulously thorough marginal corrections of grammar, syllabi that imply unity-coherence-clarity-economy, outlining before writing, never embarking without a clearcut thesis statement, and making certain that all paragraphs have a topic sentence, who, worth considering, would argue against him? If his point is that we should always make students aware of the tentative nature of texts and of the infinitely complex relationship among writer, reader, and text, who worth considering would argue against him?

Now we reach the crucial turning point in Miller's magisterial lecture. He is, he says, "aware that it is difficult to conceive just what an alternative way of writing might be like, an anti-logocentric way, a way based on difference and radical heterogeneity rather than on models of sameness and unity" (281). In short, Miller is stumped. But there is always a way out; rather than offering a tentative solution to the problem he has delineated, he turns to a neo-New Critical reading of Nietzsche to show the genesis of his ideas and to fill out his essay.

The conclusion that Miller leads us to, via Nietzsche, is that "All language is figurative from the beginning. It is tropological because it is based on a sequence of displacements from

a forever unknowable reality" (286). Hence, there is no difference between "rhetoric as the knowledge of tropes and rhetoric as the knowledge of various persuasive techniques" (287). Of course, it is completely unstartling to find that the concatenation of letters c-o-w don't give milk or chew cud, and it's a commonplace that one text is simply an invitation to further textuality. In short, one again wonders who among the intended readers of Miller's essay might disagree with him in his philosophy of language.

In the subhead to the concluding section of his essay, Miller tacitly promises to deliver "A Counter-Mode of Composition," but all we get is the admonition that "a change in concepts about rhetoric and the intellectual tradition to which it belongs demands a change in style" (291), though we get not a hint concerning the nature of that change or of the new style. And Miller ends with a coy irony that allows him to evade all critiques, including the one I am at present composing. Here is what Miller says:

> Though I have of course tried to be as clear, correct, and coherent as possible, to ward off beforehand the policing of the copyeditor, I too have found it necessary to use a somewhat oblique parable or fable to say what I have found myself saying. And who knows? There may even be some irony here and there in what I have said. (291)

Miller has written a perfectly conventional academic essay (I like to call this genre the "term paper") urging compositionists to teach "transgressive writing" that breaks out of the strictures imposed by the copyeditor and (one assumes) The MLA Style Manual, not to mention such established genres as the five-paragraph essay and the term paper. "Isn't it ironic," Miller is asking, "that my argument for transgression is so conventional?"

In Common Ground: Dialogue, Understanding, and the Teaching of Composition, Kurt Spellmeyer valiantly attempts to define the agora where both literarists and compositionists can amicably set up shop, a sort of English-department mall.

The Leitmotif throughout the book is the need for a common ground between the demands of societies and institutions and the use of language to question those institutions, in the process creating knowledge.

> Rather than suppress the discord between the subjective and the social, a discord erupting into every aspect of life at our historical moment, I have tried . . . to imagine the terms of an emancipatory response to the widening fissure between day-to-day experience and institutional *conventionality*. (23)

Surprisingly, Spellmeyer mentions Freire only once, and that in passing, yet Common Ground might be viewed as a literarist re-

write of Pedagogy of the Oppressed and Education for Critical Consciousness.

The argument is (ironically) structured around current theorists popular with literarists (e.g.,Bakhtin, Foucault, Gadamer, Habermas, Rorty), interpretations (of, e.g., Hunger of Memory, The Rainbow, the essays of Montaigne), and commentary on student texts and current textbooks.

The pedagogical goal that Spellmeyer wants to reach is Miller's "dialogical, open-ended essay." And as he continues, he sounds very much like Miller.

> I can think of no genre, however, less conducive to such a movement than the rigidly formal, conceptually straitened "freshman theme," which prevents in almost every writer's case the occurrence of what the historical essay, the dialogical, open-ended essay permits and even celebrates: an event of language, a transforming enlargement of the writer's conceptual horizon. (22)

I can think of no compositionist who argues in behalf of (or assigns) "the rigidly formal, conceptually straitened 'freshman theme.'" Like Miller, Spellmeyer seems to be addressing a caricature of compositionists.

"To find a voice inside a community," Spellmeyer tells us, "we must concurrently pursue the thought from the outside" (78). Which leads to a condemnation—of whom? "Inconsistency and transgression may have a place in composition theory, but they

typically stand at the farthest remove from actual practice" (78). Now if Spellmeyer means that I don't encourage my students to be inconsistent and transgressive in their writing, he's perfectly right, but if, on the other hand, he means that I don't encourage my students to understand and write about the inconsistencies and transgressions in the world about them, he's badly mistaken. However, I can't imagine consciously using inconsistency and transgression to critique those qualities in institutions. Hold on, Nellie! I can imagine irony, and I would encourage its use, and I use it all the time. I must add that I don't outlaw inconsistency and transgression, for I repeatedly urge my students to use writing to explore their beliefs and values.

Now I must quote, for Spellmeyer makes a remark that needs to be thought about.

> Because discourse is fundamentally transgressive, the more we attempt to simplify and regulate language by reducing it to an 'academic' univocality, the less occasion students have to make eventual use of their own language and experience" (78).

1. I would ask Spellmeyer, "Who makes such an attempt?" Of course, he might answer, "Sheridan Baker and Joseph Williams."
2. The goal of language is univocality, a goal that must always be frustrated; hence, the striving for univocality is precisely the reason for the ongoing discourse in Burke's parlor.

Spellmeyer would revise his position if he would think about Kenneth Burke. 3. From the standpoint of English-department academic discourse, I've never read a more univocal treatise than Common Ground. From the standpoint of the institution (the English department, the MLA), the book is not in the least transgressive!

Spellmeyer, then, is the obverse of Miller. And both are doing what comes naturally: Miller speaking from eminence of a brilliant career in literature and Spellmeyer attempting to talk the talk of the establishment, to move from Brownsville to Park Avenue (or from CCCC to MLA). Not wanting to change our dialects, many of us who speak CCCC nonstandard ask our English department colleagues who are speakers of MLA standard to grant us the right to our own language, and not only to grant us the right, but to view our language as a prestige dialect.

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Title: Paper presented at the 1997 4C's Convention (Phoenix)
COMPOSITION AND LITERATURE: NOW WE'RE TALKING TO ONE ANOTHER

Author(s): W. ROSS WINTEROWD

Corporate Source:

Publication Date: March 12-15, 1997

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