DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 451 518 CS 217 484

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TITLE Critical Thinking and the Historical Imagination.
PUB DATE 2001-03-15
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (52nd, Denver, CO, March 14-17, 2001).
PUB TYPE Opinion Papers (120) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Academic Discourse; *Critical Thinking; *Freshman Composition; Higher Education; Instructional Innovation; *Language Role
IDENTIFIERS Social Constructivism; Structuralism

ABSTRACT

Most educators' ideas about academic discourse and critical thinking are confined by social constructionist assumptions. Working with historical texts, in such a way that these texts empower students to imagine alternative futures, opens up the freshman writing course to three-dimensional critical thinking. Freshmen at one particular college must take a social science course in which they read C. Wright Mills, the influential sociologist who coined the terms "power elite" and "sociological imagination," among others. And the concept of "historical imagination" owes a great deal to C. Wright Mills. The term "historical" is preferred only because the intention is to broaden the concept and to throw the emphasis on a temporal dimension of reading and writing that has suffered from neglect. The very phrase "academic discourse" diverts attention from the historical--academic speech refers to a particular linguistic system with its own codes and structures, and teaching academic discourse is teaching these synchronic codes rather than entering a diachronic conversation. Academics routinely draw on the work of a recognizable intellectual predecessor and apply it, adapt it, or revise it to fill a contemporary felt need. Lytton Strachey's "Eminent Victorians" is an example of a general truth: that the historical imagination is not really concerned with the past as past; it uses the past to address the present and reinvent the future. (NKA)

Critical Thinking and the Historical Imagination.

by Matthew Parfitt

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Critical Thinking and the Historical Imagination
Matthew Parfitt

As an instructor of the required freshman writing course in a general education program, I've long been committed to teaching academic discourse, partly as a way of introducing students to the kind of writing that college courses expect of them, and partly as a way of promoting or even demanding critical thinking, however vague my working definition of that phrase has been. Over the past couple of years, though, I've begun to get the nagging feeling that this isn't quite working the way it should, and more recently I think I'm beginning to understand why. It appears that to demand genuine critical thinking of the kind that Steve has been describing requires that we somehow leap out of what he has felicitously called "the Fishian bowl." I would contend that our ideas about academic discourse and critical thinking are confined by social constructionist assumptions, and that working with historical texts, in such a way that these texts empower students to imagine alternative futures, opens up the writing course to the three-dimensional critical thinking that Steve has been describing.

All first year students in the college where Regina and I teach take a required Social Science course in which they read, among other things, C. Wright Mills, the influential American sociologist who coined the terms "power elite" and "sociological imagination." They learn that the latter term denotes "the ability to grasp the relationship between our lives as individuals and the social forces that help to shape them." Mills argues that individuals who have acquired this ability, who have learned to see relations between what he calls "the most impersonal and remote transformations" and "the most intimate features of the human self" have become radically empowered to effect change: they no longer need to see their troubles as strictly private, they can identify the large-scale social and political forces that impinge on their lives and thereby, alone or in concert with their fellows, hope to shift and even reshape them.

Mills was writing forty years ago, at the beginning of the civil rights movement, and perhaps his ideas have become familiar to the point of banality, but I believe that they have implications for pedagogy that have yet to be completely absorbed. It's his choice of the word "imagination" rather than, say, consciousness or awareness that seems to me powerful, because imagination entails some degree of individual creativity and so the word underscores the importance of understanding how sociological or historical forces affect *me*. To imagine something is to make that thing present and real for ourselves; it's not just an abstract consciousness or awareness of something as being a reality out there somewhere. The concept of "historical imagination" that I will discuss in the next few minutes owes a great deal to Mills; I prefer "historical" only because I want to broaden the concept, and want to throws the emphasis on a temporal dimension of reading and writing that has suffered from neglect.

Academics routinely do exactly what I've just been doing: they draw on the work of a recognizable intellectual predecessor and apply it, adapt it or revise it to fill a contemporary felt need. Such a move is so typical, so paradigmatic, that we hardly notice it and hardly reflect on its significance. But academics and other serious cultural workers imagine their writing, and even their speaking, as contributing to a conversation with a past and a future. The conversation's past is dotted with touchstone texts that have irreversibly shaped the conversation, texts that will be more or less familiar to an academic writer's readership. To function as an academic is not simply to demonstrate familiarity with these touchstone texts, nor is it merely a matter of demonstrating familiarity with a jargon or a set of linguistic practices, a "discourse" in the narrow sense. Instead, it's largely a matter of understanding how the conversations of the academy work and of demonstrating the ability to move these conversations forward by *applying* prior ideas or *revising* prior ideas to meet the felt need of the moment, of demonstrating the ability to imagine how established ideas can be creatively brought to bear, revised, and put to use in addressing

problems that matter to us, to me, here and now.

In his 1984 article "Collaborative Learning and the 'Conversation of Mankind,'" Kenneth Bruffee draws on the work of Michael Oakeshott, Lev Vygotsky and Clifford Geertz to argue that initation into these unending conversations, here collectively called the "conversation of mankind," is fundamental to education, not merely to succeeding as an academic or as a college student but even to thinking as educated persons think. His starting point is a quotation, from Oakeshott's essay, "The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind," that runs in part: "we are the inheritors, neither of an inquiry about ourselves and the world, nor of an accumulating body of information, but of a conversation, begun in the primeval forests and extended and made more articulate in the course of centuries. It is a conversation which goes on both in public and within each of ourselves. ... Education, properly speaking, is an initiation into the skill and partnership of this conversation in which we learn to recognize the voices, to distinguish the proper occasions of utterance, and in which we acquire the intellectual and moral habits appropriate to conversation" (*Rationalism in Politics* 199, qtd Bruffee in Villanueva, 397). Bruffee uses this insight to support his argument that teachers of writing must induct students into "established knowledge communities" and that they can do this by introducing collaborative learning into their pedagogies. What is surprising to me, however, is that, having invoked Oakeshott's concept of the "conversation of mankind," not just in a lengthy quotation but in his essay's very title, Bruffee advocates a pedagogy that has very little to do with this concept: the pedagogy of collaborative learning has students working collaboratively to solve problems by drawing on the diverse knowledge *already available to them.* After all, Bruffee writes: "Every student is already a member of several knowledge communities, from canoeing to computers, baseball to ballet." (403) How students' knowledge of canoeing and ballet can induct them into the conversation of mankind, or even into the established knowledge community of the academy,

he doesn't quite explain. And yet his own practice as an academic writer (probably an almost unconscious practice) is entirely in keeping with Oakeshott's notion of what it means to be educated: Bruffee draws extensively on seminal writers, not only Oakeshott, Vygotsky and Geertz, but Thomas Kuhn, Richard Rorty, and Stanley Fish, not to mention Descartes, Shakespeare, Freud. And of course it's not just that he cites these writers that marks Bruffee as an academic writer; it's that he uses their work insightfully and creatively, reshaping it so that he can bring it to bear (or so one would have hoped) on the particular problem that confronts him. In other words, Bruffee exercises a historical imagination in his writing, though he fails to see the value of introducing such a practice to his students. The root of the contradiction, I think, can be found in the epistemology of social constructionism, the view that knowledge, as Bruffee puts it, "is an artifact created by a community of knowledgeable peers, constituted by the language of that community." (405) As Kurt Spellmeyer has argued in *Common Ground*, such an epistemology can only be ahistorical: it does not allow for significant progress or change in the state of knowledge. Hence the role of writing teachers becomes to familiarize students with "academic discourse" understood merely as a performance, the semblance or outward show of academic competence, but not its reality.

The very phrase "academic discourse," I would suggest, diverts attention away from the historical, the temporal dimension of reading and writing in the academy. When we talk about "academic discourse," we generally mean, I think, academic speech rather than academic speaking; in other words, we're referring to a particular linguistic system with its own codes and structures, and using the term "discourse" in a structuralist sense. Although structuralism *can* accommodate the dimension of time, its bias is toward spatializing concepts and metaphors because it aspires to the objectivity of empirical science, and so our immediate ideas about a discourse tend to be as synchronic code rather than as diachronic events of meaning. Thus we think of teaching academic

discourse as the teaching of these synchronic codes rather than as entering a diachronic conversation.

We can more readily appreciate how the notion of "the conversation of [human]kind" can empower our students as academic readers and writers, by turning to philosophers of hermeneutics such as Hans Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur, whose work is deeply concerned with the historicity of reading and writing, than to anti-foundationalists in the line of Stanley Fish. Gadamer's notion of "effective historical consciousness" bears closely on the concept of "historical imagination" as I've been using it. The term is one of those brave attempts to translate an impossible German phrase into English, but it might be rendered simply as the awareness of how history works upon us, the awareness of being *situated* in history and in a culture that, as the word "culture" itself implies, is the product, the *effect*, of historical processes. For Gadamer, this awareness is basic to what we mean by "interpretation," both as the core intellectual discipline of the human sciences and, in a more primordial sense, as the way that human beings encounter the world. "Effective historical consciousness" does *not* mean merely putting oneself in the shoes of a thinker from the past. It means making use of the difference between the text's point of view and our own in order to become more aware of our own assumptions and thereby to reexamine them. In other words, the alterity of the historical text affords a standpont from which to engage in a critique of one's own unconscious cultural assumptions, to engage in a critique of the present, and thereby to imagine alternative futures. This kind of historical imagination (to return to that term) leads to a transformation of the self (an expansion of its horizon), and to writing that both produces and expresses this transformation. Indeed, as others have noticed, reading in this hermeneutic sense *is* a kind of writing, because each interpretation is new.

In *Truth and Method,* Gadamer writes:

> Every encounter with tradition that takes place within historical consciousness involves the experience of a tension between the text and the present. The hermeneutic task consists not in covering up this tension by attempting a naive assimilation of the two, but in consciously bringing it out. ... Historical consciousness is aware of its own otherness and foregrounds the horizon of the past from its own. On the other hand, it is itself, ... only something superimposed upon continuing tradition, and hence it immediately recombines with what it has foregrounded itself from in order to become one with itself again in the unity of the historical horizon that it thus acquires. (306)

This is basically how Gadamer understands the hermeneutic circle: the situated reader confronts the situated text, and understanding requires that the reader's horizon expand to imagine the point of view of the author, or more precisely the world disclosed by the author, and then comes back to itself, adjusting or reconfirming his or her own point of view. It's a circling movement between between the reader's world and another's world.

The alterity or distance of the historical text is what Paul Ricoeur calls a "productive distanciation." He sees in all interpretation a productive dialectic between the otherness of the text and the ownness of the reader's self. He writes: "Distance ... is not ... just the actual spatial and temporal gap between us and the appearance of such and such a work of art or discourse. It is a dialectical trait, the principle of a struggle between the otherness that transforms all spatial and temporal distance into cultural estrangement and the ownness by which all understanding aims at the extension of self-understanding. Distanciation ... is the dynamic counterpart of our need, our interest, and our effort to overcome cultural estrangement. Writing and reading take place in this cultural struggle. Reading is the *pharmakon,* the 'remedy,' by which the meaning of the text is 'rescued' from the estrangement of distanciation and put in a new proximity, a

proximity which suppresses and preserves the cultural distance and includes the otherness within the ownness." (*Interpretation Theory* 43)

Reading any text requires us to guess at the author's meaning as we go along, to project possible readings, and to remain open to the way that the text confirms or corrects these guesses or projections. The alterity or strangeness of historical texts, especially for students who may have little experience with them, can be seen as an advantage, because it makes this hermeneutic process visible. Admittedly, it's also what makes working with historical texts difficult, for both students and instructors — it's what makes students at times quite resistant — but it also makes their difficulty and ours enormously worthwhile: the hermeneutic circle, the dialectical reading process of projection and correction, becomes so pronounced that we actually notice it and can talk about it, though not necessarily *as* "the hermeneutic circle." But we can talk about how our assumptions need to be laid open to question as we read historical, or "traditionary," texts because we become aware of the fact that in another time people wrote differently, spoke differently, thought differently from ourselves, and in unexpected, perhaps even baffling, ways. Class discussion brings out the differences in how individual students have construed a difficult text, but it also exposes the common ground that we share with one another and share with the past. The discovery that to a considerable extent, equally careful and reasonable readers can arrive at different interpretations of the same text demonstrates that any single reading is limited and incomplete, that texts can be put to use in different ways according to the reader's concern or prior questions, and that therefore interpretation is creative and inventive and it calls for writing.

In his essay, "Being Philosophical About Composition: Hermeneutics and the Teaching of Writing," Kurt Spellmeyer remarks that the social constructionist notion of consensual "discourse communities" omits a role for critical reflection and therefore compositionists have tended to teach academic discourse as a matter of assimilating the established language and

rhetorical habits of the academic. He writers: "Because teachers in our society have emphasized performative competence so one-sidedly and have attempted to instill this competence so mechanically, ... the intimate relation between dissent and sociability has remained a kind of family scandal, akin to having Florence Nightingale *and* Jack the Ripper at the base of one's family tree." (Spellmeyer 24) This scandalous intimacy between dissent and sociability can, I think, be restored through the diachronic or historical model of "conversation" that I've been exploring. If I understand Spellmeyer's intent here, he's referring to a quality that belongs to genuine conversation both in the ordinary sense, as when good friends or close colleagues get involved in a really absorbing conversation, and in Oakeshott's infinitely extended historical sense, where the dialectic between dissent and sociability is what keeps the conversation of humankind moving forward.

Indeed, if we think not of casual conversation, but the absorbing, creative, unpredictable conversation of friends or colleagues about subjects and problems that matter deeply to them, a conversation that entails true listening, thoughtful speaking, one that leaves the participants changed, we are really no longer describing a model of the academic status quo, but a model of academic discourse that is healthier and more constructive than the all-too-familiar adversarial and antagonistic, ego-driven discourse of academic debate. What Steve likes to call "essayism," the more creative, free and personal kind of essay that characterizes the most exciting kind of academic writing, and that also marks the essay in the tradition of Montaigne, involves a triangulated mediation that brings the impersonal — the conversations of humankind — to bear on the personal, the local, the particular. This work demands the exercise of that dynamic combined activity of disputing and listening, of critique and receptivity, of dissent and sociability. When students practice this, they are surpassing a merely performative notion of academic discourse, surpassing the semblance of academic competence and instead developing

real academic competence.

Spellmeyer's juxtaposition of Florence Nightingale and Jack the Ripper immediately brings to my mind Lytton Strachey, whose devastating and wickedly amusing portrait of Florence Nightingale in *Eminent Victorians* as a monster of willfulness and conceit is the closest thing I know to an actual meeting of Florence Nightingale and Jack the Ripper. And in fact, Strachey provides a useful example of the "historical imagination" at work. Considered strictly as historiography, Strachey's book may be flawed: his interpretation of events and his psychology are often tendentious and poorly supported by the evidence, and he rarely took advantage of primary sources. But Strachey wasn't the kind of historian who seeks to recover and preserve the past: his purpose was to undermine the Victorian establishment as he knew it, to debunk the pretentious value system and code of respectability of his parents' generation. *Eminent Victorians* appeared in 1917, in the darkest moments of the First World War, as Bloomsbury and the modernists were on the brink of cultural ascendancy. It's this triangulation: of Florence Nightingale as a pillar of Victorian society, of Strachey's iconoclastic personality and urbane style, of Europe on the edge of collapse, that makes this essay memorable as an essay, even if it is flawed as strict historiography. And indeed, it remains important, a "traditionary text" less as historiography than as an early example of the iconoclastic style of biography that continues to dominate the genre, and continues to shape ideas about heroism and celebrity in our age.

Eminent Victorians stands as a somewhat extreme example of a general truth: that the historical imagination is not really concerned with the past as past; it uses the past in order to address the present and reinvent the future. When student writing becomes a mere performance of so-called academic discourse, when we fail to offer students the opportunity and the means to participate in the ongoing conversations of our culture, the conversations of the academy, we

deny them the opportunity to use writing to make a difference in the world.

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EFF-088 (Rev. 9/97)