

# LITERATURE AND COMPOSITION: SEPARATISM OR CONVERGENCE?

## A Review Essay

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Winifred Bryan Horner, ed., *Composition & Literature: Bridging the Gap* (Chicago and London: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1983), 184 pages.

A number of years ago, when I was directing the writing program at one of the state universities, a common complaint I heard from students was that faculty were teaching them literature, and not writing, in their composition courses. At the time, I thought the students were right to complain. Literature, I believed then, had no proper place in a composition class. Teaching literature, I thought, was what faculty did because they didn't know any better, because they hadn't kept up with the new and ground-breaking research on the composing process that was coming out in the journals. In fact, I longed for the day there would be "real" writing programs, staffed by a new generation of writing specialists without the burden of traditional literary critics and scholars.

Part of my reaction, I see now in retrospect, derived from a kind of status anxiety: I wanted to see professional legitimacy extended beyond the Modern Language Association to the Conference on College Composition and Communication-types, young, bright teachers devoted to the theory and practice of composition teaching. I held the belief, shared at the time by many writing program administrators in similar positions, that we were on the verge of a professional breakthrough. The newly emerging paradigm in composition studies, usually expressed as a process-oriented approach to teaching and research, was

going to get writing research out from under the Ed school stigma and constitute composition as a separate but equal discipline within English studies.

Now, eight or ten years later, I look back at my professional separatism nostalgically but critically. The new research in composition offered a vision of applied theory that I found wonderfully refreshing after years of graduate study in literature and (too much) time spent on a dissertation in literary studies. My professional identity and loyalties were shaped by the brave new world of writing specialists. Now, however, though my identity is fixed, my loyalties have enlarged. Just last week, for example, at a staff meeting with graduate assistants and part-time faculty, I explained that the critical interpretation of literature is an indispensable component of the composition syllabus. And I suspect I'm not alone among writing program administrators in calling for the reintegration of literary studies and freshman composition.

Winifred Horner's book *Composition and Literature* is significant not only for the individual essays it gathers together. It's significant too because its appearance is another sign that the trend toward composition separatism I participated in so enthusiastically is reversing itself. A few of the essays operate within the factionalized world of composition and literature. Two of them, David Kaufer and Richard Young's and Edward P. J. Corbett's, argue for composition's separate disciplinary status, while Frederick Crews presents a "minimal case" for letting instructors teach a little literature in freshman comp to raise morale and prevent faculty burnout. Most of the essays, however, from various starting points, are more inclined to question the distinction between composition and literature and to raise the possibility of integrating the two approaches to language and writing. This growing trend toward reintegration wants to blur disciplinary lines, to cross freely back and forth from composition to literary theory. Such a reintegration, moreover, seems to promise in tentative and preliminary ways a new understanding of literacy and literature. In the rest of this essay, I'll try to suggest why this shift toward reintegration is taking place right now and what it implies for undergraduate education and for writing program administrators.

First of all, it will be useful to situate the impulse toward composition separatism in its wider social and cultural context — in the context of what we've come to call the Literacy

Crisis. Perhaps more than anything else, it's this crisis and the perceived decline of standards, test scores, abilities, and so on that accounts for composition's claim to be a separate discipline. Taxpayers, legislators, policy-makers in education, government, and business may be ambivalent about the study of literature, but they all want students to be able to read and write at an acceptable level of literacy. And this is no secret to students. If the increasingly career-minded students of the seventies avoided literature and humanities courses in droves, it was because they were lining up to register for writing courses — composition, advanced composition, business writing, technical writing, legal writing, medical writing, scientific writing, journalism, about anything we could cook up for them. Upper division literature courses went unfilled and were cancelled while new sections of writing courses had to be opened overnight. What emerged, I think, was a growing sense of the social power of writing programs. Maybe we weren't getting much respect from our colleagues, but we were guaranteeing enrollments and keeping English departments afloat. Besides that, we were doing what society at large seemed to be asking us to do — to teach literacy to a new generation of students.

The Literacy Crisis, if nothing else, served to attract funding to writing programs and give those programs a *raison d'être*. It helped to create an optimistic mood that we were doing something "real" while our colleagues in literature were hopelessly lost explicating delicate points of fine writing — a bad situation, to be sure, and a potentially ugly and explosive one politically. At the same time Milton scholars seemed to be going under, many of us in writing were thriving. Entry level jobs in English departments only confirmed this fact. Credentials in technical writing could get you a job, while Ph.D.s in eighteenth century studies were contemplating career changes. At some colleges, cost effective-minded administrators set up writing programs separate from the English department and left the literary wing to sink or swim on their own, sometimes with the active collaboration of writing faculty.

One of the reasons, then, for the perceived need to reintegrate literature and composition is a pragmatic one. Unless we work out some professional rapprochement, English departments are going to be in deep trouble. I know this, MLA knows it, and *Composition and Literature* is evidence of widespread professional concern. I don't want at all

to underestimate the importance of such political considerations. But I also want to suggest that there are important theoretical reasons for overcoming separatism and reintegrating composition and literature.

The Literacy Crisis, despite what *Newsweek* and *Time* say about "Why Johnny Can't Write," is not just a matter of undeveloped or underdeveloped writing skills. As Elaine Maimon points out in her essay "Maps and Genres," the expansion of post-secondary education in America has sought to open higher learning to members of society formerly excluded from college education. The land-grant universities of the nineteenth century, the GI Bill, the rapid growth of community colleges in the fifties and sixties, and Open Admissions programs in the early seventies all served to democratize the academy, one of the last bastions of traditional, class-bound privilege and culture. The students of the Literacy Crisis of the seventies and eighties are not simply the victims of television and video games. Many are non-traditional students, from minority and ethnic groups and working class and lower middle class families with no tradition of college education or familiarity with the inherited cultural wealth. These students are new to higher education, and they are in college to train for new jobs in the rapidly expanding service and information sectors of the economy — in human resources, personnel management, the computer industry, and so on. The Literacy Crisis, I would argue, is as much a product of these shifts in the work force as it is a matter of standardized test scores. Behind it is the policy-makers' growing acknowledgement of the social need to train workers who once filled industrial jobs to read and write passably well.

Whether students read and write as well as students did a generation ago is beside the point. The point rather is that the social role of college education and the social demand for literacy have changed. Composition programs, as I've already suggested, have attempted to cash in on this historical situation but often without understanding its implications for undergraduate education. Too often composition classes reduce writing to a technical skill, to train students to write without educating them in writing. In turn, literature teachers claim, legitimately if from a narrow point of view, that students can't be truly literate without knowing literature and the humanities in general. If the sentiment is somewhat reactive, it recognizes nonetheless that the Literacy

Crisis of the seventies is situated in a wider cultural crisis, where a new illiteracy threatens the traditional values and beliefs which have shaped the profession of literary and humanist studies.

A pervasive response to this sense of cultural crisis has been the General Education movement and the re-appearance of Western civilization and Western literature requirements. Sanctioned by Harvard's readoption of General Education requirements, the reinstatement of the classics of the traditional canon is a kind of back to the basics in higher education. Designed to expose non-traditional and career-minded students to the great works they might otherwise ignore, the back to the basics mood on college campuses is also a reaction against the alleged abuses of the late sixties and early seventies. The feeling seems to be that too many concessions were made to student demands for relevance and self-determination. According to this view, the problem began with students and faculty who wanted to replace astronomy with astrology, Chaucer with Bob Dylan, and Max Weber with Carlos Casteneda. And the solution proposed is often a return to the set of requirements in effect before colleges "caved in" to students, before the era of permissiveness made the curriculum a trendy incoherency of electives and self-designed majors.

It wasn't just academic anarchy, however, that broke apart the traditional consensus about what shared knowledge qualifies a person as literate. There were plenty of critics who emerged from the social ferment, generational revolt, and cultural disillusion of the late sixties and early seventies to challenge accepted notions of literacy and literature. Mavericks like Leslie Fiedler, for example, argued that the distinction between high and low culture is nothing more than the vestige of an outmoded snobbishness out of line with democratic aspirations; and best sellers, pulps, and genre fiction started to make their way onto the reading list. Other literary reformers attempted to open the reading list and the curriculum to works of the oppressed and excluded. What resulted was a kaleidoscope of new courses and programs, in popular culture, black, Native American, Asian American, Chicano, and women's studies and literature.

The most significant challenge to received views of literature came from abroad, from new currents in continental literary theory. Post-structuralist critics such as Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida wanted to do more

than add new works to the margins of the canon. More than the radical students and faculty of the sixties, avant-garde literary theorists called the totality of Western tradition into question, challenging the hegemony and privileged position of the traditional canon by deconstructing the conventional opposition between literary and non-literary language. In this view, the distinction between literary and non-literary writing can no longer serve to segregate the poetic language of the classics from the ordinary language of science, business, and government. Instead the distinction has served to authorize a certain style of reading that institutionalizes the role of the critic and professionalizes literary studies. By reopening the problem of literature as the problem of writing in general, this new critical horizon, moreover, has prepared an intellectual and cultural climate for the possible reintegration of composition and literature. The influence of these new currents in literary theory can be felt, whether acknowledged explicitly or not, in the articles in *Composition and Literature* that argue most strenuously for dismantling the disciplinary barriers that divide composition and literature.

This line of thought implies that the reinstatement of Western literature requirements is not so much wrong-headed as it is incomplete. The goal of centering a shared body of knowledge in the undergraduate curriculum, as E. D. Hirsch argues, is to teach cultural literacy because linguistic literacy without "content" is an illusion. I agree. But Hirsch's notion of filling in the cultural gap with more information leaves the context of cultural literacy implicit, assumed, and unexamined. The goal should be not simply to pass down the shared knowledge that defines a coherent tradition. The goal rather should be to problematize that tradition. What's wrong with the canon is not the works which constitute it but the fact that we're so far inside it we overlook the conventions and structures of authority that legitimize it. The emphasis in traditional literature courses has been on the consumption of literature, a training in cultural manners and taste. The shift suggested here is toward productive reading and writing, where the interaction among the reader, the text, and the encompassing cultural situation produces what we agree at specific times and places to call literature. The questions to ask seem to be what makes a text literary, what expectations do we bring to a text that confirm its literariness, and what are the institu-

tional and ideological forces that shape these expectations.

Similar questions, moreover, might be brought to the composition classroom. In a sense, they are already there, latent in rhetorical considerations of the relationship among writer, purpose, and audience. Answers to these questions might yield a certain cultural knowledge, though it's not exactly the kind Hirsch has in mind. It is rather the knowledge of how writing is embedded in structures of power and authority, in the larger social and cultural contexts that regulate the production and circulation of texts. Non-traditional students especially need to see that writing does not simply express personal meaning or report outside reality. They need to see that writing is a social practice, generated and validated by the activity of readers and writers linked together in complex systems of interdependence.

Finally, we need to turn these questions on ourselves. If the new literary theory changes the way we think about literature, it also suggests we may need to change the way we think about composition. The question for writing program administrators is whether the language we use to talk about the writing process is really as transparent as we tend to treat it, or whether the notion of the writing process itself is part of a terminology we've invented to professionalize our field of study and our roles as teachers and researchers. My inclination is to think the paradigmatic opposition of process and product may well be an attempt to authorize certain styles of reading student texts and to establish a disciplinary matrix for such readings. There's no doubt in my mind that composing research has produced important innovations in teaching writing. At the same time, I worry that such research is saturated with a professional interest in segregating our style of reading from other styles. What Winifred Horner's book does, I think, is to suggest readings which rely on neither institutionalized composition studies nor institutionalized literary studies, a reading shaped by the convergence of literacy and literature under the rubric writing.

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