

Writing in the Graduate Curriculum: Literary Criticism as Composition

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In 1900, the Pedagogical Section of the Modern Language Association sent a questionnaire to its members asking their opinion as to whether rhetoric was a proper subject for graduate work in English, and, if they felt that it was not, what they regarded as “their strongest reasons for excluding it from the list of graduate studies” (Mead xx). In reporting the results of the survey, W.E. Mead acknowledged that “owing to the prevalent vagueness of conception as to what Rhetoric really is and should cover, the various reports read a little like debates on a question in which the meaning of leading terms has not been agreed upon” (xx). Nonetheless, he was able to conclude that those professors who viewed rhetoric as a “science” generally felt that it had a legitimate place in the graduate curriculum, while those who construed rhetoric to mean “the arts of discourse” or “composition” felt that it was not a proper subject for graduate work. Those in the latter group shared what we would now call a “current-traditional” view of composition, as the following excerpts from Mead’s report attest:

Regarding Rhetoric as the art of speaking and writing correctly, I am of the opinion that it is an unsuitable subject for graduate study.

Rhetoric should be mastered in its practical aspects before the student completes his undergraduate study; but as a science I believe it is eminently suited for graduate work.

A graduate student should, of course, be able to present in appropriate literary form the results of labor in his chosen field; but he should have done preparatory work to that end before he became a graduate student.

Mere theme-writing, however sublimated or raised even to the *n*th power, ought never to be a part of the credits for a higher degree.

The object of teaching Rhetoric is not theoretical but practical, as propaedeutic to composition and literature, and the undergraduate course should suffice for this. The graduate course should be literature itself, which has no limit. (xxii-xxx)

Equated with “speaking and writing correctly,” “theme-writing,” and presenting “results” in “appropriate literary form,” writing was perceived as a set of skills that a student “mastered” before undertaking the graduate study of “literature itself.” Such skills were presumably manifest in the papers the

student composed, so that flaws in form could be taken as signs of intellectual deficiency, perhaps even an inherent unsuitability to the demands of literary study, as one of the more surly responses to Scott's questionnaire suggests: "When a man has obtained his A.B. degree, he ought to be able to write his language with sufficient correctness to be responsible in the future for his own style. If he has not thus learned to write reasonably well he probably never will learn" (xxii).

In the decades that have passed since the MLA conducted its survey, developments in literary theory and composition have radically altered the nature of English studies. Literary theory has come to concentrate on the activity of reading, the processes by which readers reconstruct texts. Contemporary theories of reading revise the relationship between texts and readers, displacing the authority and autonomy of texts by recognizing the constitutive powers of language and readers' creative capacities as language users. Accordingly, to read and interpret a literary work is to shape or modify or reconstitute the work "itself" (or what was formerly viewed as a static, autonomous object) so that the text that was formerly accorded an independent status is now viewed as a function of our scholarly and critical discourse. In a similar vein, composition theory has shifted its emphasis from the formal product to the activity of composing—the complex interplay of linguistic, cognitive, rhetorical, social, and cultural processes by which texts come into being. From the generative rhetorics and expressivist pedagogies of the 1960s to more recently articulated social and cultural theories of writing, composition has steadily moved in the direction of a constitutive theory of discourse, one which emphasizes both the agency of the writer and the importance of context in the production of meaning. Literary studies and composition, then, would now seem to share a common theoretical basis and not merely a common home in English departments. Indeed, as Jay Robinson has pointed out, "Theories linking reading and writing are becoming the dominant ones among those who study either reading or composition—theories that reconceive reading as the active construction of texts and their meanings; theories that reconceive writing as an act of perpetual making, perpetual revision, with publication or submission for a grade an arbitrary stopping point" (492).

In his introduction to *The Social Mission of English Criticism*, Chris Baldick addresses the pedagogical implications of contemporary theories of criticism and observes that "the real content of the school and college subject which goes under the name 'English literature' is not literature in the primary sense but criticism"; the student "is required to compose, not tragic dramas, but essays in criticism" (4-5). Significantly, Baldick not only identifies the "real content" of literary studies as criticism but also reminds us that criticism must be composed, that a student's work in literary studies—whether it goes by the name of interpretation, criticism, or analysis—entails acts of writing as well as reading. In limiting this insight to a school and college

subject, however, Baldick, like many other scholars and educators today, implicitly reinforces the notion that composition properly belongs in the undergraduate curriculum, a notion which still allows us to represent literature and composition as separate intellectual activities in graduate courses. While graduate programs now admit rhetoric as an area of concentration or specialization for the Ph.D, it is rhetoric conceived as a “science,” a method of analyzing the art of discourse rather than the practice of this “art” in its own right. Most graduate faculty assume that graduate students, by definition, “already know how to write,” and thus writing assumes a secondary and often marginal role in graduate education. The written product, but not the writing process, compels the attention of graduate faculty. In this respect, graduate courses today still bear a remarkable resemblance to the tacit curriculum which Mead uncovered in the MLA survey ninety years ago. Despite development of theories which emphasize the processes and contexts of interpretation, we are still tied to current-traditional modes of writing instruction, for while we have allowed contemporary critical theories to inform our teaching of literature, we have not investigated the ways such theories problematize our assumptions about writing. In the remainder of this essay, I will explore the disjuncture between theory and practice to argue for a reconceptualization of the nature and role of writing in the graduate curriculum.

Writing in Graduate Literature Courses

To discern whether developments in critical theory and composition research were having a discernible impact on the pedagogical practices of graduate faculty and on the writing practices of graduate students in literary studies, I conducted a two-part study of graduate-student writing. First, I surveyed graduate students in English at six universities to learn what kinds of writing they had been assigned in their courses that term and the rhetorical frameworks in which these assignments had been cast.¹ I followed the survey with case studies of two master’s and two doctoral students enrolled in four different literature seminars (Twentieth-Century American Literature, Studies in Hawthorne, Studies in Shakespeare, and Restoration Drama) at one of the universities I surveyed.² For each case study, I observed courses, interviewed the student before, during, and after the course, collected drafts and revisions of the writing he or she did in response to course assignments, and interviewed the professor of the course at the end of the term. My intent in presenting this study is not so much to offer the results of data-driven research as to highlight and illustrate, through the actual experiences of graduate-student writers, the broader theoretical issues underlying this essay.

From the survey, I learned that a great deal of writing is assigned in graduate courses in English, but writing is seldom taught as a process integral

to the study of literature. The most common writing assignment reported by the one hundred graduate students who completed the survey was a term paper of fifteen pages or more. Seventy percent of the graduate students reported that they were assigned term papers of at least fifteen pages in their courses (with creative writing workshops and teaching practica excepted) during the term that the survey was conducted. Somewhat less frequently assigned were short (three to five page) and medium length (six to fifteen page) papers; forty-five and fifty-one students, respectively, reported they were assigned at least one paper of those lengths. Journals, essay exams, one-to-two-page "response" or "position" papers, and bibliographies comprised the other types of writing assigned. Of ninety-five students who responded that they had written or were writing at least one paper of medium length or longer, less than twenty percent reported that their professors had assigned or suggested paper topics or had discussed in class how to formulate arguments, conduct research, or develop ideas. Less than ten percent reported that their professors had asked to see or respond to drafts before the final version was evaluated, had asked the students to share their written work with other students in the class, or had specified an audience or suggested a forum other than the professors themselves.

In many respects, the four case studies confirmed the findings of the survey. In three of the four courses I observed, lengthy term papers were assigned and were due at the end of the term; little discussion occurred with regard to the papers in terms of their purpose, method of development, audience, or forum. In one of these courses (American Literature), the term paper was preceded by a short, analytical essay which was due at midterm; in another course (Shakespeare), a series of two-page "position" papers preceded the term paper; and in the third (Hawthorne), the term paper was the sole writing assignment. In the fourth course I observed (Restoration Drama), students were asked to keep a journal, which was collected and graded both at midterm and at the term's end but which was read only by the professor. Each of the four students who participated in the study reported that a term paper was the most commonly assigned writing task in their graduate experience, and none could recall receiving explicit instructions about content, purpose, or audience. Finally, with the exception of the student enrolled in the Shakespeare seminar, none of the students read or responded to another graduate student's paper in the courses I observed, and only one student said that he had done so in a previous graduate course.

The results of my survey and case studies suggest that under the current pedagogical model, the completed assignment is privileged over its production, the written product over the writing process. A pedagogical distinction is drawn, in other words, between course content and course assignments, between subject matter and what the student writes. Writing is separated from the study of a subject (an author or period) and relegated to the bottom tier of a tacit hierarchy of discursive practices—of reading, speaking, and

writing. The most important “object” of three of the seminars I observed, both in terms of their subject matter and their *raison d’être*, was the set of literary texts studied. (In none of these courses was secondary sources—scholarly or critical articles—made part of the required reading that the class discussed as a group.) The most important activity of these courses was reading. That is, students read the assigned set of literary texts to cover or to “know” the material and to critique, interpret, or otherwise analyze the texts themselves. Such “readings” were shared either through class discussion or through an oral report that was the responsibility of an individual student. Since students were expected to give formal evidence of their reading of literary texts and their awareness of critical issues, they were asked to write. But unlike the literary texts themselves and class discussion of those texts, the student’s writing was not valued for what it contributed to the course and to other students’ understanding of the issues. Rather, it was valued primarily for its evaluative properties as an academic exercise, as the basis for a grade.

I should point out that contemporary theories of criticism were mentioned and in some instances discussed at length in all but one course (Studies in Hawthorne, which was tacitly informed by the tenets and close-reading methodology of New Criticism.) In Restoration Drama, for example, the professor took pains to show how Dryden presaged poststructuralist, reader-response, and dialogic theories in his “Essay on Dramatic Poesy.” Class discussion in Studies in Shakespeare frequently turned to feminist critiques of character, scene, and plot; and the professor incorporated such critiques in the list of topics he periodically distributed to the class for written analysis in their position papers and for in-class discussion. And in Twentieth-Century American Literature, the professor transformed his frequently acknowledged ambivalence toward contemporary critical theory into an ongoing, reflexive commentary upon the current state of literary studies, invoking its central pragmatic problem—“what you’re to do as a critic”—to defend his own belief that “one should look closely at the text.” In none of these courses, however, did awareness of theory translate into a comparable theory or pedagogy of writing. That is, each course reflected a text-based, product-centered approach to composition. Students were expected to produce critical essays, term papers, and a journal; but in each case, it was up to the student to discover a significant topic or issue, determine lines of reasoning that would resolve the issue, construct the audience to whom the discourse would be addressed, and devise a purpose for communicating. In some courses, professors acknowledged that a particular critical approach would make a difference in the way students read a particular text or set of texts, but no suggestion was made that such an approach might similarly influence the students’ writing—the shape, voice, argument, or style of their discourse.

Although many of us wish to claim in theory that a distinction between literature and its interpretations is no longer tenable, our practices continue

to emphasize the substance, not the act, of interpretation, for we continue to attend only to the ends, and not the means, of written production. The contexts for writing in many graduate literature courses are, in this sense, arhetorical, for writing does not take place within, or as a fundamental part of, the courses themselves. Writing is nearly always a matter of individual performance, a solitary act rather than a social or collaborative experience. This act most often occurs at the conclusion of course work, in the form of a term paper, so that a student's critical or scholarly discourse is removed from the course itself as a context for inquiry and learning. And the student's work is most often read by a single reader, the professor; students do not write for one another. Thus, acts of writing are both marginalized and privatized in the graduate classroom; literary texts are given precedence over the texts that the students themselves compose, and even in courses where theory is made part of the interpretive context, such theories are not translated into a comparable theory or pedagogy of writing.

Implicit in this pedagogical model, as I noted earlier, is the assumption that graduate students "already know how to write" by virtue of their higher educational status. This assumption is, I believe, the cognitive corollary of a current-traditional theory of writing and a product-oriented pedagogy: writing itself is conceived as a set of skills that a student "masters" at some point in his or her educational life. The point at which an individual makes the transformation from "novice" to "expert" may vary from student to student, but it is presumed to occur before the student attains a bachelor's degree so that the teaching of writing to graduate students is held to be redundant or superfluous.³ If writing problems manifest themselves in a text a graduate student composes, such problems can be attributed to personal deficiency, not institutional *praxis*.

Recent composition scholarship, particularly that which takes a social view of the writing process, has shown "mastery" to be an exceedingly arbitrary concept; writing well is as much a function of context—the particular task at hand and the situation or situatedness of the writer—as of personal experience. The writer, regardless of ability, is subject to the conventions and constraints that inform his or her particular rhetorical situation. But for graduate students in literary studies, the arts of rhetoric are still equated with "speaking and writing correctly" and "presenting results in appropriate literary form"—in short, with the set of skills the student presumably mastered before undertaking graduate study. And so graduate students are simply asked to set these basic skills in motion and bring their professors the finished product, which is then evaluated according to how well it approximates an ideal, but apparently unteachable, text.

The assumption that writing is an automatic process is so deeply embedded in the collective unconscious (indeed, I would argue, in the political unconscious) of English departments that the term "composition" has come to serve, as James Slevin points out, as a synecdoche for "all the

activities that are in fact undertaken within composition” (547). Most often the term designates a specific course—usually first-year English—so that composition is construed as an activity that only undergraduates engage in. The labels “First-Year English” or even “Advanced Composition” serve the institutional function of putting composition in its proper place, but they also allow us to suppress and evade the rhetoricity of our own discipline: the ways complex interrelations of topic, audience, voice, genre, gender, culture, convention, disciplinary context, and self become folded into our own and our students’ construction or reconstruction of texts. The institutionalized suppression and evasion of writing, moreover, leads us to reenact modes of instruction at the graduate level—such as assigning papers that will be read only when the course is over—that mirror an earlier world, a world or *Weltanschauung* that has been superseded by constitutive theories of reading and writing. The problem with such traditional modes, as David Punter argues, is that they “do almost nothing to help students to understand what literary *work* might be; . . . an enormous weight [is] placed on written production, and at the same time this production is required to fit into pre-established molds” (220). As a result, Punter says, “an alienated self, formed according to the imagined desires of the institution, attempts to speak to another alienated self, caught between subjectivity and convention . . .” (221). Punter’s representation of the student writer as a self caught between subjectivity and convention is particularly apt of the graduate-student writer, whose discourse emanates from the dual (and oftentimes conflicting) ethos of both “graduate” and “student.” Elsewhere I have discussed the conflicts this dual ethos or double perspective engenders for graduate students’ perceptions of audience as they write essays on literature (Reader). Here I wish to focus on two additional problems that graduate students encounter in the act of writing as a result of the current disjuncture between theory and pedagogical practice: problems of invention (the processes by which they formulate issues to write about) and argumentation (the manner of discourse in which these issues are explored and resolved.)

Invention, Tradition, and Individual Talent

In “The University and the Prevention of Culture,” Gerald Graff writes, “A literary education that operationally boils down to a series of blunt confrontations with texts ‘in themselves’ will leave students at a loss as to what they are to say about literature. For the problem is that literary texts in themselves go only so far in telling us what we are supposed to say about them” (78). As a critical theorist, Graff identifies the problem of “what to say” about literary texts as a problem of reading, a problem whose solution depends on students’ training in critical approaches that counter New Criticism’s emphasis on the text itself. Graff nominates “speech act theory, pragmatism, and various forms of reader-response criticism” as possible

contenders to the New Critical throne because each takes into account the linguistic codes and cultural values that exist, not in the text, but in the interaction between text and reader. While I share Graff's misgivings about text-oriented theories of reading which ignore the agency of the reader and contingencies of context, I wish to reconstrue the problem of what to say about literature as a problem of writing—more specifically, as part of a problematic of writing that both presumes and subsumes what Graff has posed as a problem of reading. The student who is assigned a piece of writing must have something to say, and if that writer is a graduate student, he or she must often say it for fifteen pages or more. While other disciplines routinely assign topics for research projects and papers at the graduate level, English studies nearly always leaves finding a topic part of the writing task, a task, moreover, that is completed as an addendum to rather than integral part of the course which forms the occasion for inquiry. While graduate students talk about literary texts in class, thereby having the benefit of a communal exchange of ideas, they most often write their papers as individual, autonomous “subjects,” isolated from the “interpretive community” which provided a forum for their ideas as members of a class.

The experiences of the two doctoral students who participated in my study, Karen and John, cast into relief what Graff has posed as a problem of reading and what I have posed as a problem of writing: both students found themselves at a loss of “what to say” at some moment of their writing processes as they endeavored to compose critical discourse to meet their respective writing assignments. At the outset of her seminar on Hawthorne, Karen confided that she wished professors would propose topics more often because, she noted, “there’s always more to be said, but it isn’t always obvious.” Karen’s course focused exclusively on the Hawthorne canon—the author’s novels, tales, and sketches—which the class read closely and analyzed, in Karen’s words, “mainly to cover the material.” As Karen read the assigned texts in the course, she became intrigued by Hawthorne’s use of a particular narrative technique in his fiction. As she put it, “There’s a storyteller telling a story about a story, and I see it over and over again, and that’s intriguing to me, and I want to sit down and analyze when and where he does it and why he does it.” She hoped to explore Hawthorne’s use of storytellers in her term paper. By the end of the course, however, Karen felt she could not begin to answer the question of why Hawthorne used that particular technique without knowing more about the narrative tradition in which Hawthorne was writing, and the seminar’s emphasis on coverage and close reading of Hawthorne’s works themselves left her with no time to conduct inquiry into outside sources. She felt she lacked the “right context” to explore her topic further, so she went to see her professor with that specific problem in mind: “I told him what I was interested in but that the more I thought about it the more I felt, ‘There’s just no topic here.’ I asked, ‘What am I going to write about once I get past the first paragraph?’”

In essence, Karen posed a question about writing; she could say, in her first paragraph, what she had observed about Hawthorne's use of a storyteller, and she could point out when and where he used this device; but she could not say why. Karen's professor, however, deferred to her judgment that she had no topic and suggested she think of something else to write about. If she could not see what directions her topic might lead her given her close readings of the Hawthorne canon and whatever criticism she might read in the allotted time, he told her, she should probably choose a different topic.

John identified himself in our initial interview as "a historical scholar," interested in "historical accuracy rather than aesthetic evaluation," but he noted (in a remark similar to Karen's wish that professors would suggest topics more often) that he was becoming "somewhat disillusioned with scholarship" because he has "this finite sense that all that can be written has." Nonetheless, John, like Karen, discovered a topic to write about during his seminar on Restoration Drama. Midway through the seminar, John became taken with Dryden's *All for Love* and wanted to explore his "intuitive feeling" that Dryden's version of the Antony and Cleopatra story was the "superior work." He began reading and meticulously summarizing other versions of the play and some works of secondary criticism on *All for Love* in his journal to gauge critical responses to the plays, and this activity consumed much of his time for the remainder of the course. He then went to speak to a former professor and mentor about issues that remained to be resolved with respect to the Antony and Cleopatra plot beyond the critical responses he had catalogued; however, he was told, in effect, that there was virtually nothing left to be done. In essence, the professor confirmed the fear John had expressed many weeks earlier, his "finite sense that all that can be written has."

Karen's experience speaks to the immediate problem a student encounters when a literature course is primarily devoted, in Graff's words, to a blunt confrontation with texts themselves: the close reading model in the Hawthorne seminar left Karen without a coherent theoretical context for framing, developing, and evaluating her ideas, and so she was left wondering what to say in her term paper "beyond the first paragraph." Karen's difficulty in developing her topic, in other words, can be traced to constraints inherent in the course itself. John's experience, on the other hand, reveals a potential dilemma for graduate students that transcends the immediate course as the context for writing—what work there is left to do, what the student can contribute to an ongoing conversation or to what Adena Rosmarin calls the "interpretive history of a work" that hasn't already been said. Unlike the constraints that Karen encountered, John had ample time to read outside sources and to read intertextually, and his professor's assignment of a journal afforded him multiple opportunities to probe and refine his topic. Nonetheless, he too reached a point at which he wondered what to say, what work was left to be done.

Although specific features of each student's discourse situation were different, the problems Karen and John experienced in writing and the strategies by which they set out to resolve these problems were similar in some significant and revealing ways. First, both students found themselves trying to invent an *issue* for writing; that is, while each had a specific topic in mind, even a general theoretical approach (narrative and reception theory, respectively), these topics and theoretical approaches were not enough in and of themselves to propel the students into writing sustained, formal discourse. It was not in the act of reading or interpretation or analysis of works themselves that Karen and John found themselves at a loss as to what to say, but in what each as a writer had to bring to those texts, to the topics they had discovered through their transactions with the texts. Second, both students sought out their professors to help them formulate an issue and conceive a way of exploring or resolving it. That is, preparatory to actually writing or drafting their texts, Karen and John sought to construct themselves as writers by constructing a rhetorical situation for their work; they engaged in dialogue with an actual interlocutor (a professor) who represented the authorial audience of their prospective texts, that is, "Hawthorne critics" or "Dryden scholars." And third, both were told that they had chosen unfruitful topics of inquiry, that writing along the lines of the topic they had already conceived was pointless. By engaging their actual reader in the invention stage of their work, both students cast their professor (or in John's case, a previous mentor) in the role of co-writer or collaborator—a role both professors resisted, deferring the problem of what to say back to the student.

Karen and John both recognized what we too often forget in our assumption that writing is an "automatic process": graduate students in literary studies encounter a vast tradition of literary texts and scholarship in their courses, but they must read against this tradition in order to have something to say in their own texts. To write, in other words, they must have the sense that the subject or topic of their discourse is an issue that requires intellectual work. This issue is neither self-evident in the texts that students read nor immanent in students' transactions with texts; rather, it is a function of the critical resources that they bring as *writers* to their readings or reconstructions of texts. Graff's contention that certain contemporary critical approaches have a heuristic value that New Critical practice no longer enjoys offers a partial solution to the problem of invention, then, for having something to say about literature is clearly dependent on the literary-critical frameworks in which texts are read. Had the Hawthorne seminar incorporated theoretical discussions of narrative and allowed more time for secondary reading, for example, Karen might have felt better prepared to answer the question she had formulated. But I would caution against our seeing specific theories and approaches as a panacea to the problem of invention, for like literary texts themselves, critical theories "go only so far" in telling students what they're supposed to say about them, or more to the

point, what they're to do with them and why. The exigencies which give rise to writing are no more inherent within critical approaches themselves than they are within the texts that students read. The issues which compel critical discourse must still be invented by a writer who has both a personal and professional stake in the criticism he or she produces. Karen and John, through their interactions with professors, sought not only to create a rhetorical context which would give purpose and meaning to their inquiries about Hawthorne and Dryden but to insert themselves within this context as authors or rhetors. However, so long as the questions of what to say and why it's important to say it remain confined to a pragmatics of reading—construed as a problematic of reader, text, and (theoretical) context but not writer, text, and (rhetorical) context—graduate students cannot locate themselves within the interpretive history of a literary work as coauthors or co-makers of this history. In other words, if students' writing is not perceived as an integral part of the study of a subject but only as a discursive exercise through which they demonstrate individual ability, they cannot fully participate in the critical and scholarly discourse that a graduate course is intended to engender. Chances are they will discover, like Karen and John, that they are not active agents in the construction of a scholarly tradition, a tradition that seems to go on independently of anything they might do.

Academic Genres

As my survey and case studies revealed, a term paper of at least fifteen pages is the most common writing assignment in graduate courses in English studies, the predominant mode of writing by which graduate students do their academic work. The fifteen-to-twenty-five-page term paper would seem, moreover, to be a distinctly (though not exclusively) graduate-level genre; the term papers which the four graduate students in my study reported that they wrote as undergraduate English majors generally fell into the eight-to-ten-page range, and all but one of the students said that they had never written a longer paper as undergraduates. Most likely, the term paper is the most frequently assigned writing task because it is perceived as preparatory to the scholarly essay or journal article, which requires research and a more complex and extensive treatment of a topic than a shorter paper allows. The term paper, in this sense, may be viewed as a kind of discursive "training ground," one in which graduate students gain practice conducting sustained inquiry into a topic. It is one of the ways that they learn the argumentative processes and bibliographic procedures that are the "tools of the trade" in literary studies. Also, such learning presumably has a cumulative effect: by writing a succession of term papers and reading different professors' responses to their work, students acquire knowledge of the formal features and conventions of literary criticism and enhance their skills in argumentative discourse.

But whether the term paper, as currently conceived and taught, truly has the effects which graduate faculty imagine and desire is a questionable assumption at best. For in truth, the term paper is not “taught” at all; it is assigned. This assignment is usually cast only in generic terms—a twenty-page research paper or a critical analysis—so that the work that students will do is already represented as a text, not as a process of inquiry. Whatever discursive practices are required to write the paper take place in what Patricia Bizzell has called a “black box,” out of view of the professor (49). The professors who participated in my study, in fact, explicitly stated that such processes cannot or ought not be taught because discussion of the writing task would mean intervening in the writing process either in superfluous or counter-productive ways. One professor said he did not feel it was necessary to teach the term paper as a process of inquiry because “graduate students already know about such things”; another said that students learn the conventions of critical discourse “from their reading rather than having them spelled out”; and another said that to teach the term paper as a discursive practice would “inhibit students’ creativity” and induce them to write “formulaic stuff.” Perhaps because graduate faculty are accustomed to viewing their own scholarly and critical practices as acts of reading (or interpretation or criticism) rather than acts of writing, they naturally assume the role of readers (or critics or evaluators) of their students’ texts rather than as teachers of the discursive processes by which texts are composed.⁴ In any case, they commonly expect graduate students to have mastered the arts of discourse well enough to produce term papers “as easily and inevitably,” in Bizzell’s words, “as a hen lays eggs” (49).

From the students’ perspective, writing term papers can be a gratifying and rewarding experience, a place to test out their own theories, to engage other critics’ voices, to make discoveries and bring new challenges to the literary tradition. But the process of producing argumentative discourse (the predominant mode of discourse in literary studies) proves neither easy nor inevitable, as the reports of the graduate students who participated in my study reveal. To be sure, all of the graduate students I interviewed were able to say, in general, what constitutes a literary argument; in fact, all sounded remarkably similar: “You have to have a thesis, prove it with textual evidence, counter possible criticisms” and so forth. But the actual process of constructing a formal argument proved difficult when the students were engaged in writing sustained discourse on their chosen topics. Hank, one of the master’s students in my study, had studied structuralism in a previous course and decided to write a term paper in his American Literature seminar on a certain “binary opposition” he had discerned in Sylvia Plath’s short stories. But he said he needed to go to the library and get his professor’s book to see how his professor “constructed an argument.” The other master’s student, Lisa, did considerable research in preparation of her term paper in the Shakespeare seminar, but she asked me and later her professor whether simply reporting

on the various theories that have been advanced to account for *Othello's* popularity in the Old South “constituted an argument.” Karen said that her greatest difficulty in writing on the topic she had finally chosen for her term paper (the relation between Hawthorne’s use of storytellers and his often ambiguous endings) was “interweaving disparate ideas into a coherent argument.” In the professors’ evaluations of the students’ writing, the most frequently discerned problem was some flaw in the students’ reasoning: Hank “tried to make his thesis do too many disparate things”; Lisa “didn’t seem to understand what constitutes literary evidence”; the text “didn’t warrant some of the claims that [Karen] made.” Significantly, these comments came at the “end” of the students’ writing, as evaluations of the students’ finished texts, and at the end of the course, when the students had no opportunity to revise or rethink the arguments they were trying to make for the actual reader of their work.

If we are searching for reasons why graduate students have difficulty with argumentation, we would do well to focus on the writing situation or context in which these arguments are composed. In the cases of the three students I have described here, this “context” was narrowed to the term paper itself. Each student had to produce a text-based form of argument, one which demonstrated its own logic rather than engaged an actual reader in a dialogical process. The students were not exchanging ideas with an interlocutor, in other words, but submitting a linear, fully formed argument to a textual critic, who then evaluated the argument’s premises, evidence, and so forth. The product-oriented or formalist conception of argumentation evident in the professors’ comments was also reflected in the students’ own accounts of what constitutes an argument: the “thesis-proof” model to which each of the students pointed as the defining structural feature of the critical essays they were to compose. While this model may have “fit” neatly with the activities of close reading and explication that the students likely practiced at the undergraduate level, the longer paper that graduate students in literature are routinely asked to write calls for more elaborate and complex forms of argumentation, for a dialectical interplay of critical voices and perspectives—in short, for a discursive practice that goes well beyond the thesis-proof model with which they are most familiar. The problems the students encountered in drafting their arguments and the flaws the professors perceived in their students’ texts might have been addressed more effectively had the students been given opportunities to engage in argument—to test their ideas, lines of reasoning, and evidence—with actual readers in the process of writing their term papers. But once again, such interventions were perceived by the professors in my study as either superfluous because students already know how to produce critical discourse or as impediments to students’ individual creativity.

Those aspects and features of critical discourse that are not thought to be the function of already learned skills or a matter of inspiration are often

assumed to be a function of the student's reading: students will learn to compose critical discourse by reading critical discourse and internalizing its structures, strategies, vocabulary, and style. While this assumption is no doubt true, Baldick's assertion that students compose "not tragic dramas, but essays in criticism" bears repeating here, for students in literature courses are reading and writing in two distinct genres. In most literature courses, graduate students read a set of literary works—for example, the complete works of Hawthorne, Twentieth-Century novels and poems, or Shakespeare's plays. They may or may not read "secondary" or non-literary works such as scholarly essays or critical reviews as part of the required reading of the course. (In one of the courses I observed, Twentieth-Century American Literature, students were instructed *not* to do outside reading for their term papers because other critics' notions might interfere with their own perceptions of the literary texts under study.) In their papers, however, graduate students are asked to produce a kind of discourse that bears almost no resemblance to the plays, novels, short stories, and poems they are writing about. Literary texts, the primary reading in most courses, assume an evidentiary role in the papers the students must compose. The texts that might serve as examples of the kind of critical work students are expected to emulate in their writing—critical reviews or scholarly essays on particular literary works—are not always read in class in conjunction with the literary texts themselves. And when secondary works are included in a course, they are not "read" as examples of the kind of work that professionals in English do. They are not analyzed for the way a critic frames an issue, establishes its significance, builds a case, and resolves the issue, but as further pieces of evidence the student might incorporate in his or her own argument. Thus, the literary essay, one of the predominant genres by which professionals do their work in literary studies, is not taught as such. We teach literary genres by asking students to read and analyze examples and variations of the kind, but we assume that the term paper, as both a mode of writing and a method of inquiry, teaches itself.

Reconceiving the Graduate Course

My study indicates that in the graduate curriculum, literature and composition are still represented as separate intellectual activities, the study of literary texts occupying center stage, the production of student texts a peripheral role at best. Graduate faculty tend to teach literature in the primary sense but assume that graduate students will master (or have mastered) the writing of scholarly and critical texts on their own. Literary criticism is still imagined as the "reading" an individual student produces rather than as a discourse he or she participates in. This individualized, privatized notion of reading and displacement of writing leaves students without a social context in which to develop and explore disciplinary issues,

practice academic genres, or engage in argument with real (as opposed to idealized) others.

The persistence of product or text-oriented pedagogies of reading and writing in the graduate curriculum has implications, I think, both for students undertaking graduate study and for the profession itself. Such pedagogies tend to deny to the graduate student an active and defining role in shaping the critical and scholarly discourse of the discipline. And they contradict the very process approaches, including collaborative writing and peer response, that graduate teaching assistants are adapting in undergraduate writing courses.⁵ If the purpose of graduate education is to train students in the roles they will assume as future practitioners of our profession, then our current modes of instruction are serving, in effect, to perpetuate the very models of inquiry and teaching that contemporary theories of reading and writing seek to displace at all levels of the English curriculum.

If we are to translate theory into practice, it will be necessary to revise text-oriented approaches to literature and practice ways of reading that call upon all of the resources available to the reader, including his or her experiences or “transactions” with the text in the act of reading. But though such a revision may represent a dramatic change in the way literature has traditionally been taught in the university, it still allows us to forget that criticism—the real content of literary studies—must be composed, that it is writing that ultimately defines graduate students’ work and role in the academy. Along with text-oriented approaches to reading, then, we must also revise our view of composition as an art that graduate students have already mastered, for such a view gives rise to the currently dominant product-oriented model of composition that fails to recognize the social and constitutive nature of writing and commits us, at best, to a paradox: at the same moment we proclaim that literary texts are not self-interpreting, our practices reinscribe the belief that our students’ interpretations are somehow self-generating.

The move from text-oriented to reader-oriented theories of literary criticism, in short, must be accompanied by a similar move from text-oriented to writer-oriented theories and pedagogies. It is not only the reader’s relation to the text but the writer’s relation to the texts and contexts of literary studies that must be the real “content” of English studies. If, indeed, interpretation is the only game in town, as Stanley Fish says, then the text the student writes must be the most important text in the class, the processes by which this text comes into being the real subject of any seminar. As Graff has observed, reader-response and pragmatic theories, which regard reading as the active construction of meaning, grant students an authority which was formerly held to be a property of the text “itself.” And cultural criticism, feminism, and the new historicism, which concentrate on the social conditions and political circumstances under which texts are produced, offer graduate students more to say and exigencies for saying it. But it is not enough to grant authority to

the reader nor to bring history and culture back into the classroom unless graduate students see themselves as makers of this history and culture through their acts of authorship.

Composition scholarship has shown that to become a practitioner of a discipline, one must not only learn the discursive terms of that discipline but must participate in its discourse as a rhetor, as an author whose texts have the power to alter knowledge in that field (see, for example, Bazerman). Graduate students must be able to reflect on their own work as developing scholars and critics, as members of a community who have an active role and stake in the knowledge generated by the course which formed the original occasion for inquiry. To become authorities on Shakespeare, Austen, Dickinson, or Derrida, students must first become authors, and their acts of authorship must occur in settings that are self-consciously rhetorical. The graduate course in English studies must be conceived as a scene of writing as well as a scene of reading, a discursive site in which literary history is truly conceived as history in the making.

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Notes

¹I surveyed English departments at Florida State University, Ohio State University, Pennsylvania State University, the University of California at San Diego, the University of Oregon, and the University of Utah. I wish to thank both my colleagues and the graduate students at these institutions who assisted with the survey.

²I have changed the names of the four graduate students who participated in this study to preserve their anonymity.

³Early cognitive research in composition may have unwittingly contributed to this assumption via studies in which graduate students were placed in “expert-writer” control groups against which the writing of “novices” was measured.

⁴The tacit hierarchy of discursive practices I discerned in the graduate seminars I observed—where the reading and in-class discussion of literary texts took precedence over the writing that students did about those texts—accords in many respects with the English apparatus Roberts Scholes has discerned and delineated in *Textual Power*. According to Scholes, consumption is privileged over production, reading over writing, and literature over non-literature; hence the greatest gap is between literature and composition—the reading (or interpretation or criticism) of literary texts and the writing of pseudo non-literature (or student essays). Scholes’ schema serves to explain, in part, why literature faculty more easily assume roles as readers and critics of the finished texts of their students than as readers or collaborators of work in progress: they are accustomed to seeing themselves as “consumers” of texts, as critics and scholars of the “already written” rather than as teachers of writing. The texts of their students, moreover, inhabit the area of pseudo non-literature. But Scholes overlooks in his apparatus what graduate faculty overlook in their roles as teachers and readers of literature: criticism, including a book like *Textual Power*, must be composed. We do not merely “consume” literature; our readings, interpretations, and criticisms of literature and of the academy entail acts of production—of composition.

⁵Irene Gale similarly observes that “many graduate courses, even in rhetoric and composition, are based on the presentational model, in that the professor lectures and requires one or two research papers due at the end of the term but offers no avenue for peer response to emerging papers.” Arguing that it is “inconsistent to teach teaching assistants to teach writing as a process on the one hand while on the other to force them as students to magically produce finished products,” she calls for graduate courses designed to let teaching assistants “deal with writing problems they face as students and professionals” (46-47).

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