

Theory and Its Practice in Composition Studies

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In his article (and book chapter) warning against “the death of composition as an intellectual discipline,” Gary Olson points to a conflict in composition studies that he says will “undoubtedly . . . come to be known as ‘the new theory wars’” (“Death” 25). According to Olson, the “opening salvo” in this conflict was a 1999 essay in *College Composition and Communication* by Wendy Bishop, titled “Places to Stand: The Reflective Writer-Teacher-Writer in Composition.” In that essay, Bishop points to a sentence written by Olson in a 1998 article, and she says that “for me, the sentence, I realized, had no clothes, and no heart” (26). By the time of his 2000 plenary address to the Research Network Forum at CCCC,¹ Olson understands Bishop’s criticism to be an attack on his use of critical theory and theoretical language.²

Since then, continuing declarations of composition’s “new theory wars” have gone even more public, appearing in March 2003 as the topic of a live, online colloquy hosted by *The Chronicle of Higher Education* featuring Olson.³ An article published in *The Chronicle* two days after that colloquy points to “seething hostilities” and “internal conflicts” in composition, and announces to its wider academic audience that “the ‘new theory wars’ break out in an unlikely discipline.” As “unlikely” as such a war (or our discipline) might seem, it is clear that composition studies has played host to some kind of conflict or “hostility.”⁴ I want to suggest, however, that there is nothing particularly new about this war, and that it might rather be understood as a more recent skirmish in a conflict that has a long history.

In 1982, Patricia Bizzell identified a conflict between “inner-directed” and “outer-directed” theories of composition (“Cognition”). By

1990, according to Richard Fulkerson, this conflict had been resolved (in favor of what he calls “rhetorical philosophy,” or what Bizzell would have called “outer-directed” theory), only to find that other conflicts had emerged. In his 1997 book, *Constructing Knowledges*, Sidney Dobrin speaks of the way debates over the use of theory had at that time “turned ugly and, thus, counterproductive” (17). He describes these earlier “theory wars” as “a decidedly anti-intellectual attack on theoretical pursuits from within and without the academy” (19). Then as now, such disagreements need not be framed as “war” at all.⁵ Although Olson has done his part in propagating this idea of the “new theory wars,” he nevertheless counsels wisdom when he urges the field to proceed “through dialogue, through persuasion, and, finally, through mutual respect” (31). That is, we might rather use these disagreements as opportunities for a dialogic exploration of disciplinary values and priorities. Instead of declaring war on each other, we must do more to understand the place(s) of theory and theoretical discourse within composition studies.

According to Stanley Fish, theory has no consequences.⁶ This claim is meant, of course, to provoke a reaction, in much the same way that Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels’ “Against Theory” had done earlier in the eighties.⁷ Just like Knapp and Michaels, Fish must argue for an unusually restrictive definition of “theory” in order for his claim to hold any weight. I will turn to the particulars of that (re)definition in a moment, but it is first important to consider the fact that, without such a shift in definition, the assertion that theory has no consequences is simply counterintuitive to most experience. Theoretical commitments affect practices in every facet of our multi-layered discipline. Neither teaching, nor research, nor scholarship are ever “theory-free.” So why all the fuss? The issue at hand, I believe, is not *whether* theory has consequences, but rather *which theories* and *which consequences*. The conflict in composition studies is not between those who would use theory and those who would not, but instead between those who engage in a particular kind of theoretical discourse, which we could call, for the sake of convenience, “critical theory,” and those who feel that such discourse has no place in the discipline.⁸

The purpose of this essay is to explore this conflict within the context of some of the work being done in composition studies. While we may

have to agree in the end with Fish, that theory (under his definition) does not—or cannot—have the consequences it claims for itself, it is important that we consider the consequences that the analytic mode we ordinarily call “critical theory” might enable. Those consequences, it will turn out, go far beyond the simple—and problematic—function of “informing” or “driving” our research or teaching practices. Some of critical theory’s more interesting consequences do not just concern the composition classroom (where some scholars demand that theory be relevant), but also in the kinds of thinking about language we do, and in the ways in which we perceive our field as intellectual and professional pursuits. What I aim to show here is that critical theory has effects within a wide range of practices, not because it is separate from practice, but rather because this kind of “theory-talk” is itself a kind of practice, performable within communities of practice, and even across different disciplines.

What is Theory?

We now turn back to Fish, whose work addresses the question at hand in a meta-theoretical mode, and whose own theoretical work (especially concerning “interpretive communities”) has had an arguably sizable impact on composition studies. In the essay “Consequences,” his pronouncement of theory’s death (or perhaps its stillbirth) says more about Fish’s definition of theory than it does about the uses to which theory is put within communities of academic practice. What he means by “theory,” in short, is a kind of general hermeneutics, a foundationalist attempt to “put our calculations and determinations on firmer footing than can be provided by mere belief or unjustified practice” (321).⁹ Such theories are “formal, abstract, general, and invariant” (317–18). This brand of theory attempts to transcend practice, history, and ideology in order to provide a stable mechanism by which particular practices may be predicted, guided, or reformed.

The problem with this view, according to Fish, is that such theory “cannot help but borrow its terms and its contents from that which it claims to transcend, the mutable world of practice, belief, assumptions,

point of view, and so forth" (321). A foundationalist theory attempts to get a purchase on practice from the outside, but there is no way for a theory to articulate itself without drawing upon the very terms from which it wants to distance itself. It is not that theory has stopped working; it never did the work of transcendence it claims to do. Having defined theory thusly, Fish concludes that "theory will never succeed" (321). Patricia Bizzell has pointed out that even anti-foundationalism, or "the belief that an absolute standard for the judgment of truth can never be found," can nevertheless "slide . . . into foundationalism" by raising certain positions to the status of a priori truths ("Foundationalism" 204, 213).¹⁰

It is hard to argue (at least from my own postmodern sensibilities) against the idea that foundationalist theory must fail at its attempt to transcend practice. But does all theory attempt such transcendence? In order to make his argument, Fish has had to shave the definition of theory very close indeed, perhaps to the point of drawing blood. He is careful to distinguish this foundationalist theory from what he would prefer to call assumptions, beliefs, "rules-of-thumb," descriptions, and empirical generalizations. The problem is that, taken together, this list of exclusions describes a great deal of what is normally practiced under the rubric of "theory." Fish responds to the possibility of opening up the definition of theory by saying that "such a liberal definition would . . . blur the distinction between theory and everything that is not theory" (325). Besides being tautological (i.e., we shouldn't expand the definition of theory because that would expand the definition of theory), this objection fails to recognize that definitions may become useless both by being too broad *and* by being too narrow. Yes, if we call everything "theory," then the idea of theory loses its power. But if we apply the name of "theory" to nothing but foundationalist attempts at hopeless generality, then the concept also loses its power by denoting a project so narrow that it simply winks out of existence.

Such a definition of theory hinges upon the (im)possibility that theory can stand outside of practice. In this respect, Fish follows Knapp and Michaels, who argue that "no one can reach a position outside practice, that theorists should stop trying, and that the theoretical enterprise should therefore come to an end" (30). Again, they are right to distrust

foundationalist attempts to ground practice from the outside. But, as Joseph Harris comments upon this passage, “instead of revealing the futility of doing theory, such arguments simply show the gap between what theory claims to do and what it actually can do” (143). This much Fish concedes, when he says later in his essay that theory is “a form of practice and therefore is consequential for practice as a matter of definition,” but he adds that these consequences “are not theoretical consequences” (336–37). That is to say, theory does things; it just doesn’t do what it (sometimes) claims to do.

What we must keep in mind, though, is that foundationalist theory, which claims to stand outside practice, is only one approach to theoretical discourse. There are other ways to “do theory” without claiming this transcendence. Dobrin makes a useful distinction between “*theory* with a small *t* and *Theory* with a big *T*” (11); the latter is foundationalist essentializing, while the former is a more nuanced process of “theoretical speculation” (12). Victor Vitanza locates himself in this category when he refers to his own theory-talk as “a way of seeing or *theorizing* (or if I may purposefully misspell, *theoreyezing*)” (“Seeing” 165). Vitanza is playing here upon the etymology of the word “theory,” which (as Raymond Williams’ *Keywords* points out) derives from Greek words meaning “spectacle” or “sight” (“Seeing” 165–66). According to Vitanza, a way of seeing or “*theoreyezing*” may end up running along foundationalist lines, but that need not be the case:

I have always (all ways) considered myself to be a theorist, a theoretician. I am solely, boundlessly, concerned with theorEYEzing. When I write “boundlessly,” I mean that I leave behind on occasion systematic, alienated seeing—that is, I leave . . . “homogeneity and arborescence” behind, and *by choice*. (166)

This “systematic, alienating seeing” is Fish’s foundationalist theory, which Vitanza sees as homogenous and “arborescent,” implying that such ways of seeing attempt to stabilize themselves by putting down roots—just like a tree.¹¹ In contrast to this way of seeing, Vitanza offers “boundless” theorizing, which he eventually names “third sophistic ways of seeing,” that contrast with “*what* counts as (mathematically correct)

SEEing, theorizing, thinking” (168). Unlike Fish, Vitanza embraces the word “theory” while at the same time distinguishing his particular practice of theory from those he sees as systematic and alienated. For him, it is not the concept or the ontology of theory that counts, but instead what one does with it.

As novel as Vitanza’s spellings may be, this way of defining theory is not especially new. As Vitanza notes, Aristotle’s famous definition of rhetoric uses the word *theoresai*, and George Kennedy’s translation of that definition reads, “Let rhetoric be [defined as] an ability, in each [particular] case, to see the available means of persuasion” (qtd. in “Seeing” 166). Understood this way, rhetoric itself is a theoretical project, since it attempts to “see” how persuasion gets done. Fish might prefer to call Aristotle’s project “description” or “empirical generalization” rather than “theory,” since Aristotle is seeking an induced rather than *a priori* model of persuasion. However, Vitanza has etymology on his side here, and it may be fruitful to think of theory as a practice that engages in “boundless” perspective taking.

Steven Mailloux also points to this function of theory, when he cites *Tom Sawyer Abroad*, where “Tom argues confidently that ‘the trouble about arguments’ is that ‘they ain’t nothing but theories after all, and theories don’t prove nothing, they only give you a place to rest on a spell” (“Segregated” 131). Tom emphasizes the temporary and contingent nature of theories, the idea that they do not settle disputes once and for all, as a true foundationalist theory would claim to do. This definition also ascribes to theory not so much a necessary relation to truth or reality, but rather a kind of pragmatic function. That is, theories are not so much true or false as they are used to reach some objective. Mailloux links Tom’s meta-theory to William James, who tells us that theories are “instruments, not answers to enigmas, in which we can rest. We don’t lie back upon them, we move forward, and, on occasion, make nature over again by their aid” (qtd. in Mailloux 131). Common to both views is the idea that theory offers a place to rest. For Tom that rest may only be temporary, a respite on the way to other locales, while for James that rest is illusory, a false assumption about the function of theories.¹² A theory, in this view, is not a static principle but rather a dynamic vehicle for movement.

What I am suggesting here is that definitions of theory are ultimately less interesting than analyses of the way(s) theory functions in a given field. That is, I am trying to move away from a purely definitional view of theory to something more functional. The question “what is theory?” is less useful, from a pragmatic perspective, than the question “what does theory do?” This shift in focus is suggested by Harris, who applies J. L. Austin’s categories of constative and performative speech to different ways of approaching theory. In Austin, constative speech consists of statements that can be measured as either true or false, while performative speech consists of words that actually enact what they say, as when a judge in a courtroom proclaims “I find you guilty.” Harris applies these terms to theory by claiming that “the constative view asks whether a certain theory is true or false” while “the performative view looks instead to the possible effects of holding a theory” (142). This application does not exactly form a tight seal between the different contexts of language and theory (since, for example, Harris has understood “performative” as “having effects”), but it gets close enough to comment usefully on different ways of approaching (or “seeing”) theory. The point is that there are at least two different kinds of theorists. One attempts to figure out whether theories are true or not, and we call that person a foundationalist. The other theorist attempts to see what a theory might perform, what kind of work it might do.

Unlike Fish, such diverse figures as Harris, Mailloux, and Vitanza point to a way of doing theory that does not participate in a foundationalist project of escaping practice, but rather uses theory as a way to get something accomplished within practice. What that “something” is depends a great deal upon the particular contexts within which theory is deployed. Theory is a kind of practice, and it happens only within a given sphere of activity. As Harris puts it, the performative view of theory does “not privilege it as a base or ground of understanding, as something separate from and prior to practice” (144). Rather, theory is a way of seeing, a vehicle, a momentary rest stop, an instrument with which to think otherwise. Since theory will always be embedded in practice, it is time to turn to the specific set of practices called “composition studies,” where we might ask not what theory is but rather what it does.

What Can Theory Do?

In composition studies, the value or worth of theoretical discourse is often measured by the degree to which it seems relevant to classroom practice. As Harris observes, “most theories of composing gain interest only when they are linked to teaching” (145). The first-year comp classroom is a kind of magnetic north for composition studies, the place to which our field has habitually and historically expected its intellectual work to point unerringly. The result of that general orientation is that ideas or theories that do not seem to have an immediate pedagogical payoff are often deemed irrelevant to the field as a whole. Jasper Neel comments on this phenomenon, saying that it represents an “intractable conundrum, the theory versus praxis split—more intractable and more confusing in rhetoric and composition than in most other disciplines because contemporary rhet/com comp grew from the classroom” (3). Composition studies has a complex relationship with teaching, since it finds both its origin and source of legitimation there, but it is also in some sense constrained by the classroom and perceived as a field in service of larger institutional goals.

Of course, pedagogical practices are themselves imbued with all kinds of theories, whether explicit or tacit. I am not saying that teaching and theory (as such) are wholly separable activities. At the same time, though, certain brands of theoretical discourse have been criticized for seeming disconnected from the classroom. Attempts to engage with critical theory, without immediate reference to teaching, have been dismissed by some as being (at its best) irrelevant or (at its worst) dangerously antithetical to the goals of composition studies. In 1990, during the first round of so-called “theory wars,” Maxine Hairston, a former CCCC chair, once expressed irritation with the rising tide of theoretical discourse by referencing “unreadable, fashionably radical articles” that “have little to do with the concerns of most college English teachers” (qtd. in Olson, “Death” 23). Those concerns of teachers, presumably, have more to do with the day-to-day practice of instruction rather than the scholarship that may or may not relate directly to that teaching. Hairston equates membership in the field of composition with being a “college English teacher” (a problematic enough equation), not

with being a scholar, researcher, or theorist. Relevance in the field is figured as relevance to the classroom.

What is also interesting here is Hairston's reference to readability (or lack thereof), which is a common tactic in arguments against theory-talk.¹³ Susan Wells offers this analysis of "difficult prose" in the field:

Our complaints about difficulty . . . are probably most bitter when the hard text is one from our own discipline. A rejection of difficult texts in composition and rhetoric resonates with a whole range of disciplinary preferences, including traditional belletristic commitment to "fine writing," the populist energy of formative writers like Mina Shaughnessy and Maxine Hairston, and the influence of current models, such as the crystalline prose of Deborah Brandt. (491)

While a certain amount of abstract or jargonized language might be tolerated from writers outside the discipline, Wells suggests here that there may be less patience with difficult prose from other scholars within the field. She blames this intolerance on "preferences" borne out of the complex history of composition. Much of the discourse of critical theory flies in the face of stylistic advice to be clear and concise. James Kastely quips that Kenneth Burke's "inefficient" prose style makes him "Strunk and White's worst nightmare" (507). Perhaps this aversion to theory-talk emerges in part out of a simple dislike of dense, difficult prose.

Then again, accusations of unreadability can mask perhaps more fundamental disagreements with the theory itself. Beth Daniell has also noted that "practitioners complain . . . that theory is impenetrable or stylistically obnoxious," though she speculates that "what the practitioners fear is theory that doesn't in some way talk about pedagogy or students," that it has "killed off intention, feeling, readers, and authors, leaving only texts of indeterminate meaning, only signifiers in endless play" (135, 134). Susan Jarratt and Nedra Reynolds are more explicit about this implied split between postmodern theory and the rhetorical theory that grounds much classroom practice, saying that

the issue on which they seem to be most at odds is the nature of the subject: the human being who speaks and writes. Many of the most prominent voices in rhetoric, composition, and communication are

still invested in the concept of the individual—a unified and coherent whole. (37)

Perhaps the anxiety over theory is not so much that it is difficult to read, but rather that, once read, one specific brand of theory seems to be saying things that would make teaching composition more difficult, not less. Much of postmodern theory has, at the very least, complicated ideas of the subject and subjectivity, while composition pedagogy has continued to work with models—like the author, the reader, intention—that seem contradictory to that impulse. That is, theory puts into question notions that the field has historically depended upon in the teaching of composition. This is not a case of “theory vs. practice,” but instead a matter of one set of theoretical assumptions conflicting with another.

But maybe there is more to it than that. This discomfort with theory extends beyond the classroom into received—and cherished—versions of what writing is and what writers are. Bishop contends that the writing of a theorist like Olson has “no clothes, no heart.” Perhaps that characterization has less to do with Olson’s prose style and more to do with a sense that a particular construction of authorship has come under attack by more explicitly theoretical discourse. Certain kinds of theory-talk have worked to dismantle ideas of authorship, and that dismantling threatens someone like Bishop, who, as she describes it, is left looking for a “place to stand” as a “writer-teacher-writer.” Bishop’s essay takes on an elegiac quality as it laments the fading influence of her personal “writer-teacher-writer” heroes, such as Donald Murray and Peter Elbow. Whether or not theory is in fact responsible for the loss that Bishop describes (an issue certainly up for debate), certain theories have undoubtedly brought received notions of writing into question.

Whenever deeply-held beliefs and assumptions come under scrutiny, it is only natural to feel threatened. Since such questioning is, perhaps, the primary aim of much theoretical discourse, resistance to it should not come as any great surprise. Lynn Worsham has linked the perceived difficulty of theory with its overall function, by suggesting that theorists are generally driven by

a respect for difficulty and complexity, not because difficulty and complexity are to be valued in and of themselves but because the

real world from which theory arises and to which it speaks is itself complex—an almost incomprehensible network of discourses, practices, and forces. (“Coming” 104)

In other words, theory is hard to read because the world is hard to read. Daniel Smith likewise argues that the difficult prose of figures like Hegel, Adorno, and Jameson is not an attempt to use “inflated language and labyrinthine prose as a form of smoke and mirrors,” but instead to reorient readers to “an ethics of encountering and responding to the multiplicity of existence” (525–26). According to this line of reasoning, any written attempt to grapple with the messiness of lived experience is itself bound to be messy. By extension, a lack of tolerance for difficult theoretical prose might signal a more deeply entrenched aversion to instability.¹⁴

One important function of theory is to make this questioning possible, to interrogate the assumptions and beliefs with(in) which a field is ordinarily practiced. Postmodern theories of the subject do not prescribe direct and obvious versions of pedagogy (or writing) that we can then import straightforwardly into the classroom. It is asking too much of even explicitly pedagogical concepts, such as Vygotsky’s “zone of proximal development,” to drive teaching practice in an unproblematic way. Rather, postmodern theory provides an occasion for composition scholars to ask different questions, to see another way, to think otherwise from what has been thought before. That questioning need not revolutionize the field; it may simply lead to a reaffirmation of the practices already in place. As Harris puts it, there are times when “theory helps us explain what we are already doing” (147). If theoretical discourse does that for us, then it performs much more than a simple exercise in justifying the status quo. Harris goes on to say that “to teach writing better we need not simply more knowledge but a stronger sense of purpose, of how to use the things we already know” (147). Theory as a reflective practice can affect our sense of resolve and clarify the methodologies which we already espouse.

Of course, theory can also shake our foundations by foregrounding beliefs or assumptions that have previously gone unexamined. Again, such questioning does not automatically lead to a new kind of practice. My guess is that many postmodern theorists still speak to their students as if they were individual subject/authors with an audience to persuade. Does this make them ironists? Not necessarily. The fact is that calling the

“author-function” into question does not have automatic or necessary consequences for classroom practice, nor should we expect it to. Perhaps somewhere down the line, when such theory has been more fully articulated, it might present probable lines of practice that were not visible before. But to be constantly shooting for that payoff is to privilege, in the parlance of composition, the product over the process. Just as many instructors today urge students to think of their writing as a process (cognitive, linear, recursive, or whatever), so too ought those instructors think of theory as a reflective process that has value in itself, whether or not it translates into pedagogical practice at some later date.

Vitanza takes a similar position when he urges the field to “declare a moratorium on attempting to turn theory into praxis/pedagogy” (“Three” 160). He sees theory-talk as an important pursuit in its own right, without having to produce consequences for teaching. Olson echoes this point when he says of theorists that “it’s not that we don’t value teaching; it’s that we don’t value teaching to the exclusion of every other intellectual concern” (“Death” 26). Vitanza further argues that “there can no longer be or . . . ethically, micropolitically, there should not be any foundational principle or covering law or ontogenetic model for composition theory and pedagogy” (148). Worsham refers to the desire for such a foundational principle as the “pedagogical imperative” or “will to pedagogy” (“Writing” 96). She goes on to say that this imperative lies “at the heart of a discipline requiring every theory of writing to translate into a pedagogical practice or at least some specific advice for teachers” (96). Too often, this “pedagogical imperative” takes the form of a foundationalist project to uncover what Worsham calls “a nugget of pure truth about writing” that will tell us exactly how to teach our subject (96). Like Fish, Vitanza considers this kind of theoretical project doomed to failure, since “Language . . . turns against the models that are constructed in its name” (148).

Scholars like Bizzell, Vitanza, and Worsham fear (quite rightly) foundational models that seek to replace individual judgment with what Fish refers to as an infallible “theoretical machine,” which could generate practices from a position outside of practice (319). Fish examines attempts to import the concept of situatedness—that “the subject is always and already tethered by the local or community norms and

standards that constitute it and enable its rational acts"—into the composition classroom (346). In looking for a "methodological payoff" for this theoretical observation, Fish argues, we end up making the foundationalist turn: "any claim in which the notion of situatedness is said to be a lever that allows us to get a purchase on situations is finally a claim to have escaped situatedness" (348). Simply observing that subjects are situated, or that the notion of subjectivity may be deeply troubled, does not lead inexorably to pedagogical procedures that can be deployed in the classroom.

At the same time, it is perfectly possible to engage in activities like teaching and research without the aid of explicitly articulated theoretical frameworks. We should look with suspicion, however, on any claim to "theory-free" pedagogy. Substituting "philosophy" for "theory," Fulkerson reminds us that "teachers who claim . . . to teach without any philosophy [are] deluding themselves. It is possible to be unconscious about philosophy, or to be inconsistent, but it isn't possible not to have one" (410). Nevertheless, pedagogical practice could (and would) continue whether we had a theoretical discourse surrounding it or not, but we run serious risks if we decide to dispense with theory altogether. Neel, referring to the practical roots of composition, asks if "praxis is the purpose, must one theorize at all?" (3). His answer is "no," but he goes on to say that the "price [of not theorizing] is a mixture of naïveté and self-deception" (3). At the very least, theory has the potential to show "us little glimpses of ourselves and our students, giving us insights about what it means to read and write in this culture," as Daniell concludes (140). We need not imagine catching those glimpses from a privileged position outside of practice, but rather from taking different perspectives from within any given activity. To borrow a phrase from Donald Schön, theory helps us become "reflective practitioners." Theoretical insights may or may not lead us to radically alter practices at some future date, but the alteration or affirmation of pedagogy need not be the primary goal of our theorizing.

Nor is pedagogy the only set of practices within composition studies that might connect with theory. Engagement in the performance of theory carries with it the possibility of various professional consequences. Fish acknowledges these material, "non-theoretical" consequences of theory when he concedes that academics "can be published, promoted, fired,

feted, celebrated, reviled” based on their work on theory (337). Daniell continues this line of thinking, saying that “Because talk about theory has ‘cachet and prestige,’ theory talk helps articles get published in journals and helps panels find places on conference programs. It gets grants, curricular changes, graduate courses” (133).¹⁵ Theory may not have theoretical consequences, but it has a kind of market value within academia, and its adoption by practitioners in a field like composition, which has struggled to legitimize itself in its relatively short history, ought to come as no surprise. Composition as a discipline has historically found itself at the mercy of its privileged sibling, the English literature department. One way for compositionists to “attain academic respectability”—to render their work visible (or simply comprehensible) to their literary colleagues—is to demonstrate their facility with theoretical models drawn from more prestigious departments (Daniell 134). Without conceptual points of contact like this, we risk alienating ourselves from fields with which we share both affinities and institutional obligations. According to Dobrin, without theory, “composition scholarship will stagnate, and composition as a field will be defined within the narrow confines of a service orientation” (23). We risk invisibility and illegitimacy, and those attributes would have dire consequences for the field as a whole.

Theory may be giving compositionists a way to legitimize themselves, but not all members of the composition studies community are sanguine about this move toward professionalization. Olson offers an example of such resistance:

Wendy [Bishop] blames what she sees as the sad state of affairs in composition on “careerism.” Apparently, she believes that so-called Current-Market-Forces drive compositionists into “rapid professionalism” by creating the “need to appear ever-more scholarly, historical, and theoretical.” (28)

The implication in Bishop’s argument is that doing theory amounts to a kind of careerist “sell-out,” a betrayal of composition studies’ principles (however we might construe those) in the rush to establish successful academic careers. She seems to view theory talk as the mere appearance of scholarship, but her view says more about the way she positions herself

within academic practices than it does about theory itself. Bishop also seems to see the turn toward theory as a function of individual scholars wanting to professionalize themselves. There may be something to that argument, but it misses the larger way in which theory helps make the entire field of composition studies “appear ever-more scholarly, historical, and theoretical.” It is possible that she objects more to this general shift in the field than to any single scholar’s choices. Whether or not this growing professionalization through the use of theory is a good thing is, of course, a subject open to debate. My point here is that theory does in fact perform legitimizing work both for individuals and for the field as a whole, and that function of theory meets resistance precisely because of its pragmatic, “careerist” outcomes.

Theoretical discourse has also been accused of distracting scholars from more pressing material concerns. Robert Samuels criticizes theorist Slavoj Žižek for being a “nihilistic machine,” writing that “Žižek and many other academic critics employ abstract and universalizing political theories in order to escape the horrible working and thinking conditions shaping academic labor” (327, 328). From this perspective, theory-talk is less a careerist move, and more of an escapist fantasy that prevents academics from confronting the realities of the work they do. Theory constitutes a kind of false consciousness. However, as with the perceived split between theory and pedagogy, it is important to remember that topic and purpose are not coextensive. That is, theoretical discourse does not have to be *about* the classroom or *about* poor academic working conditions in order to have a transformative effect in either context. Instead of viewing theory as the delusion of disinterested scholars, someone like Worsham argues that “theoretical texts are strategies for coping with concrete, material situations; they are equipment for living, for naming and changing, as Merod puts it, ‘the tangible conditions of the real world’s unsatisfactory options’” (qtd. in Worsham, “Coming” 103). In other words, theory is not separate from material reality, but instead has the potential to map out some of the uncharted territory between the real and the not-yet-realized.

So far we have looked at the possible effects of theory on pedagogy and professionalization, but I want to suggest now that it is possible for theory to engage both of these concerns in a kind of reflexive examination

of the field as a collective entity. James Berlin's book, *Rhetorics, Poetics, and Cultures*, is a good example of an attempt to view the whole field of composition studies through a variety of borrowed theoretical lenses. Berlin's main goal is to refigure the enterprise of what he calls "English studies," by which renaming he foregrounds his subsequent attempt to cancel out the oppositions, through a deconstructive analysis, between poetic and rhetoric, literary and nonliterary, and (at a more disciplinary level) literature and rhet/comp. Throughout the book, Berlin marshals notions and methodologies from cultural studies, such as Bourdieu's "pure gaze," in order to tell the history of English studies. He is especially careful to connect the various formations of English as a discipline to larger social and economic forces, such as the valorized positioning of the aesthetic (and literary) as a response to "the dehumanizing conditions of the new social order of industrial capitalism" (6). Not only does Berlin show how changes in economic and social conditions brought with them changes within the academy, but he also tries to show how various models for what English departments do can compete for prominence at the same time, even as larger social forces compete for hegemony. This sort of analysis draws on the work done by theorists such as Frederic Jameson.

All of this theoretical work leads Berlin to make a rather large claim about the practice of "English" studies:

We must take as our province the production and reception of semiotic codes, providing students with the heuristics to penetrate these codes and their ideological designs on our formation as subjects. (93)

How he got to this conclusion is less important here than the fact that his liberal borrowing from existing theoretical models allows Berlin to construct this particular vision of the practice (and import) of composition studies. In this redefinition of the field, Berlin points clearly to the pedagogical consequences of this shift in thinking. Moreover, by ultimately collapsing (in a deconstructive manner) the stubborn split between rhetoric and poetic, he has also used theory to legitimize the field of composition vis-à-vis English departments. That legitimation comes first by rendering the practices of composition studies more recognizable

to our colleagues in English departments (i.e., we deal with texts, too), and then by suggesting that the specific modes of composition studies (“the production and reception of semiotic codes”) is the larger category under which literary studies is practiced. That is, this inversion implies that composition is not a part of the English department; the English department is a subset of composition.

Berlin’s use of theory is just one example of the kind of reflection that critical theory might enable in the discipline. In this case, theoretical reflection helps Berlin develop a “stronger sense of purpose” for the field through his disruption of the usual hierarchies. This particular use of theory is deconstructive in the strict sense, and it is probably the sort of thing Jacques Derrida encourages in a 1990 interview conducted by Gary Olson:

I think through deconstruction you should study and analyze these models [of composition] and where they come from, where their authority comes from, what the finality of these models is, what interests they serve—personal, political, ideological, etc. (“Conversation” 9)

For Derrida, the important thing is that we “go through a reflection on the institution of composition” (8). Such theory work provides opportunities to explore and examine our models and practices in novel ways. As Foucault has said, “there are times in one’s life when the question as to whether one can think otherwise than one does is indispensable if one is to go on looking and reflecting” (qtd. in Biesecker, 362). Worsham echoes this sentiment, stating that theory emerges out of “a desire for alternate points of view, other stories” (“Coming” 104). Such questioning is not always productive, nor does it need to be. The process itself opens things up, provides lines of inquiry that were otherwise invisible or impossible to articulate.

Another way to view Berlin’s project is to think of theoretical discourse as a mode of persuasion. His inversion of the usual (and all too persistent) hierarchy between literature and composition is a rhetorical move, not a “performative” one.¹⁶ Whatever other consequences we might ascribe to it, theory can be persuasive. It attempts, as Mailloux puts it, “to persuade its readers to adopt its point of view, its way of seeing texts

and the world” (*Rhetorical* 159). Theory is, in this sense, both rhetorical and interpretive, a hermeneutic act that aims at persuasion. Berlin arrives at his vision of “English studies” via a chain of arguments that can only be called theoretical. He does not claim that those theories are somehow foundational, nor does he claim that his conclusions are the only ones possible. In fact, he resists the possibility of such closure by invoking Lyotard’s distrust of “grand narratives,” yet another name for foundational theory. That is to say, Berlin uses theory to draw attention to the contingent and persuasive nature of his own use of theory. He surely does so to provide evidence of his own theoretical sophistication and self-reflection, and in so doing he establishes an ethos and authority designed to persuade those who engage in academic discourse. Rather than using theory to escape practice, Berlin has deployed theory within a practice of academic argumentation that values “theory talk,” that finds theory persuasive. He uses theory in the way Harris describes, when he says that theory “can offer a way of arguing about (and perhaps changing) the things we do and believe as teachers and intellectuals” (144).

We may question, of course, what it is exactly that makes theory so persuasive in modern academic contexts. Authors like Mailloux and Harris might point to its potential for providing useful interpretations of practices. That is, theoretical discourse is persuasive because it helps us understand those “things we do and believe.” Others might rather suggest that the valuation of theory in academia is an arbitrary phenomenon, with the perverse result that we now engage theory seemingly for its own sake. Barbara Biesecker, speaking of the use that gets made of Foucault’s work in rhetorical theory, suggests that “perhaps we have found in Foucault’s theorizations and historical analyses a critical lexicon that . . . allows us nonetheless to continue to study the art of persuasion in roughly the same old way” (351). In this view, the importation of Foucault’s ideas into rhetorical studies has less to do with changing practices and beliefs, and much more to do with using a vocabulary that bears some academic cachet. We are likely to find, however, that theory is persuasive for both of these reasons, and any deployment of theory cannot avoid entanglements with either motivation.

Theory as Practice

Are we in the midst of “the new theory wars”? Probably not. The exchange between Bishop and Olson merely made visible a tension that has persisted in our field almost from the start. What has always made that tension possible is our continued faith in what Worsham calls the “theory-practice split,” with “practice” often understood as “teaching” (“Coming” 102). And not only do we continue to believe in this split, we also maintain belief in a hierarchical relationship in which theory takes the privileged position. Believing thus, we either expect theory to drive practice from the top, or we yearn to divest theory of its exalted throne, leaving practice to rule itself. Of course, we could think otherwise. We could, as I have tried to do in this essay, invert (and dispense with) the usual hierarchy between theory and practice by treating theory not as something above or outside of practice, but rather as simply another kind of practice, albeit one with a sometimes strained relationship to other disciplinary practices. That is, theory (just like pedagogy) constitutes a range of activities, habits, and dispositions that have consequences, some of which I have outlined above. Theoretical discourse does not drive practice; it is practice.

As with all practices, it is always an open question whether we want to continue participating in certain brands of “theory talk.” This question needs to be debated and negotiated among scholars in the field, but we need not declare war on each other to do so. I have suggested here some of the intellectual and professional advantages of certain kinds of theoretical discourse. Others, like Bishop and Hairston, argue that we might be better off without it. But such arguments need not depend on overly narrow definitions of theory or attacks against other scholars. A case could be made, for instance, that many of the assumptions made by postmodern theorists are too antithetical to important values held by the field, that they somehow paralyze our efforts at good teaching, good research, and good scholarship. In the midst of an earlier “outbreak” of the theory wars, Fulkerson wrote that “[w]hile axiology, pedagogy, process theory, and epistemology are not a tight-wrapped package, different elements in a theory of composition *can* still be logically incompatible” (422).

However, taking such a position would depend on a sense of unity among compositionists that perhaps does not exist. What the Bishop/Olson skirmish illustrates is a deep divide within the discipline, with each side feeling somehow marginalized. In the end, where each of us stand on the practice of critical theory speaks to the way we understand the field's collective identity. And since identity is never a stable construct, we will need to find ways to handle the inevitable differences of opinion. Perhaps the question should not be whether or not to engage in theoretical discourse, but instead how we move forward as a discipline when some engage in it and others do not. How do we find coherence in a field that draws so liberally from various traditions? I am not advocating what Tim Mayers refers to as a "benign, fuzzy pluralism . . . in which we can all just get along" (454). Struggle is not necessarily a bad thing, but it is important to be clearheaded about exactly what it is we are struggling over. Instead of waging a war over theory, we need a greater understanding of what it is and how it might fit within the larger purposes of the field, however configured. Theory-talk is not for everyone, but composition studies as a discipline would be poorer (both materially and intellectually) without the kind of work it enables.

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Notes

1. Reprinted as "The Death of Composition as an Intellectual Discipline" in *Rhetoric and Composition as Intellectual Work* in 2002.

2. In a short 1999 piece, "James Kinneavy and the Struggle over Composition," Olson suggested that not only Bishop's essay but also the entire special issue of *CCC* (51.1, 1999) in which it appeared constituted a "revitalized backlash against theoretical scholarship" (538). At least one of the authors who appeared in that issue—Tim Mayers—subsequently objected to that characterization.

3. The date of the colloquy was March 19, 2003, which coincided with the first day of the annual CCCC convention. A transcript of the colloquy is available online at <http://chronicle.com/colloquylive/2003/03/composition/>.

4. Given the tenor of the Bishop/Olson exchange, it is tempting, of course, to read this as a conflict of personality, but, as I hope to show, there are salient

intellectual issues here worth our consideration. As Olson puts it, “this exchange is not about Wendy, and it’s not about me; it’s about the future of composition as a discipline” (“Death,” 31).

5. For an analysis of how “theory wars” had played out in the field up into the mid-1990s, see Dobrin’s book. Also see Stephen North’s *The Making of Knowledge in Composition* for an extended discussion of methodological and epistemological tensions in the field from its inception to the mid-1980s.

6. Fish has said this so often, I do not bother to cite it directly. I have in mind, however, his essay titled “Consequences” in *Doing What Comes Naturally*.

7. Originally published in 1982 in *Critical Inquiry*, “Against Theory” spawned a range of responses that were collected together and published with the original essay in *Against Theory* in 1985.

8. I realize how reductive it is to collapse a wide range of theoretical pursuits into the term “critical theory,” but the term is as useful as any for describing the kind of discourse scholars like Bishop find objectionable. Examples of work in this mode can be found in such collections as *Writing Theory and Critical Theory* and *Contending with Words*.

9. It is worth noting here that in this essay Fish is dealing with theories of textual interpretation, hence “hermeneutics.” His direct engagement with composition theory (an essay called “Antifoundationalism”) can be found in the same volume.

10. See Bizzell’s essay on “Foundationalism and Anti-Foundationalism in Composition Studies,” originally published in 1986, for a much more thorough treatment of these issues.

11. Vitanza is clearly drawing on the introduction to Deleuze and Guattari’s *A Thousand Plateaus*, where the “rootedness” of foundationalist theory is contrasted with a more open, “rhizomatic” model of theorizing.

12. The latent new critic in me wants to do something with that whole phrase “rest a spell.” “Spell” here surely denotes something like “a brief space of time,” but is etymologically related to ideas of narration or story-telling, as in “gospel,” which means nothing more than “good spell” or “good narrative/news.” Perhaps it is a stretch, but I like the idea of a theory as something “to rest on for the time it takes to tell a story.” The theory thus becomes a narrative, though not a Grand Narrative.

13. Olson quotes Andrea Lunsford and Wendy Bishop, two other past chairs of CCCC, making very similar, disparaging comments about the difficult language of theory.

14. Even proponents of theoretical discourse, however, concede that there may be texts that are, as Dobrin puts it, “gratuitously incomprehensible” (23). There is no test, though, to determine the rationale for a particular text’s difficulty. What is needed, perhaps, are more analyses like Smith’s that argue for the depth (or hollowness) of theorists’ prose styles.

15. Theory apparently does not just do work for faculty. In their "Survey of Doctoral Programs in Rhetoric," Brown, Jackson, and Enos note that "The high status theory receives from the profession is mirrored in the dissertations produced or in the number of dissertations categorized as 'theor[ies] of rhetoric and composition.' Interestingly, given the nature of the profession, pedagogy comes in a close second with history a distant third" (240).

16. That is, not in the sense in which Austin uses the term "performative," but certainly in the way Harris uses it.

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