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## **DISCIPLINARITY AND EXPLOITATION:**

### *Compositionists as Good Professionals*

James Sledd

A handful of quotations map the much advertised "revolution in composition":

The serious comp teacher HAS to work for social change, even when there seems little hope—or none. One place to begin is with the staffing of comp courses—by either graduate students or a "wage section"/"resource pool." That sort of academic peonage will ultimately reduce the humanistic departments to academic slums, with a tiny handful of docile, privileged luminaries and a vast majority of underpaid, overworked, untenured transients. (Sledd, 1982, qtd. in Parks 236 n. 2)

The emergence of composition studies has enabled a few writing teachers to do research, to publish professional discourse, to get grants, rank, and tenure, and thus to assume power in English department and university politics. (Crowley 236)

What the director of a writing program wants, it seems to me, is to be able to interview, hire, and train a teaching staff, to fire teachers who don't work out, to establish curriculum, to set policies, and to represent the program as he or she sees best. (Harris 57)

(I make) \$10,000 to \$13,000 . . . per year teaching the equivalent of a full-time load of two or three courses, after my five years of graduate education, a doctorate in Renaissance literature and 18 years of college teaching. . . . (Burns)

If higher education's future is one of part-time work dominated by corporate managers, English has had a key role in making that future more likely. (Nelson and Watt 55)

The quotations force insistent questions. Why was the emergence of "composition studies," the achievement of "disciplinarity" by a fortunate minority of compositionists, neatly paralleled by the deepening exploitation of composition's most numerous teachers, the teaching assistants, part-timers, and other contingent workers? Why did a few directors "get grants, rank, and tenure" while growing numbers of classroom teachers remained overworked, underpaid, and insecure? Why did the conventional ambition of good professionals end in bossdom?

The deadly parallel is not itself in doubt. Its recognition is almost amusingly implicit in a resolution proposed for the Washington meeting of the Modern Language Association's Delegate Assembly in

December, 2000. With the required whereases, the resolution affirmed that "an exploitative labor system" in higher education has relied on underpaid contingent labor "since 1970." The date leaps off the usually lead-footed pages of the *MLA Newsletter*. It was about 1970, as the job market for literary PhDs collapsed and panic seized the MLA, that frightened job-hunters became instant compositionists. "When there were few jobs, if any, in literature, and when large numbers of freshmen and sophomores, many of them poorly prepared, wanted instruction in the composition that the literati preferred not to teach, only the less ingenious members of the too-numerous cohort of literary PhDs could fail to see that the time was right for a transfer of allegiance" (Sledd 16). The desire to teach Comp 101, in the '60s an aberration if not outright disqualification, had become a ticket to employment in the '70s.

In the new century, the results of thirty years of revolution and exploitation are obvious—and accepted by the authoritative as inevitable. As in the corporate world, academic labor has indeed been casualized since 1970. Today, "nearly half of all higher-education faculty, twice as many as in 1970, are part-timers" (Kirp 25), the proportion having grown "from 22% in 1970 to 42% in 1992" ("News" 43).<sup>1</sup> With all the old hierarchies still in place, academic salaries and teaching loads vary inversely: the less faculty members teach, the more they get paid. Full professors don't spend much time in the classroom; but on twenty-nine campuses in over a dozen states, they now average over \$100,000 a year, with superstars even in the humanities drawing \$150,000 or more (Magner). The *average* salary of full professors at doctoral institutions is around \$90,000 ("What"). Meanwhile, busy TAs are paid so little that many end their formal education deeply in debt, and over-loaded part-timers "work for wages comparable to those in the worst illegal sweatshops in the country" (Nelson and Watt 6).

The abuse of casual labor is centered in English departments, more narrowly in composition programs.<sup>2</sup> For Cary Nelson and Stephen Watt, English is "corporate America's fast-food discipline," the discipline which "has led the way in turning college teaching into a low-level service job" and thus has laid "the groundwork for the corporate university." In many English departments, Nelson and Watt go on, students can "be assigned to teach composition the semester after they earn their B.A. So the educational requirement to teach rhetoric is apparently a B.A., a summer vacation, and a week's training" (55-58).

The harsh fast-food analogy is repeated by Lennard J. Davis, head of the English Department at the University of Illinois at Chicago. In the *Chronicle of Higher Education* for November 10, 2000, Davis struggled with his conscience over his six-figure salary. His conscience lost, but Davis did acknowledge that professorial luminaries live off the sweated labor of TAs: "because some T. A. is working the equivalent of the deep fryer at Burger King, I can dine at the chancellor's table" (B9).

Less colorful confessions may also be heard. A report by an Ad Hoc Committee of the Association of Departments of English (ADE) acknowledges that "the problem of staffing first-year writing courses forms the core . . . of the staffing problem generally" ("Report" 4); and John Guillory offers the banality (note his subject-hiding passive voice) that the teaching of freshman comp "has now been consigned largely to graduate students, or to an adjunct or casualized faculty (with familiar and deplorable consequences)" (Guillory 1158). Relevant data on wages are available too. Estimates of an adjunct's pay per course have run as low as \$1,000; but on the more generous assumption of \$2,500, an adjunct teaching four sections of comp per semester would be paid \$20,000 per academic year. A run-of-the-mill professor carrying a two-course load for \$80,000 yearly would get the adjunct's annual income for teaching just one course.

The most distressing fact is not that the majority of composition teachers are treated like migrant workers on the corporate farm. The most distressing fact is that the established now justify exploitation as the inescapable way of the academic world. The ADE's Ad Hoc Committee clearly described the situation in English. Part-timers and TAs together now constitute 52% "of the instructional staff teaching in the four-year English departments in the ADE's sample," and if full-time untenurables are added to the total, it reaches 60%. In doctoral institutions, the Committee found, TAs taught 36% of *all* undergraduate English

courses. But this lamentable condition was only to be lamented, not rectified. In the '70s, the use of adjuncts and part-timers was considered temporary; but now adjuncts are "structurally required," "integral to the structure of contemporary higher education." "In large universities with three hundred or more sections of composition each year, the possibility of not using part-time faculty members is simply non-existent." In the corporate language newly popular among lower academic managers, part-time and full-time untenurables are "an indispensable part of the delivery of instruction in English" ("Report" 10-18). They come cheap.

More exalted academics than the ADE committee take the same gloomy view. In contemplating the future of doctoral education, Guillory observed that "many of the problems facing the university today cannot be solved in the university. They are problems of the educational system as a whole. We all know, for example, that departments cannot at this point refuse to hire adjunct labor or to employ graduate students to teach composition" (Guillory 1162).

Catharine Stimpson agrees that the buck stopped elsewhere than in faculty offices. The "market model for higher education," with students as clients, customers, or consumers, will remain dominant, she declared, "until large social and political developments more powerfully nurture a sense of the public good and of a shared civil society" (Stimpson 1147). Academics must be content, like blind Milton, to stand and wait, hoping, perhaps, that the cat-fight over the presidency in the year 2000 will promote civility and that "sense of the public good."

The same acceptance of the formerly intolerable characterizes academics with a sharper eye on the main chance. In *The Adjunct Professor's Guide to Success* (a more saleable volume than *PMLA*), Lyons, Kysilka, and Pawlas warn their readers that the "new paradigm of 'colleges and universities as service providers to consumer-oriented students' is now firmly entrenched. The successful adjunct professor will do well to embrace it" (42-43). The finicky may boggle at the idea of embracing a paradigm in a trench, but the meaning is plain enough for businesspeople to have grasped it. Major publishers see profits in "reaching out directly" to the nation's 500,000 adjuncts, a big market with both a journal, *The Adjunct Advocate*, and a National Adjunct Faculty Guild. Enterprising McGraw-Hill publishes "an online newsletter designed especially for graduate teaching assistants and other part-time instructors" (*Adjunct* 44, 50).

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So much for the "revolution" that fulfills the gloomy prophecy of "academic peonage" made twenty years ago. In the society of greed, the revolutionaries' unconsidered desire for upward mobility left no other outcome possible.

The revolutionaries were not motivated primarily by intellectual rebelliousness, like their Chomskyan contemporaries in linguistics. As the '70s began, new compositionists did join forces with a handful of older scholars to talk a good deal about rhetoric ancient and modern, but they used the term so loosely that it had no precise meaning. For some admired expositors, rhetoric was anything that could be said about the written word, the people who wrote or read it, or the social context of the reading or writing; and continuing efforts at characterization left rhetoric, as the saying goes, with its center nowhere but its circumference everywhere.

Vagueness isn't lessened by the latest commentaries on "composition as an intellectual discipline." For one defender of the revolutionaries' discipline, Gary Olson, composition somehow encompasses "broad and diverse investigations of how written discourse works," and the repeated catch-phrase "how discourse works" has to serve as the uninformative label for "a two-decade long tradition of substantive theoretical scholarship" (Olson 33-35).

The tossing about of words like *theory* and *theoretical* leaves obscurity still obscure. Another zealous theorist, Sidney Dobrin, writes that "the debate regarding what 'body of knowledge' constitutes *rhetoric* and *composition* dictates that composition maintains no constant, codifiable knowledge." "Where are we going?" the theorist asks—and answers happily that because composition has become an interdisciplinary congregation of theories, "we are going everywhere" (Dobrin 151, 155).

When a puzzled graduate student tries to explain the buzzword, she consoles her readers with the assertion that "theory is something we all do . . . without much effort." "Theorizing . . . is thinking critically," "making connections," "making considered generalizations." "In short, to theorize is to clear a pathway toward change." For such clarifications, the young scholar thanks her mentors (Price A7-A8).

The charge that their research is chaotic provokes the boss compositionists to an easy but empty response; they give chaos an honorific name. Andrea Lunsford sees the nature, the space of composition studies as "large and loosely bounded, informed by cross-disciplinary, trans-institutional, multiply mediated, multi-gearred, multi-voiced, and radically democratic principles" (11)—principles which do not console exploited TAs and part-timers. John Trimbur cites Lunsford and other polysyllabists as arguing that composition studies, a postmodern pastiche resistant to "the positivist certainties and foundational accounts that shaped the older disciplines," follows "the cultural logic of postmodernism" and "situates itself in a nondisciplinary or postdisciplinary place where multiple, heterogeneous, and polyvalent discourses, projects, and interests intersect" (Trimbur 136). From such explanations, the only possible conclusion is that composition studies is (are) whatever compositionists may study.

Though the revolution in composition wasn't intellectual, it wasn't pedagogical either. The very idea of teaching a "service course" bothered the revolutionaries. Well after disciplinarity had been achieved, Gary Tate asked indignantly, "Does the vast apparatus of our discipline—all the journals, books, conferences, graduate programs—exist in the cause of nothing more than better sociology and biology papers?" (qtd. in Heilker 107). About the same time, David Bartholomae acknowledged that "composition has produced and justified a career that has everything to do with status and identity in English and little to do with the organization, management, and evaluation of student writing except perhaps as an administrative problem" (What 23). Of the three persons of the academic trinity, ambitious compositionists had accurately judged teaching and service less honorific than scholarship.

With the field of rhetoric and comp so undefined, what indeed were the compositionists to teach? They never agreed on the kind or kinds of writing they should help their students cultivate or by what methods they should help them. Instead, the revolutionaries produced a succession of final solutions, none of them justified by hard evidence of notable improvement in students' writing. The one unequivocal agreement was that earlier methods—"the current-traditional"—had ignominiously failed.

It troubled nobody that characterizations of the current-traditional were widely various, even contradictory. Maxine Hairston, known for her separatist rage against the "mandarins" of literary studies and for zeal for an alleged "new paradigm" in composition, as late as 1986 dismissed her predecessors with a single sentence: "Until very recently, most college composition teachers have not known what they were doing" (117). Hairston, who gained considerable status among compositionists, began her directorial career about 1970 (that date again). With present attention focused on the exploitation of labor in comp programs, it's an amusing coincidence that she wrote so dismissively in an essay entitled "On Not Being a Composition Slave."

Work like Hairston's solidifies the judgment that the revolution in composition, neither intellectual nor pedagogical, was really about power, but limited power within the academic system as it existed (and exists). For jobless young PhDs in literature about 1970, the only available jobs were in composition; but within the system, composition was despised, a workplace for "composition bums" who would never make it above assistant professor. The young literati had, then, to change the reputation of composition;

but they couldn't try to knock over the ladder that they hoped to climb: they couldn't try (even if they had big power) to change the system deeply. Instead, they followed the prudent conventions of upward mobility among good professionals—conventions which included much ill-considered publication and the repeated proclamation of their own revolutionary superiority. Their damnification of the current-traditional is matched by their self-praise.

Inevitably, then, the compositionists' non-intellectual, non-pedagogical campaign for limited academic power has duplicated, on a small scale, the encompassing society's division into haves and have-nots. The externals of disciplinarity have been established—conferences, journals, and the like—and a minority has won minor status and privilege as lower managers of the class war as it's conducted on campus. The system that the quest for upward mobility affirmed has worked predictably.

To these criticisms over the past decade and more, the boss compositionists have replied that they have been falsely accused of selling out. The accusation is in fact quite different—but more disturbing because it questions foundations. The boss compositionists haven't sold out. They've bought in, bought in to the rotten system of academic exploitation as good professionals do. Good professionals have to play by the system's rules. They organize, claim to have all the answers, badmouth their rivals, and warn off intruders on their field.<sup>3</sup> For the risen compositionists, that field is less the scorned but essential teaching of workaday prose than the bossing of real teachers.

Joseph Harris has quite accurately described what directors of writing programs want. They want control, but control in an area that bigger bosses still despise. University presidents resent the required freshman course as remedial, an unpleasant necessity when secondary schools don't rightly prepare students to do the writing that colleges demand. In staffing the unwanted course, the presidents want cheap labor and flexibility—the chance to treat teachers like disposable diapers; and of comp's directors they ask mainly that they maintain surface respectability and keep the workforce quiet. In an essentially unchanged system, then, the boss compositionists on Pomocompo, composition's postmodern farm, have risen to be foremen, superior to the migrant workers but far below the members of the farm's corporate board. That is the unplanned achievement of their revolution.

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This essay must now shift into the personal and programmatic, acknowledging the absurdity that an emeritus in retirement for fifteen years, who first was tenured at the University of Chicago forty-five years ago, should presume to speak to the present unprecedented foofaraw among bosses and bossed in composition programs. The absurdity is duly acknowledged, but not by silent withdrawal.

Graduate students have finally lit a fire under graduate professors. The professorial types have been given to much moaning and groaning over the wickedness of the world, much dilatory fact-finding and refusal to face facts when abundant facts have already been found. The responses to the recent report of the Coalition on the Academic Workforce were typical. Karen Thompson, an active unionist, said accurately that in CAW's findings "there are no surprises"; but David Adamany, president of Temple University, wanted more facts. "This report," he said in presidential tones, "gives us useful information but doesn't answer the fundamental question of whether the growing use of part-time faculty has any effect whatsoever on education." Besides, Adamany went on, universities can't afford raises for part-timers when full-time professors get their teaching loads reduced and won't teach introductory courses at all (Cox A14). To those not afflicted with selective blindness, however, the invisible faculty and the consequences of its abuse have been highly visible for years.

Despite resistance by the comfortable, campaigns for change in the damaging conditions of academic labor are at last under way—campaigns not by bosses but by the bossed. With increasing frequency,

unions are forming and demanding recognition; and even within the MLA, graduate students are raising strategic hell in the Delegate Assembly. Long inactivity and even hostility above have persuaded the lower orders that if they don't act, nobody will.

Shamed by the evidence that exploitation of labor is most grievous in composition programs, writing program administrators (WPAs) now have a real opportunity to give some substance to their talk about liberation and empowerment by transformative intellectuals. Instead of chasing grants, rank, tenure, and consolidated bossdom, they can do real good and get deserved recognition--by reversing direction. Deep change might result from their active acknowledgment that the purpose of required composition—the most nearly universal requirement in U.S. colleges—is to help students learn to write, not to foster the "intellectual discipline" of composition studies.

That discipline (a word that embodies academic pomposity) has been grossly overrated by its propagandists, and distress would not be universal if its flood of publications became a more modest stream. Compositionists read compositionists. They write, but mainly to one another. Constantly berating professors of English, they complain just as constantly that English professors don't value them properly. When Sharon Crowley at last concluded that the required freshman course was beyond salvation, she didn't lament directorial failure but characteristically proposed instead the establishment of a kind of empire of composition, an entity free from the tyranny of Anglicists.

Entities, the medieval schoolman said, shouldn't be multiplied beyond necessity. English departments had studied writing for decades before they became conglomerates of miscellaneous "studies," and even now Hairstonian separatism would entail a wasteful duplication of efforts and the weakening of both parties to the divorce. Duelists in insult both suffer from the combat. In a sane academy (and the possibility of oxymoron must be admitted), the teaching of writing in the English language would *belong* in English departments, but in English departments compelled to acknowledge that their proper function is indeed higher education in two of the three Rs.

By full acceptance and support of composition programs, English departments would also benefit. At the moment, English as an academic entity is an indefinable, often an object of contempt, a whatsit with no defining purpose—certainly not the teaching of the conflicts, which would infringe on the physicists' chaos theory. What possible unity could hold together women's studies, men's studies, queer studies, Asian studies, Black studies, Chicano studies, cultural studies, language studies, and unlimited studies in the literatures of the world's most popular language from the fifth century to the twenty-first? The old question "What is English?" now prompts derisive laughter.

What kinds of writing should compositionists in English departments teach? With no answer to that question, composition studies have gone everywhere and nowhere; but at the University of Texas some twenty years ago, a big survey of faculties other than English provided an unsurprising but solid answer. Un-English faculties wanted "clarity of statement, intelligible organization, reasonably justified assertions, mechanical and grammatical correctness—in other words, the sort of general-purpose prose that one reads in the minutes of faculty meetings, in reputable journals, or in the arguments of denigrators of general-purpose prose" (Sledd 27).

As for the administration of composition programs, either in English departments or "free-standing," the first essential is to respect the autonomy of the teachers. In laying out his wish-list for WPAs, Joseph Harris had the advice of almost a dozen well-known compositionists, but advertised a desire for the undesirable. Intelligent adults don't want to work for a director who will interview them, hire them, train them, tell them what to do, fire them if they don't please him, and officially describe the whole process however he chooses. If codes of fair labor practices in universities are to become effective, they should denounce such schemes for domination, which anyway are likely to be self-defeating. Unions should fight them.

For freshman comp, a director on a campus without unions would do better to begin by drawing the teachers of the course into its governance, as directors of some programs have already done. Here an example from quaint antiquity may keep some relevance. As a director thirty years ago at the University of Texas, I got permission from the presiding dean to set up a course committee of seven members. Three were faculty appointed by the chairman of the English Department, but three were TAs elected by the TAs who taught most of the sections. As director, I made the seventh member, but I was to vote only to break ties. In two years, I had to vote just twice.

The fate of a second commonsensical undertaking in that long ago time also remains instructive. Our course committee carefully formulated a statement, "Rights and Responsibilities of TAs." Having won general approval by the TAs and (after a struggle) by the Department too, the statement was forwarded to the dean--and vanished without a trace. I made inquiry but was assured that the statement had been properly directed through channels to the Board of Regents, who alone could give it legal standing. Somewhere along the way, the statement just disappeared, for the Regents' secretary informed me that it had never reached them. The story doesn't end there. When TAs complained, after I had resigned the directorship, that the statement was being violated, they were told (as they told me) that the statement wasn't legally binding, that it imposed "only a moral obligation." I conclude, in lost innocence, that however the exploited today may try to lessen their exploitation, they shouldn't forget that change must come from below, with power to compel it. Freedom must be taken. It isn't given.

The only source of teacher-student power that so far has been plausibly suggested is unionization. WPAs should enthusiastically support it, hoping (I think) that some day, university unions will be vertical, inclusive of faculty at all levels, of TAs, and of "staff"—the janitors, groundspeople, furniture movers, book shelvers on whom everybody else depends. With real power available against exploitation, a teaching assistantship might become in fact what it has been ludicrously labeled now, an apprenticeship in an honorable career. Such a re-definition, like the imposition of some control on the Ph.D. mill, is of course a matter for whole faculties, not solitary WPAs.

One last proposal in this musing on change beyond cosmetology: I don't believe that essential faculty unity against exploitation will become possible so long as tenure exists. The foundation of a hierarchy as rigid (and mindless) as military rank, tenure is defended as necessary to academic freedom; but when only a minority of teachers are tenured, the defense is a confession that the majority is un-free. Even the tenured have no sure protection against marauding administrators, who have cultivated numerous modes of harassment. The most powerful instrument of control is the seven-year probationary period, in which the faint-hearted learn the arts of mousiness. But a tenured mouse may quickly transmogrify into a cat, ready to pounce on the untenured. In effect, tenure becomes a means of intimidation, a device by which skillfully manipulative administrators divide and conquer faculties. Nobody should pretend that invertebrates will suddenly grow backbones when they join the elect.

How will faculties be protected without tenure? The question is disingenuous, because it assumes that tenure protects. Individuals are protected, at least against dismissal, if they can make their dismissal more costly to administrators than their retention: the only real protection is power to hit back. Strong-minded unions would protect whole faculties, not just the minority of the tenured, and unionization would have the added advantage that ordinary working stiffs outside the universities would understand it. They think the claim to tenure is an unjustified claim to job security when job security has become impossible for most folks.

So much for yesterday's dream of tomorrow. The great lesson to be learned from sustained lamentation and endless study of exploitation in composition/English is that incremental change, mere tinkering, won't do. Rapacious bosses will always frustrate it, no matter how good the intentions of the incrementalists. The resolutely brutal system of top-down administration must be deeply changed if decent education is to

be provided and decent teachers rightly rewarded. That no such change is presently possible enhances the necessity of urging it now. The boss compositionists, if they choose, can do as much as anyone else to inaugurate fair labor practices. They won't do it by playing the good professional--by scrambling upward as up and down are defined in the society of greed. In an unjust system, the campaign for upward mobility affirms injustice.

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*Honi soit qui mal y pense.*

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