

BOOK REVIEW

Lives in Writing, An Essay Review of John Brereton, ed.,
Traditions of Inquiry (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985)

by
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Addressing the Association of Departments of English of the Modern Language Association, Mina Shaughnessy offered a convincing summary of her goals for increasing the capacities of basic writers. Her authority for this academic audience derived, of course, from the success she was having with the culturally heterogeneous students provided by the Open Admissions program begun in the early 1970s by the City University of New York. For while she had learned a great deal about students, she had also come to know her colleagues, teachers of writing in and out of the English Department. Improving instruction, she acknowledged, had everyone's support. Yet only a few regular faculty members could be recruited to teach in Shaughnessy's innovative basic writing program. "Instead of asking how to go about this task," she confessed, "I should probably...have been asking why so many English professors don't want to do it-and probably wouldn't even if our methods were to be measurably improved." In her view, therefore, problems in writing instruction reflected as much "the English Professor's Malady" as they did the poor preparation and uncertain motives of students. Her diagnosis stressed her colleagues' "provincialism," too many professors having "Too 'local' a conception of the subject [they] teach-its processes, its history, and its context" (Shaughnessy, 1980).

Like most professions, teaching pays scant attention to its past, selecting when it must particular issues to illuminate as change is needed. There is no comprehensive history of English as a profession in the United States, perhaps because, as Wayne Booth (1983) has suggested, untangling the facts about the past and the myths the profession holds about itself is an unappealing task. Moreover, had one been written as recently as ten years ago, when Shaughnessy spoke to her colleagues, it is unlikely that it would have paid anything but perfunctory attention to the history of composition as an instructional, scholarly and social activity. Richard Lloyd-Jones (1984) has proposed the rudiments of such an enterprise, properly stressing the need to account for the impact on the teaching of writing of the Morrill Act, the G.I. Bill, and the movement for civil rights. Of course he also directs us to the internal dynamics of a profession which has grown mightily but incoherently in the past few decades.

Indeed, according to John Brereton, teaching writing has always been the largest if not the dominant activity in American higher education. In part at least to recognize this fact he compiled *Traditions of Inquiry*, portraits of eight exemplary figures in the history of composition teaching and research. His book is meant to demonstrate how they thought about writing, and taught it, and to provide current practitioners with knowledge of the history of their discipline, still in many ways an emerging one since "there is no body of knowledge to constitute the center of their study."

Reconstructing the history of composition today means providing a past for a field whose present is fertile with research problems and teaching opportunities even as it is troubled by professional habits and divided goals within the larger (or, as some would have it, separate) profession of English. For even the most traditional teachers of literature cannot be unaware of the redirection, within both theory and practice of instruction in composition, toward realization of the complex relations of writing with allied fields of the arts and sciences. Classical and modern rhetoric require attention, of course, but so now do psychology and the cognitive and neurosciences, plus sociology, linguistics and other social sciences. And a strong claim can be made for the uses of literary theory, even and perhaps especially in its recent emphasis, however hermetic at times, on social, psychological and rhetorical themes in literature and literary history.

Brereton's models cannot be said to have anticipated all of these areas of study nor to have represented all styles of pedagogy but in different ways each is a point of departure for thinking about writing, its sources, structures, meanings and uses. "They are people to confront," he says, "to agree with or argue against, to follow or revolt against." They also suggest, he hopes, the diversity of careers possible for teachers and scholars in composition.

The pioneers in composition, not surprisingly, found little institutional support, not to mention professional esteem. As Wallace Douglas' essay on Harvard's Barrett Wendell (1855-1921) makes plain, the latter's interest in structural principles of composition, even if at times at the expense of substantive ones, deserved better than this judgement by his colleague, the philosopher George Santayana: "Had he been thoroughly educated and a good Latinist like Dr. Johnson, he might have expressed and propagated his ideas to better purpose; as it was, his force spent itself in foam. He was a good critic of undergraduate essays, but not a fair historian or a learned man; and his books were not worth writing. He was useful in the College as a pedagogue, and there was moral stimulus in his original personality."

In this remark can be found one source of the "status anxiety" (to borrow the sociological term) that has been a common feature of composition considered as a sub-discipline of English. Unfairly defined by what they don't know rather than by what they do, teachers of writing have been welcomed by colleagues in English and other fields for their pedagogical idealism but until recently have often been presumed to be without intellectual earnestness. Hence it should comfort contemporary specialists to discover in their forebears signs that some of the trendiest of today's literary and rhetorical themes were nascent at least in yesterday's classrooms.

In his essay on the University of Wisconsin's Sterling Andrus Leonard (1888-1931), Brereton cites this comment from the former's *Current English Usage* (1932): "The problem of communication may be put in the form of a question: 'How can I be sure that my reader as he reads will think of the same things I am thinking as I write?' It takes at least two to make a meaning; a meaning has not been established until the reader has understood." Leonard's interest in the instability of language and the social relations of the text (he would not, of course, have stated them this way) resemble today's preoccupations enough to suggest that composition has a usable past in pragmatic and theoretical matters. Brereton finds in Leonard's career evidence that research

on language change can be combined with radical innovations in the curriculum and that pedagogy can accommodate a wide range of technical and communal themes: hence the forgotten *English Composition as a Social Problem* (1917) anticipates James Moffet's influential *Teaching the Universe of Discourse* (1968).

A colleague of Leonard's once described him as "impulsive and dramatic," an unexpected combination of traits for a scientific grammarian. With no adequate firsthand accounts of his teaching we are left to surmise about his impact on students and colleagues, a problem that Brereton recognizes as inevitable in any effort to recover the past of an activity so transitory. Yet Amherst's Theodore Baird (b.1901) is revered for his justification by example of the dignity of instruction in writing. Recalling his motives in the 1930s (as his famous freshman composition course was about to be replaced in the mid-1960s) Baird said, "I suppose what I wanted was simply to demonstrate that the teaching of this course was as engrossing as the teaching of an advanced course, that you could make a Life out of it as well as by being a Wordsworth man."

As Walker Gibson claims in his affectionate and thoughtful essay on Baird, experience in teaching writing reveals that an effective course is not merely the display of a body of knowledge. It is as dynamic in its intellectual demands as any needing to balance theory (however concealed) and practice. Gibson says simply but forcefully of Baird's course, and any other reflecting similar commitments, "It is an action." Baird, too, appears to have quietly pursued challenging problems in language, and even epistemology, within the format of freshman instruction. One of his famous sequences of assignments concludes this way: "It can be said that the students and the teacher have been concerned with what may be called an Ostensible Subject for this course, when all the while we are really thinking about its Real Subject. How do you phrase this Real Subject? You must understand that this Real Subject exists only as you think of it. The question is how to express what everyone may know and yet knows differently."

Many of Baird's students are now themselves well regarded teachers and theorists. As Donald C. Stewart has suggested in the case of Fred Newton Scott (1860-1931), who made major contributions in the theory of rhetoric, the legacy of influential scholars also includes the pedagogic traditions they initiated. John Dewey paid Scott one of the highest of educational compliments when he recognized his gifts for adding great vitality and meaning to a course that students dreaded. Gibson notes that one of Amherst's brightest students, having been granted permission to skip freshman composition, took Baird's course as an upperclassman in recognition of what he had missed.

Unlike Baird, of course, I.A. Richards (1893-1979) and Kenneth Burke (b. 1897), set out to contribute to rhetorical theory. Richards' work was based on his belief that "all studies are language studies, concerned with the speculative instruments they employ." Moreover, Richards' career is an example of the distribution of theoretical goals across a great variety of themes in language and pedagogy. In her lucid account of Richards' many projects, Ann Berthoff states one of their uses this way: "The smug declaration that research in the teaching of English should be undertaken for its own sake or that it should be modeled on the 'mission oriented' projects of the natural and social sciences are views antithetical to Richards' view of the dialectic of theory and practice in the

realm of language. The teacher undertaking to make interpretation central will necessarily be a researcher, his or her classroom necessarily becoming a 'philosophic laboratory.' " Richards' cosmopolitan career included enough empiricism (e.g. *Practical Criticism* [1929]) to make it novel and enough interest in interpretation to make it durable.

As Richards himself was aware, problems of pedagogy, and especially in composition, have never claimed a respected place in academic departments, leading to considerable vocational uncertainty for those eager to pursue them. Shortly before he died Richards' recalled ruefully the consequences of his devotion to problems in education: "I learnt where the academic railway tracks are. I was crossing the railway tracks in the most sinister fashion. I was told again and again...In a way you are betraying a cause, showing things up." Berthoff doesn't accept the strict division of interests implicit here. Instead she demonstrates the continuity of Richards' career, notably what it demonstrated about the importance of mastery in reading for achievement in writing. For good readers, in Richards' view and Berthoff's, understand the provisional aspects of meaning. Accordingly, good teachers of writing recognize that classroom assignments are always to be considered works-in progress, reflecting intentions at various stages of realization.

The argument for writing as a form of thinking, therefore, can be traced to Richards. So too can the critical rigor needed to ground this style of instruction in some of the traditions of interpretation, to check, in other words, any excessive reliance on the cognitive aspects of writing. "Psychologists," Richards said in *Practical Criticism*, "have never resolutely faced [the] question of how we know so much about ourselves that does not find any way at present into their textbooks. Put shortly, the answer seems to be that that knowledge is lying dormant in the dictionary. Language has become its repository, a record, a reflection, as it were, of human nature." Berthoff rightly notes as well the strong moral force in Richards' work, his identification of the central theme of scholarly inquiry as "What are we and what are we trying to become?"

The case of Burke is equally compelling. William Irmischer struggles, with some success, to bring order to Burke's productive but diffuse career as an independent scholar in several of the disciplines of the humanities and social sciences. His claims for Burke reflect as well an argument for the priority of composition in the curriculum. "If we acknowledge one definition of rhetoric as a study of paradigms - the organizing principles of human relations; the implicit but inviolable rules of living in social harmony; the assumptions on which human communication, understanding, and identification depend - then Burke assumes a special role as the master rhetorician of this age." Irmischer argues that composition pedagogy has overemphasized utility at the expense of viewing writing as "a form of complex behavior" in the manner of Burke.

Through his method of "dramatism" and the famous "pentad," of course, Burke has influenced many teachers. But very little instruction in writing, I suspect, reflects a grasp of his communicative theory as a whole. Irmischer's essay, unlike Berthoff's, does not demonstrate the unity of its subjects' own complex behavior in language. Nonetheless his essay does suggest why Burke's range and insistence on the social and philosophic meanings of rhetoric (the backdrop of the daily classroom enterprise) have

fortified morale in composition teaching and research. Irmischer might have asked why it took someone working outside the academy to provide one of the most appealing intellectual models for those working in it. To answer that question would have taken him further into historical themes needing attention in the study of composition instruction as a vocation.

Ironically, as Brereton observes, Sterling Leonard himself neglected the historical dimensions of his subject, even in his study of popular grammars, *Doctrines of Correctness in English Usage* (1929). For when he looked at the rise of rigidity and authority in the late Eighteenth Century in England, Brereton says, "He never connects this outburst of grammar with social changes occurring at the time: the rise of popular education and increased literacy rates, the increased opportunity for upward mobility, the expansion of the middle classes." This is a crucial point; for if today's historians of composition are to recover a tradition that will contribute to contemporary theory and practice then they will have to account not only for individual achievements but the circumstances - political, economic, institutional that helped to advance or impede change. How else can we learn from the history of composition to evaluate in our own time the opportunities for innovation?

Lloyd-Jones' account of the career of his University of Iowa colleague Richard Braddock (1920-1974) is especially timely because he places his contributions in the context of major institutional changes in higher education. The co-author of the landmark study *Research in Written Composition* (1963) and the founding editor of *Research in the Teaching of English*, Braddock also demonstrated how to manage some consequences of mass education: training graduate students (and hence socializing them into the profession), evaluating the uses of testing, and finding and maintaining fruitful relations with the public schools. He displayed, in Lloyd Jones' view, the tools needed to get things done in his own infrequent but still significant scholarly work: "He defined exactly, illustrated his definitions, was explicit in reporting his methods and results, and wrote plainly." Yet by insisting on an empirical base for composition studies he may have needlessly limited the resources for research in a field whose relations with other disciplines - in the form of programs in "writing across the curriculum" - were soon to become critical. Noting that Braddock was no theorist, Lloyd-Jones says, "He was practical, reponsible, industrious, and open-minded....But although he was liberally educated and humane, he probably was not a humanist."

In the diversity of its presentations, and despite its stress on composition research, *Traditions of Inquiry* resembles *Masters*, the collection of portraits of famous professors that appeared in the *American Scholar* in the 1970s (Epstein, 1981). Both belie Lionel Trilling's claim that "pedagogy is a depressing subject to all persons of sensibility" (Trilling, 1979a). He had in mind, presumably, the procedural interests of educational research. *Traditions of Inquiry* demonstrates the contributions of innovative scholarship to good teaching. Indeed, Booth's account of how he became a teacher and scholar indicates how vital it is to know more about their relations, and how desirable it would be to have more first-hand accounts of them in any field (a model from history, for example, can be found in Duberman, [1969]). And it was Trilling himself who also paradoxically proposed where to find what was stimulating in the study of teaching.

The best teacher, he said, "does most for his students not by speculating about what shape and disposition their minds ought to have, but by simply pressing upon them the solid substance and the multitudinous precisions of their own particular intellectual disciplines" (Trilling, 1979b).

There is in this ideal the appearance at least of some moral diffidence, and surprisingly so given Trilling's strong claims for the moral force of literature. As is plain in the closing portrait in *Traditions of Inquiry*, Robert Lyons' essay on Mina Shaughnessy (1927-79), the most influential of today's teachers and scholars think of their subjects as moral activities because they are as meaningful and demanding as any other form of experience. Students - especially Shaughnessy's and likely even those with fewer obstacles to overcome - will change and grow in school, and writing can be taught in ways that fortify both without converting instruction to therapy. For these reasons she never doubted the possibility of showing that English and composition instruction were a unified vocation, awaiting greater efforts to help today's teachers to "learn to *want* to do the work that waits to be done" (Shaughnessy, 1980). *Traditions of Inquiry* itself displays the sources of such ambitions and where neglected historical resources for realizing them may be found.

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