(INTER)ACTIVE RHETORIC: THE ETHICS OF AGENCY AND PRAXIS

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(INTER)ACTIVE RHETORIC: THE ETHICS OF AGENCY AND PRAXIS

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CHAPTER I

MEANINGFUL CONFLUENCE

I promise nothing complete; because any human thing supposed to be complete, must for that very reason infallibly be faulty. -- Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*

What have I to do with refutations!—but as becomes a positive spirit, to replace the improbable with the more probable, possibly one error with another. -- Friedrich Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*

“They chose to fall,” my Sunday school teachers would often say. The story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden was a regular Sunday topic—I remember hearing one version or another of “In the beginning” every year as a child. I recall, however, one Sunday in particular when, sitting in a circle in one of the cramped classrooms of Elm St. Church, I asked Mr. Campbell what would’ve happened if Adam and Eve had followed God’s instructions and not eaten from the tree of knowledge. I asked this question subsequent years that the story was told, but I always received a similar response, as if a teacher’s handbook came with the bible. Mr. Campbell told my class that someone would have eventually eaten from the tree of knowledge, and humanity would nonetheless be fallen. Years later, during my theological training, I preached a sermon that argued “sin no longer matters” if, in fact, salvation is a “free gift” as many theologians claim. This did not go over well.

The pastoral leaders in charge of my program forced me to apologize for making such ideas public, even though I argued effectively that the rationale and scriptural basis for my sermon were sound. Regardless of how well I explained that my point was one of
emphasis, attempting to focus Christian service on acts of love rather than following a list of “what not to do,” those in charge pressured me to accept various versions of the same concept: “we cannot have people thinking that sin is not a problem.”

In many ways, to subscribe to Christian fundamentalism is to hold contradictory notions of agency, or “freewill,” in a confusing tension. The fundamentalist community I was raised in, the Pentecostals, often claim that everything happens according to “God’s will,” while also positing God as allowing and respecting the freewill of individuals. Anyone who has taken an Intro to Philosophy class will recognize this tension as founding one of the Christian responses to “the problem of evil.” Should we blame the freewill of humanity for the evils of the world, or do we blame God, who controls everything? The resounding answer during my years as a fundamentalist was to blame evil on the freewill of humanity.

While I chose to fall from my fundamentalist beliefs for many reasons, the idea that I'm not in control of my life and that I'm “sinful” whenever I'm not yielding full control to God, is one of the reasons I became liberal—I wanted to exercise my freewill. After leaving my job at Youth for Christ, a Christian non-profit organization where I worked with inner-city youth, and after spending a much needed aimless year working construction, I decided to go to college. English studies seemed a natural fit (though I considered a degree in philosophy): terminology such as hermeneutics, interpretation, close reading, and understanding the context were regularly used in my theology program (only so long as the use of these concepts reinforced a fundamentalist reading of scripture), and made for a comfortable transition into an English major. But early in my undergraduate at Ohio State, one of my professors influenced my perception of what it
meant to major in English. During English 367, the second writing class at OSU, Dr. Dion Cautrell discussed the differences between philosophy and rhetoric. All semester long Cautrell was careful to call himself a “rhetorician,” and regularly explained that we need to think of writing according to “effectiveness.” He told us that philosophy is concerned with ideas like “justice” and “right and wrong,” and rhetoric is primarily concerned with what “works” in a given context. As someone who wanted to leave behind the moralizing of fundamentalism, Cautrell’s practical explanation of rhetoric was inviting.

OSU allowed students to choose a focus between literature and rhetoric for the courses that defined a student’s English major; my choice was easy—I wanted to study rhetoric. In my Introduction to Rhetoric class (also taught by Cautrell) we read some of the arguments between the Platonists and the sophists, and I found the sophists refreshingly, if embryonically, pragmatic. Although, it wasn’t until I eventually read Friedrich Nietzsche’s *Beyond Good and Evil* that I was able to fully understand and articulate my negative reaction to Platonic notions of language: “To be sure, to speak of spirit and good as Plato did meant standing truth on her head and denying *perspective* itself, the basic condition of all life…for Christianity is Platonism for ‘the people’” (32). In the class we also read excerpts from the work of Quintilian, and like my earnest yet simplistic discomfort with Platonic rhetoric, Quintilian's formulation of rhetoric as “a good man speaking well” seemed far too moralistic to be useful. Too many rhetorical theorists, according to my undergraduate reading of them during my undergraduate studies, were concerned with ethical questions regarding writing, instead of focusing on how to *use* words to make meaning. Rather than focusing on becoming a “good” writer, I
understood rhetoric as the messiness between form and content, and the ways in which various forms of language practice were effective in different contexts. I thought that rhetoric allowed me to investigate and communicate meaning without considerations of “sin”—without having to think about “right” and “wrong,” the consequence of rhetorical action, and the difficulty of choice.

But now, as a teacher of rhetoric, I have found that the ethical questions regarding language are inevitable, and that questions of what works and what is useful are inexorably and constitutively bound together. I am indebted to the work of Richard Lanham, his theory of “bi-stable oscillation,” and his analysis of Quintilian. Lanham analyzes the effects of Peter Ramus’ distinct separation of rhetoric into style and philosophy, noting that “Ramus separated the traditional five parts of rhetoric into two divisions, giving invention, argument, and arrangement to philosophy, and leaving ‘style and delivery [as] the only true parts of rhetoric’” (157). Lanham contests this approach to rhetoric and in response rereads Quintilian’s complex notion of rhetorical education as “toggling between looking at the prose and through it, reading it ‘rhetorically’ and reading it ‘philosophically,’ and this toggling attitude toward utterance is what the rhetorical paideia [rhetorical education/instruction] was after all along” (170). Lanham argues that this “at/through toggle” (bi-stable oscillation) is in fact “virtuous” and “implicitly moral,” and to understand this “is to comprehend the deeply felt ‘reasoning’ behind Quintilian’s evasive answer to his own question and to glimpse, perhaps, the beginnings of a legitimate explanation of, and justification for, what the humanities do—or at least can do” (170).
I now understand Quintilian’s “good man speaking well” as much more complex than my reading of what seemed to be simplistic moral sentiments during my undergraduate education. Quintilian’s statement about rhetoric involves a tension between ethics and effectiveness, and my struggle with Quintilian, with Platonic and sophistic rhetorical formulations, based on the influence of Lanham’s reading of rhetoric and humanism, has produced a productive tension that informs my work with rhetorical theory: on one hand we have the “effectiveness question” (Quintilian’s “speaking well”) which appears to be entirely relative—meaning situational and contextual, and focused, perhaps exclusively, on outcomes. On the other hand we have the “ethical question” (Quintilian’s “good man”) which appears to transcend context, but transcendent terms like truth and right and wrong usually associated with ethical investigations are so entirely embedded in values, traditions, institutions, and discourses that we can hardly claim that ethics transcends any context. Thus, the tension between what “works” and what is “good” represents “the problem of evil” for rhetoric and composition.

However, unlike the fundamentalist response—to blame evil on the freewill of humanity—this tension begs, perhaps even depends on, the opposite question: what control, if any, do our students have over the meanings they intend to communicate? If meaning is socially constituted, rather than existing in some external (or eternal) locale separate from the influence of culture, then it would seem that agency is untenable, and rhetorical choice an unnecessary consideration. But such a conclusion undercuts the entire field—if students cannot, at some level, affect the meanings they intend to communicate, then teaching is unnecessary. If students have no measure of control—that is, if they have no measure of agency regarding the meanings they intend to
communicate, regardless of how agency may be formulated or to what degree—then teachers have little to teach and even less to assess.

The research of this thesis is focused primarily on this relationship—the relationship between agency and the teaching of writing. However, the tension between ethics and effectiveness, which begs the question regarding agency and writing, is understood most effectively for composition studies as a rhetorical one: how do we deal with the impossibility of separating the utility of language—using words—from the ways in which language constitutes the very meanings we're communicating? Put differently, does language constitute reality, or is there a reality outside of language—outside of the ways in which language possibly constitutes human interaction? Obviously, these are very difficult questions, and they have been investigated by rhetoric and philosophy for 2500 years with very few lasting conclusions, if any, that are generally agreed upon. And though the tension between ethics and effectiveness has been philosophically understood as the opposition between anti-foundational and foundational epistemology, it is not the point of this thesis to solve the problem of 'knowing' or to take part in foundational and anti-foundational philosophical debates. Instead, the concept of experience will be used to ground a reading of two discourses that have significant influence on the ways in which composition studies works around the epistemological questions (a non-foundational approach to epistemology) caused by the tension between ethics and effectiveness.
Ideology Critique and Pragmatism

Experience, however, is a slippery notion. Growing up, many Pentecostals, when claiming to have heard from God or have experienced the divine, often replied to rational/agnostic assertions regarding transcendent experience by saying: “you have an argument and I have an experience.” Such a move, to evoke experience, often makes sense—this reply implicitly suggests that there is an inconsistency between the rational arguments against transcendent experience offered by the non-believer and the experiential data or proof being offered by the believer. Though a bit of a contradiction to claim that transcendent experience proves something (the very definition of transcendence means that it cannot be explained, defined, proven, etc.), at minimum, a move to evoke experience in an argument potentially ceases productive dialogue because it is often difficult to challenge the way experience is grounded in perception. How do we challenge conclusions based on experience if we cannot point to any knowledge that is non-experiential? Yet, is there any experience that isn’t arguably transcendent? That is, is there any experience that is provable in a universal, objective sense? The essential problem with language is that our words do not create a conceptual pipeline—if words are pipes, then the residue of transport is far too contaminated to consider it an effective transfer of pure information. Of course, all this does is reveal yet another dualism—another place where the problem of 'knowing' is again central.

Therefore, my reading of ideology critique and pragmatism resists any tangible conclusion regarding epistemology and language, and instead suggests that a coexistent and reciprocal relationship between ideology and pragmatism more effectively works around the problems concerning epistemology and language. I will read closely some of
the works of James Berlin, Patricia Bizzell, Immanuel Kant, Richard Lanham, Richard Rorty, Gayatri Spivak, and others, but a comparison and discussion of these theorists is only useful to this thesis insofar as it functions within the methodology of general discursive analysis—how our discipline, secondary texts, and the implications of pedagogical choices negotiate/discuss varied and indefinite understandings and uses of theorists concerned with ideology and pragmatism.

Given the messiness of discourses, their overlapping influence upon one another, and the arbitrary nature of naming, delineating, and changing discursive (re)constructions, I attempt to work around the epistemic problems in order to remain faithful to the essential premise of this thesis—language and epistemology are always in an indeterminate and inconclusive relationship. Some might argue that my methodology is in fact pragmatic, even comparable to Dewey’s notion of “nesting” dualisms as Stephen M. Fishman and Lucille McCarthy describe it (17). However, given the way pragmatism is imbricated in the romanticism exemplified in Ralph Waldo Emmerson, the “progressive” education of John Dewey, and the religious rhetoric of William James, and the that ideology and cultural studies represent, as this thesis argues, an alternative approach to working around the epistemological problems, I will instead rely on Richard Lanham’s “bi-stable oscillation” to argue for a co-operative reciprocity of ideology and pragmatism within composition studies.

The apparent fluidity and indeterminacy of discursive (re)constructions is what enables a (re)reading of ideology critique as sharing a meaningful confluence with the discourse of pragmatism. The two texts that will be considered later in this introduction, “What is Ideology?” from Ideology by Terry Eagleton and “Imperfect Theories: The
Pragmatic Question of Experience and Belief” from *Reason To Believe: Romanticism, Pragmatism, and the Teaching of Writing* by Hephzibah Roskelly and Kate Ronald, (re)present explanations of ideology and pragmatism that show them to be far more synonymous than we might initially expect based on their terminological differences. Whereas the term ideology is generally associated with notions such as worldview, value-system, perspective, and power, the term pragmatism is generally associated with concepts like experience, empiricism, experiment, and belief. Such a basic difference in terms easily reifies the general differences between these discourses. The word belief carries with it immediate religious connotations, which for the discourse of ideology, is historically problematic. Beyond the work of Karl Marx, the discourse of ideology, post-Marx, has leveled an influential critique of both religion and science within the humanities. Also, the word belief in its non-religious use is generally synonymous with the term hypothesis, and since pragmatism is largely influenced by scientific methodology, this creates yet another negative difference between these discourses—as does pragmatism’s regular use of technological terms such as ‘a test of use’. The political terminology used by the two discourses (re)presents a site of tension as well. Pragmatism tends to use the political framework of democracy, and the discourse of ideology, contemporarily, is interconnected with socialism. Though theorists have argued about how different democracy and socialism actually are in practice, and whether the two can be considered separate political systems, the fact that current democratic forms of government continue, for the most part, to be directly influenced, if not controlled by, capitalist markets (the global deregulation of ‘big business’ and the constant reduction of
viable social programs in favor of ‘corporate welfare’) results in continuing the general
differences between these discourses’ terminological associations.

Though this thesis argues that there is a confluence among ideology and
pragmatism, I am not reading ideology critique and pragmatism as if they are identical,
and I want to be careful not to conflate their all important differences. The effectiveness
of composition studies in confronting the problems regarding the relationship of
‘knowing’ to writing is located in our discipline’s ability to (1) maintain the necessary
differences between ideology and pragmatism, but (2) in a productive way that embraces
these differences as well as understanding their mutual reliance on the meaningful
confluence regarding their efforts to work around9 the problems concerning
epistemology.

Discursive Confluence

Eagleton, Roskelly, and Ronald are concerned with the ways in which the
academy, society, and specifically, cultural theorists, deal with the epistemological
problems concerning experience. In “What is Ideology,” Eagleton argues that “those
political radicals who appeal dogmatically to ‘experience’” fail to recognize that “our
conscious experience is elusive and indeterminate” (20). However, being careful not to
become anti-foundational when explaining experience, Eagleton argues more
pragmatically that “it might be more useful to ponder the suggestion that ideological
discourse typically displays a certain ratio between empirical propositions and what we
might roughly term a ‘world view’, in which the latter has the edge over the former” (22).
Though Eagleton’s discussion of experience may criticize pragmatism when he
dismissively refers to the “political radicals who dogmatically appeal to experience,” the reading of pragmatism from “Imperfect Theories” is actually congruent to Eagleton’s discussion of experience via ideology. As Roskelly and Ronald explain, “because it is concerned with consequence, use, and human action, the heart of pragmatism rests in experience, in tested conclusions, and in verifiable data” (86). Roskelly and Ronald, however, are careful to tell readers in their explanation of pragmatism that “pragmatists did not believe in an absolute empiricism,” or a positivist approach to experience.

Eagleton’s interrogation of experience is founded on notions of false-consciousness—the ways in which ideology critique enables cultural theorists to investigate inconsistencies between communities' perceptions of society and their actions (or lack thereof) within society. However, Eagleton’s introduction to ideology critique lends a considerable amount of text to his qualification that false-consciousness and ideological discourse cannot be conflated; “ideology, in other words, is not inherently constituted by distortion, especially if we take the broader view of the concept as denoting any fairly central conjecture between discourse and power” (28). As Eagleton explains, “nobody has yet to come up with a single adequate definition,” because the term “‘ideology’ has a whole range of useful meanings, not all of which are compatible with each other. To try and compress this wealth of meaning into a single comprehensive definition would thus be unhelpful even if it were possible” (1). Yet, early in his introduction, Eagleton sites John B. Thompson’s definition of ideology: “to study the ways in which meaning (or signification) serves to sustain relations of domination” (5). Eagleton tells readers that this is “probably the single most widely accepted definition of ideology.” Therefore, according to Eagleton, the discourse of ideology no longer accepts
a strict conception of false-consciousness in the “material” Marxist sense, though discussions of the “material” effects of knowledge/discourse certainly remain part of ideology critique, but the concept of false-consciousness has been expanded to a general critique of experience, meaning, and social action.

Claims of false-consciousness (the way culturally inscribed meaning allows for systematic distortion, reproduction of the status-quo, ignorance of racist, sexist, etc. ideologies, static representations that reinforce dominant worldviews) attempt to indicate when conclusions based on experience are false. Indeed, these claims of fallacy enable more tangible critiques, and provide cultural critics the opportunity to point out immediate and potentially harmful ramifications regarding specific ideologies:

Even if ideology is largely a matter of ‘lived relations’, those relations, at least in certain social conditions, would often seem to involve claims and beliefs which are untrue. As Tony Skillen scathingly inquires of those who reject this case: “Sexist ideologies do not (distortingly) represent women as naturally inferior? Racist ideologies do not confine non-whites to perpetual slavery?

Religious ideologies do not represent the world as the creation of gods?”

Eagleton is careful to explain that if we immediately accept the conclusion that we cannot claim falsity of experience because there is no theoretical or actual space outside of what we term ideological, then we lose the ability to determine whether certain ideas, beliefs, or value systems reiterate unnecessary differences, inequalities, and both implicit and explicit violence against various social groups. Eagleton’s discussion of ideology reminds
readers that if epistemological questions are completely avoided, the “concrete particular and universal truth glide ceaselessly in and out of each other, by-passing the mediation of rational analysis” (20). If we make ideology “immune to rational considerations altogether,” we lose the ability to “speak of ‘ideological error’” with “particular kinds of causes and functions.” This is why the discourse of ideology remains relevant to composition studies work to understand the problems associated with epistemological questions, because it enables cultural theorists to make practical connections between social/public actions and the beliefs, values, or ideologies that may have motivated such acts.

The problem, however, is pinpointing any mechanism by which we might understand a perception, ‘world-view’, or value system to be a false basis for action. Eagleton openly accepts the conclusion that a theoretical space outside of ideology cannot exist for ideology critique: “There cannot be a merely external or contingent relation between our social practices and the ideas by which we ‘live’ them” (24). Eagleton further describes this by summarizing Denys Turner:

For our lived beliefs are in some sense internal to our social practices; and if they are thus constitutive of those practices, they can hardly be said to ‘correspond’ (or not correspond) to them. As Turner puts it: “Since, therefore, there seems to be no epistemic space between what is socially lived and the social ideas of it, there seems to be no room for a false relationship between the two.

As Eagleton explains, this lack of “epistemic space” regarding beliefs and social practices is why it is impossible to determine with any certainty if a perception is false, and why
conceptions of false-consciousness are so problematic for ideology critique. In fact, Eagleton criticizes Paul Hirst, whose theory of ideology attempts to “collapse” the distinction between beliefs and social practices, and make the “epistemological questions at stake here into ontological ones” (22). Though notions of false-consciousness are absolutely necessary to the discourse of ideology because they enable cultural theorists to criticize reified modes of systematic, implicit, and representational power, the discourse of ideology must remain aware of the ways in which ideological criticisms are inherently ideological, and just as situated within discourses of power and systems of mystification because of perception's reliance on experience and language. In other words, Eagleton argues that we cannot define a particular use for ideology critique, because to do so we must collapse the very tension that makes ideological criticisms necessary—the same tension that premises the work of this thesis.

This experiential tension is the premise of pragmatic discourse as well. Roskelly and Ronald’s answer to this question is very similar to Eagleton’s, and Charles Sanders Peirce, quoted in “Imperfect Theories” explains the pragmatic approach: “if there were an infinite community of inquirers and an infinite amount of time, inquiry would result in truth” (91). This reading of pragmatism argues that inquiry is always indeterminate and unending, and like Eagleton, Roskelly and Ronald deal with the epistemic space by turning to the notion of community. Eagleton wants to see “the kind of discourse that would result from as many people as possible actively participating in a discussion of these matters in conditions as free as possible from domination” while Roskelly and Ronald are looking for “Faith in the continuing disclosing of truth through cooperative human endeavor...[and] The understanding of truth as partial and contingent is a key part
of the doctrine of pragmatism and a key ingredient to its dynamic, non-doctrinal method” (85). Indeed, it would be difficult to consider Roskelly and Ronald’s community as “cooperative” if there were significant and unnoticed “domination” within the community, and surely Eagleton, as I read him, would posit any useful discussion of truth as “partial and contingent,” and part of a “non-doctrinal method,” as Roskelly and Ronald explain.

In their discussion of pragmatism, Roskelly and Ronald begin by explaining Ralph Waldo Emerson’s “Self-Reliance,” and tell readers that “Emerson knew too that history and society lead people to lean toward predetermined structures, set systems, and traditional categories” (79). They paraphrase Emerson, and explain that “People wish to be settled” and that “It is only as far as they are unsettled that there is any hope for them.” Like Eagleton's explanation of ideology, Roskelly and Ronald’s explanation of pragmatism investigates how we might “provoke change” even though “the weight of history, tradition, and system” keep people from experiencing an “awakening.” Both ideology and pragmatism are concerned with people becoming aware of the ways in which systems, categories, traditions, and significations keep them from pursuing new “possibilities,” and with the ways in which people are situated and determined by societal structures. Roskelly and Ronald’s reading of Emerson explains that “change must come from the choice to lean toward unsettling, imperfect possibilities,” because we are “always faced with the possibility not only of being wrong but the certainty of being not completely right” (89).

Roskelly and Ronald argue that pragmatism “is not easy theory; it is neither ahistorical nor foolishly optimistic; it is not asocial or culturally naive, and it is not a
plodding series of procedures” (90). Like the discourse of ideology, pragmatism posits that an “idea is defined by its consequences.” (84). However, the “test of truth is in its continuing effectiveness, and experience is the continuing test of effectiveness” (87). Indeed, pragmatism must also work around an epistemological space that cannot be collapsed via an understanding of experience as “real” or “true,” otherwise pragmatic methodology merely becomes a remaking of positivist or objectivist systems. John Dewey, as quoted by Roskelly and Ronald, admits that experience is a “weasel word” because it is “both subjective and objective,” and they use Freire’s “process of problematizing experience” to argue that we have to confront experience nonetheless by “believing that such problematizing is worthwhile” (88). This “problematizing,” according to Roskelly, is best understood as a “belief in the benefits of inquiry for an eventual realization of the ‘real’” (85). Like Eagleton, Roskelly and Ronald are concerned that if we collapse the “epistemic space,” then we lose the ability to make “conclusions” and the “possibility of knowledge and truth” (86).

Epistemic Heresy

When I preached the sermon that argued “sin no longer matters,” I wasn’t thinking in terms of theology—though the premise for the sermon was certainly theological—but I was hoping to motivate a change in the way many within my church approached Christian belief. When I counseled young people as a youth pastor, the conversations were mostly concerned with lists of sins. There were the “little” sins that everyone tried to avoid, like cursing or anger, and the “bigger” sins, like sexual activity or drug use. I grew tired of these conversations. Our prayer groups were mostly focused
on people’s lament for their “sinful nature,” and many people failed to act on their beliefs—helping the poor, visiting prisoners, consoling the sick, etc.—because they felt they were unworthy of such positive actions due to their lack of “righteousness.” So, when I finally had the opportunity to preach, I thought I would address this lack of Christian action, and argue that it was based on a flawed understanding of “salvation.” I was not “excommunicated” for such a sermon, because those in charge mostly wrote it off as youthful exuberance and “zeal.” But their strict response in forcing an apology, and their protection of the traditional reading of scripture evidenced in the following week’s sermon, greatly influenced my eventual “fall” from fundamentalist Christianity.

In many ways, the non-foundational avoidance of epistemological questions is a heretical move. The uncollapsible “epistemic space,” the indeterminacy between ‘knowing’ and language, and the experiential tension based on the impossible distinction between language as utility and language as possibility constituting human interaction—these are all associated with theory and practice for composition studies. However, from a non-foundational standpoint, the uncollapsible space, indeterminacy, and tension would be considered within the realm of praxis (where theory and practice come together). However, this is difficult ground for composition studies because of the ways in which associations among certain theoretical discourses and various practical discourses create rifts within the field. This is why I read ideology and pragmatism as having a meaningful confluence regarding non-foundational approaches to experience. It (re)presents a tangible way for composition studies to reconceive praxis in a way that is reflective of rhetoric—the irresolvable yet productive tension between ethics and effectiveness. Therefore, this thesis redefines praxis as a third space between theory and practice—a
shifting and indeterminate space. Or, as I later argue—praxis as *polis*. Where praxis is traditionally understood as practical uses of theory, using theory to direct empirical studies or research, and/or the interpretation or explanation of theory for practice, I argue that such approaches tend to reinforce a dialectical or hermeneutic approach to the interaction of theory and practice. Instead, we ought to take a rhetorical approach to praxis, and understand the (inter)action of theory and practice to be on equal terms within a repopulated third space—the *polis*.

Practice has generally been associated with empiricism, classroom research, grammar instruction, the modes of discourse, editing, revision, drafting, freewriting, and the instruction of these and other similar concepts, while theory has typically been associated with cultural studies, postmodernism, rhetorical theory, philosophy, politics, and non-classroom research. There have been figures in the field such as David Bartholomae whose work with discourse effectively bridged the gap between theory and practice for a period of time. Or, more generally, the use of certain concepts such as audience or context allow for the divisions between theory and practice to be effectively erased. However, as the second chapter will specifically discuss, the tension between theory and practice is connected to a whole set of issues that are not easily unraveled. Chapter Two looks at Susan Miller’s argument, in response to James Berlin, that attempts to resituate composition around the concept of *production*. Susan Miller’s response argues that composition’s troubles with theory and practice are as much about our identity as a field as they are about writing. Thus, chapter two will investigate composition’s identity crisis, look at specific arguments regarding theory and practice provided by Sidney I. Dobrin and Lynn Worsham, and then attempt to remediate the
relationship of theory and practice by privileging praxis rather than either theory or practice over the other.

Chapter three, using Zygmunt Bauman’s analysis from Liquid Modernity, argues that what we mean by cultural theory is inherently tied to the notion of praxis given the changing nature of power-structures. Bauman explains that the once present notion of power as external and structured has become liquid, fluid, and miniaturized. This “liquid modern” condition, combined with globalization and the privatization of public space, means that the site of cultural critique, study, and resistance is personal life politics. Because choice is seemingly infinite, and personal identity is now more obviously a construct that individuals “control,” arguing that individuals need to formulate community responses to “control” and “power” no longer makes any sense. In other words, if the initial motivation of modern resistance to power we see in Marx, and the postmodern resistance we see in Foucault, were to enable the emancipation of individuals and groups both materially and in terms of the social construction of meaning and identity, and if in a “liquid modern” world this has been accomplished, then communal movements as a primary means of emancipation are potentially obsolete. However, Bauman does not suggest that the work of cultural theorists has changed; he insists that since power is now based on the support of individual choices—consumerism, for example—then individual choice (agency) is now the ground for cultural theorists concern with power, dominance, and identity. Though Bauman explains that this does not mean that we stop studying cultures or social groups, the purpose for that study is to enable awareness, ethical choices, and individual agency.
The final chapter brings us back to ideology and pragmatism as productive examples of theory and practice as they work within the indeterminacy of praxis. Using Richard Lanham’s “bi-stable oscillation” I explain how these discourses can function in a co-operative reciprocity wherein the tension they have engendered separately within composition is what allows them to affect awareness, ethical choices, and individual agency in complimentary ways. Such an approach not only allows composition studies to embrace what is becoming a rich pedagogical history, instead of sectioning off the field with every new theoretical or practical advance, but also to finally embrace rhetoric as a historical and theoretical approach to praxis for composition. By so doing, this allows us to maintain the work of “pure theory,” epistemology, and postmodernism without overriding the importance of empiricism, classroom research, and instruction. By aligning the space we call praxis with rhetoric we make the discourse of pedagogy much like the Burkean Parlor—the “Unending Conversation” as Kenneth Burke refers to it. Some theorists, fighting for composition’s place within the academy, will have a problem defining praxis as rhetoric. But to formulate it any other way means that we reiterate the theory hegemony of autonomous discourse, or the positivist dominance of empiricism. When, rather, we ought to remember that the oldest educational tradition is rhetoric—and though this might mean that praxis is nothing more than a polis with a paper trail, we should not see this as denigrating the study of language and writing because we justify our work with ongoing discursive (inter)action.

The discourse of ideology provides critical frameworks for understanding the ways in which agreement is coerced, influenced, or systematically reproduced, either implicitly or explicitly, through representation, meaning, power, and knowledge. The
discourse of pragmatism provides frameworks for proposing agreements in an egalitarian community, free from coercion, influence, and systematic reproduction—agreements that are based on tested belief, honest observation, and non-positivist empiricism. Both discourses provide methodologies that are useful to humanist inquiry, and both discourses rely on an inherent contradiction which reiterates their necessity—if we could answer ‘how do we know what we know?’ then these methodologies would be unnecessary. However, critics of both schools point out ideology’s and pragmatism’s inability to answer the problem of ‘knowing’, or argue that their methods used when working around epistemology are inherently modernist or imbricated in power. I advocate an approach to composition theory which means embracing what has become a rich and complex history of explaining and investigating the composition classroom, and a rethinking of the divisions and categories that have long kept composition studies from realizing the meaningful confluence among our diverse, discursive approaches to pedagogy.

1 Though at the time I understood Cautrell’s notion of what “works” in a more simplistic utilitarian sense regarding meaning and language, he meant it more complexly in the ways later exemplified by Richard Lanham in this thesis.
2 I’m also indebted to Dr. Dion Cautrell for initially introducing me to Lanham, and for helping me to understand what Lanham’s “bi-stable oscillation” offers rhetorical theory. Though the rigor of the graduate teaching experience has revealed in a tangible and immediate sense the ethical problems presented by the writing classroom, Dion’s influence remains nonetheless.
3 See Richard Rorty’s Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature.
4 See Freidrich Nietzsche’s “On Truth and Lying in an Extra-Moral Sense” or Jacques Derrida’s “Plato’s Pharmacy”
5 Although, I could have easily substituted the discourses of cultural studies and science (for example: Carl Sagan’s The Demon-Haunted World: Science as a Candle in the Dark) for ideology and pragmatism (and, at times, I will make this substitution, as well as others)—cultural studies has had a long and productive reciprocity with theories and uses of the term ideology, and the methodology of science and modes of empiricism have been central to the development of America’s only school of philosophy, pragmatism. Though, as evidenced in Peirce, pragmatism modifies scientific inquiry to be more of a
social-democratic process of revising belief. The names I use to delineate these discourses may make them easier to discuss, but my naming is merely an intentional resituating in order to make them manageable. Though, I think, the chosen names reflect composition studies’ interaction with these and other discourses concerned with epistemology and language, my naming does not enable any ‘real’ determination of ‘cause and effect’ regarding ideology and pragmatism, or the other discourses with which they are often associated. Discourses are always moving, changing, and overlapping—just like the words that comprise their construction—and it would be an act of deformation to argue that my useful reductions via naming comprise any discourse accurately.

Though some readers would prefer a close theoretical examination of Dewey, Pierce, or Emerson, compared to say Althusser, Thereborn, or Friere, the problems concerning epistemology and language, which premise the work of this thesis, suggest that such purely philosophical endeavors potentially collapse the tension between ‘knowing’ and language. I am not suggesting that philosophical investigation is useless, but it is not the sole methodology of this thesis.

Cornel West’s “Prophetic Pragmatism” argues for an approach to social movements and politics that seeks to revise (neo-)Marxism as pragmatic and as complimentary to the American tradition of pragmatic-romanticism. Though I locate my arguments regarding ideology and pragmatism in texts that are more closely associated with rhetoric, composition, and cultural studies, West’s move to use both (neo-)Marxism and pragmatism significantly influenced the initial research of this thesis.

See William James’ “Pragmatism” and Charles Sanders Peirce’s “How to Make Our Ideas Clear”

Cornel West uses the term “evasion” but the possible pejorative connotation of this term potentially alienates portions of my audience that are not convinced that non-foundationalism negotiates the issues raised by epistemology. Though the term evasion effectively communicates that the “epistemic space” (as I refer to it later in this chapter) is shifting and indeterminate, I communicate this otherwise in my constant reiteration of shifting-indeterminacy—without using the term evasion.

In the same way that the term “false-consciousness” has been expanded in a non-foundational understanding of ideology critique, so too has uses of terms associated with “fallacy” more generally.
CHAPTER II
IDENTITY CRISIS: THEORY AND PRAXIS

Now, I consider that the phrenologists have omitted an important thing in not pushing their investigations from the cerebellum through the spinal cord...I would rather feel your spine than your skull, whoever you are. A thin joist of spine never yet upheld a full and noble soul. I rejoice in my spine, as in the firm audacious staff of that flag which I fling half out to the world. -- Herman Melville, Moby Dick

It requires luck and much that is incalculable if a higher human being in whom there slumbers the solution of a problem is to act – ‘break out’ one might say – at the right time. Usually it does not happen, and in every corner of the earth they are waiting but even less that they are waiting in vain. Sometimes the awakening call, that chance event which gives ‘permission’ to act, comes but too late – when the best part of youth and the strength to act has already been used up in sitting still...Perhaps genius is not so very rare: perhaps what is rare is the five hundred hands needed to tyrannize over the kairos, “the right time” – to take chance by the forelock! -- Friedrich Nietzsche, Beyond Good and Evil

There has been a long history of friction between the pedagogies and theories one might traditionally associate with ideology and pragmatism. From the debates between individual and social frameworks regarding classroom practice, to the integration of cultural studies and postmodern theory, composition has focused much of its disciplinary energy determining effective ways to use and/or confront students’ experiences in the writing classroom. Instructors wanting to teach their students to find a meaningful voice or persona were accused of reinforcing ideologies that were divisive of social awareness and community change by encouraging students to develop/write arguments and narratives that were individually meaningful. While others, working to improve students’ awareness of ideological influence on their writing, reading, and thinking, were accused
of being dogmatic and indoctrinating students with leftist ideologies. Though the
“Composition Wars,” as Thomas Newkirk calls them, have worked themselves to a near
stalemate given the verve with which they were argued from the mid to late ‘80s and on
through the ‘90s, an analysis of the composition wars, and composition’s identity crisis,
will allow a productive resituating of praxis within rhetorical theory.

Though it is difficult to determine after-the-fact which theorists fired the first
shots, uses, responses to, and criticisms of James Berlin’s social-epistemic rhetoric
occupy a significant portion of the friction regarding the relevance and/or use of students’
experiences in the writing classroom. Berlin’s Rhetoric and Reality: Writing Instruction
in American Colleges, 1900-1985 is where he first uses the epistemic framework when
discussing rhetorical theory and classroom pedagogy, but his College English article,
“Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Class,” has probably elicited the most response.
From the replies of Patricia Bizzell, Sharon Crowley, Lester Faigley, Bruce
McComiskey, John Schilb, and Victor Vitanza to the criticisms of Thomas G. O’Donnell,
Linda Flower, Donald C. Jones, Susan Miller, Thomas Newkirk, and Raul Sanchez;
Berlin’s argument that rhetoric is “always already ideological” has greatly affected the
trajectory of composition’s theoretical discourse regarding knowledge, ideology, and
rhetoric, as well as the practical application and classroom interaction of these concepts
in composition pedagogy. As Bruce McComiskey notes, “The social turn in composition
studies…had taken hold so strongly by the late 1980s that Berlin’s claims about rhetoric
and ideology seemed, at the time, almost inevitable, inescapable” (168).

Susan Miller’s “Technologies of Self?-Formation,” motivates recent responses to
James Berlin’s ideological assertions. Though her response article from JAC is brief, it
has formed a nexus of useful departures from the stale back and forth of the composition wars. Specifically, the responses of Bruce McComiskey and Raul Sanchez represent useful departures from this back and forth, and are motivated by Miller’s article. Miller’s “Technologies” also highlights composition’s identity crisis which potentially motivated much of the discursive friction, as well as providing a direct response to the conclusions of Berlin’s *Rhetorics, Poetics, and Cultures*. Thus, given the brevity of her response, and its continued usefulness regarding composition theory and practice, this section will extend the implications of Miller’s article by using it as a framework for understanding the composition’s friction between theory and practice.

Miller explains in her article that compositionists “were subtly yet coercively begged to forego writing for reading,” and this “history may explain why current composition has turned to cultural hermeneutics to give its work, and its workers, professional parity.” This was necessary because of “an early insistence that our courses and our research are about *writing*, not interpretation, conscious or not.” Edward A. Thurber’s “Composition in our Colleges,” published in *The English Journal* in 1915, displays an attitude toward composition that continues to undermine composition’s place within the academy: “Would it be too bold, I wonder, to venture the assertion that, under ideal conditions, there should be no such thing as compulsory composition in college?” (9). Miller tells readers that composition’s history is one “in which we and many others were shunned, professionally insulted, denied tenure, and, like the suicidal dentist in the movie ‘MASH,’ accused of having wasted our entire educations” (Miller).

Miller’s argument that composition went through a process of redefinition (identity change) in order to become more than a mere service course for other disciplines
(transcending the over-simplification of composition as a course that prepares students for the ‘real’ academic disciplines such as the ‘hard’ sciences), is exemplified in Sharon Crowley’s “Composition’s Ethic of Service, the Universal Requirement, and the Discourse of Student Need.” However, Crowley argues that “Periodic attempts to alter the image of composition—by associating it with loftier goals like liberal culture or democratic values—have been unsuccessful in dislodging its connection to the laying of academic groundwork.” As such, Crowley portrays service course approach to the writing classroom as a place where “student writing [is] available for surveillance until it can be certified to conform to whatever standards are deemed to mark it, and its authors, as suitable for admission to the discourses of the academy.” Thus, Crowley sees this as continuing to maintain composition’s lowly position with academe. Moreover, the long history of composition’s institutional labor practices, based on the service ethic, are such that “thousands of teachers…teach four, five, or even six sections of the required introductory course every semester, precisely because their work is perceived to be instrumental, even remedial” (Crowley).

Crowley concludes by arguing that our discipline should not only abandon the service discourse of “student need,” but also the freshman writing course altogether which, according to Crowley, is the very site of this discourse. And though Crowley’s arguments regarding ideological assimilation, institutional correctness, and the deformation often caused by progressive education’s claims regarding “liberation” are well taken, Lisa Delpit’s article “The Silenced Dialogue: Power and Pedagogy in Educating Other People’s Children” argues that the political reaction to “skills” instruction means that poor and/or minority students are potentially not taught the “codes
and rules” necessary to participate in academic discourse. That said, Delpit does not insist on a revival of a “skills” approach to writing instruction, but students, as she explains, must be “assisted in learning the culture of power, [and] they must also be helped to learn the arbitrariness of those codes and about the power relationships they represent” (99). If we abandon the first year writing course, given widely increasing minority and lower-class access to the university, we run the risk of further strengthening the very culture and power associations with which Crowley’s argument is centrally concerned.

However, Miller’s article also echoes the criticism leveled by Maxine Hairston, Thomas Newkirk, and Tomas G. O’Donnell. Hairston’s “Diversity, Ideology, and Teaching Writing,” is specifically concerned with the ideological writing instruction practiced within the composition classroom. Hairston contests what she sees as overt political engagement, and explains that “those who want to bring their ideology into the classroom argue that since any classroom is necessarily political, the teacher might as well make it openly political and ideological” (188). She objects to “injecting prescribed political content into a freshman course,” and posits that “students bring their own truths, and the teacher’s role is to nurture change and growth as students encounter individual differences.” Hairston describes the composition classroom as a place where “students can emerge with confidence in their ability to think, to generate ideas, and to present themselves effectively to the university and the community” (192).

Similarly, Thomas Newkirk’s “Composition Wars,” from The Performance of Self in Student Writing, responds directly to Berlin’s critical arguments regarding an individual framework for student experience, and Newkirk explains that the argument that “expressionistic rhetoric is easily co-opted by the very capitalist forces it opposes,” is
in fact so “loose that it can easily be used against the cultural studies approach.” Newkirk also contests Berlin’s claim that expressive individualism is “isolated, solipsistic, focused on purely personal gratification and success, oblivious to the communal responsibility,” and argues that composition’s use of the concept “individual” can resonate with young writers who require a critical-grounding and ethos from which they can effectively process their writing; “It may be that these self-descriptions are inaccurate, that they leave a lot out, that they contain a bit of posturing—yet they speak to beginning writers and others for whom the achievement of ‘self’ is more than a theoretical issue” (99).

Thomas G. O’Donnell also refigures the individual framework for composition, but he levels a response to Berlin by retrofitting expressivists with more appropriate “epistemological orientations” (424). According to O’Donnell, many of the problems with expressivist pedagogy were caused by their “failure…to articulate the theories underlying their practices in any systematic way.” O’Donnell responds to Berlin’s argument that expressive writing practice “locates all truth within a personal construct arising from one’s unique selfhood that prevents these expressionists from becoming genuinely epistemic” (425). O’Donnell’s refigures the individual framework for expressive pedagogy through Ludwig Wittgenstein; “Our interest in teaching students to make use of their experiences…is better understood as a pedagogical response to the fact that the ‘contemptuous attitude towards the particular case’ is a liability shared by all language users—philosopher and student alike” (429). His contention is that the expressivist use of the “personal” and “experiential” is “impervious to displacement by a mere highlighting of political consciousness…because there are words like ‘essence’ and
‘authenticity’ that we may want to bring meaning to—both in what we say and in what we do” (438).

Though, as I’ve mentioned, Miller’s JAC article echoes these responses to Berlin, her argument represents a turn from a discussion of individual and social frameworks for student experience, by focusing instead on the production of text. Miller argues, in reply to Berlin, that by “teaching texts rather than their making, by teaching awareness rather than rhetoric, and by teaching the power of meanings rather than the making of statements, we inadvertently reproduce a politics that is aware but passive.” Miller’s “textual rhetoric,” as it is often referred to, is concerned with the production of written texts, rather than what she refers to as Berlin’s “cultural hermeneutics” (Miller). As Raul Sanchez, whose concluding remarks in “Composition’s Ideological Apparatus: A Critique” reference Miller, explains, “Composition, like writers, must proceed on faith, in the full belief that writing is the production of meaning and in the full belief that the writing subject controls this production. But it must also renounce that faith, as I have been suggesting here, in order to explain the act of writing more accurately.” Sanchez argues that we need to make sure that our discussion of “rhetoric and ideology in the writing class” is not “a discussion of rhetoric in ideology for the interpreting class” (756). Sanchez extends Miller’s criticism of Berlin’s hermeneutics, and argues that Berlin’s approach to ideology overrides the importance of rhetoric.

Bruce McComiskey’s article, “Ideology and Critique in Composition Studies,” also challenges Berlin’s ideological formulation, but he argues that the “consequences of its use are more slippery than Sanchez suggests” (170). McComiskey argues that we need to “postmodernize” critical pedagogy’s “over-reliance on self-liberatory critical
discourse” and instead “find a new emphasis on the production of democratic discourses” (172). McComiskey explains that a cultural hermeneutics, nonetheless, ought to remain important, but “it must be the beginning, not the end, of rhetorical activity.” However, he concludes congruent to Sanchez, agreeing with Miller, and tells readers that “the conversation is left to continue into production, where, both Sanchez and I would agree, language meets ideology head on” (174).

The potential problems with the trajectory of this conversation being steered toward textual production are that (1) this suggests that composition has yet to theorize production, and (2) it threatens to restart the relatively stalemated composition wars if we are not careful to take this discussion in a productive new direction. Two important articles that have previously focused specifically on production, and are arguably situated on opposing sides of the composition wars between social-constructivist and expressivist rhetorics, are “Beyond Anti-Foundationalism to Rhetorical Authority: Problems Defining ‘Cultural Literacy’” by Patricia Bizzell and “Beyond the Postmodern Impasse of Agency: The Resounding Relevance of John Dewey’s Tacit Tradition” by Donald C. Jones. Not only will an analysis of these articles reiterate a confluence among ideology and pragmatism, but this analysis will reveal a necessary response to Miller’s call for a focus on production: rethinking the relationship of theory and practice.

Jones begins his article by arguing that Bizzell, along with Berlin and Faigley, are postmodernists because of their critiques of foundational theories of writing, and as a result Jones suggests that “a dangerous dichotomy between thought and language has developed.” Jones argues that the writing subject, as a result of these critiques of foundationalism, is reduced to “an effect rather than a cause of discourse,” and thus
“subjectivity becomes a debilitating pun, and agency, an illusion.” Instead, Jones argues that the tacit tradition of John Dewey’s non-foundationalism “can help us realize a pragmatic theory of agency, one that creates a new theoretical context for the best aspects of two supposedly competing pedagogies: writing process and postmodern composition instruction.” (Jones)

Though Jones identifies Bizzell as an anti-foundationalist in the opening section of his article, Bizzell’s own article is clearly concerned with critiquing anti-foundationalism as well. A large portion of Bizzell’s “Beyond Anti-Foundationalism” is intended to “illustrate the weaknesses of the anti-foundational philosophical perspective,” and like Jones she situates her assertions regarding composition instruction within an understanding of knowledge as “non-foundational” (665). Bizzell, arguing congruently to Jones, explains that just because “no unimpeachable authority and transcendent truth exists, this does not mean that no respectable authority and no useable truth exist” (665). The problem with “anti-foundationalist philosophers,” Bizzell argues, is that they are “preoccupied with the necessity to knock down any authority claims made by others and to offer instead little more than a presumed individual autonomy” (666). Thus, like Jones, Bizzell sees the lack of any “positive program” regarding the production of written texts as an inherent problem with anti-foundational philosophy.

While the obvious differences between Jones’ and Bizzell’s pedagogical associations exist—Jones argues that the process pedagogy of Donald Murray is implicitly Deweyan, and Bizzell argues that the ideological avowals found in pedagogies like Berlin’s are nonetheless practical—they agree that given the impossibility of answering the epistemological problems inherent in foundational and anti-foundational
philosophical debates, humanist inquiry is left to consider internal (in)coherencies between value systems and social actions. The problem, of course, with concluding that the most viable framework for inquiry is an internal one is that the classic Western move of transcendence in order to justify inquiry is no longer acceptable. Therefore, the justification of these inquiries is not based on positivist empiricism or deconstructive semiotics, but on community deliberation—rhetoric.

Jones argues, using Dewey, that “all ‘events are subject to reconsideration and revision’ because ‘their meanings may be infinitely combined and re-arranged in [the] imagination’ of individuals. These imaginative recombinations can lead to the reconstruction of prior beliefs because these conceptual alternatives can be considered and compared.” Jones further explains that by “considering discourse as a social product and operation—meaning a product and a process—Dewey creates a non-foundational theory of agency” that offers an “account of the process by which we can reform society deliberatively” (Jones). This means that the mechanism by which we judge the interaction of values and social practices is not one based on epistemic methodologies, but on community deliberation—the invested interaction of individuals to communally judge the relationship of values to social practice. Bizzell extends this sentiment when explaining her own version of non-foundational rhetoric, and argues that in order to “take the next step in our rhetorical turn…We must help our fellow students, and our fellow citizens, to engage in a rhetorical process that can collectively generate trustworthy knowledge and beliefs conducive to the common good—knowledge and beliefs to displace repressive ideologies an unjust social order would inscribe in the skeptical void” (671).
Indeed, the “skeptical void” which is the most common criticism of anti-foundational epistemology, means, as Bizzell argues, “that the smirk of skepticism is all we academics, or we Americans, can achieve in the face of the present crisis in our communal life” (674). Both Bizzell and Jones are unconvinced that radical skepticism will accomplish anything productive in the face of current power structures. Jones argues, though Dewey’s politics are difficult to categorize, that the “need for unpopular, disruptive demonstrations [are useful] to force the privileged to confront a conflict in their values” (Jones). Bizzell similarly posits that in order to discuss how our professional identities are shaped by our genders and sexual orientations, religions or secular ethical traditions, racial and ethnic identifications, regional or national origins, and also by the institutional histories of our schools and what is implicated for each of us by teaching where we do…It will require ideological avowals uncongenial to anti-foundational philosophers.

(674)

Since such “disruptive demonstrations” and “ideological avowals” are internal (read as: situated, contingent, and/or deliberative), experience becomes the primary site for knowing which ideologies or belief-systems to resist and which ones to interrogate, use, and/or revise (i.e. – individual experience is the site of rhetorical choice if non-foundationalism privileges agency and textual production). As Bizzell explains, it is this crucial point of rhetorical choice—when writers must, either directly or indirectly, choose an ideological-framework/belief-system for their writing—that anti-foundationalism’s conclusion that all claims of authority are faulty keeps writers from making arguments
altogether: “But once the ideological interest has been pointed out, the anti-foundingationalists throw up their hands. And because they have no positive program, the anti-foundingationalist critics may end up tacitly supporting the political and cultural status quo” (667). Bizzell’s and Jones’ refocus on production is centrally concerned with the relationship of ethics to invention—the relationship of the rhetorical choices students make when developing topics and inventing arguments to their appeals to authority and the development of an ethical framework (ethics and effectiveness). Both Bizzell and Jones agree that choice (agency) within a non-foundingational conception of rhetoric is not determined by systems of transcendence or total resistance.

This is where Bizzell and Jones part ways in their theorizing of productive non-foundingational rhetorics. Though they agree that experience remains the primary site of ethical investigation, and that internal coherency between values and social actions is the most useful test of empirical viability, they disagree on how these investigations should begin and the process by which students determine which topics to develop and/or which arguments to process as they write. This is where a reading of their pedagogical associations threatens to evoke the composition wars. In fact, this difference reifies Miller’s criticisms of James Berlin’s cultural hermeneutics, and her argument that interpretation and cultural criticism are separate from producing arguments and making statements. Bizzell formulates the problem regarding rhetorical choice and invention as a dualism between anti-foundingational skepticism and ideological (re)interrogation. Jones formulates the problem as a dualism between anti-foundingational skepticism and the (re)processing of belief-systems. However, Miller’s arguments are a turn away from the composition wars because she does not concern her arguments regarding the classroom
with students’ identities (either individual or social), or with pedagogical associations with either side of the epistemological debate, but with a different dualism—cultural hermeneutics and textual production; ways of reading culture and ways of acting within culture. Where Miller’s argument falls short of its promise is in her notion that this dualism must become another either/or for composition studies—the notion that textual production and cultural hermeneutics are at odds makes this crucial tension another unproductive binary opposition for composition studies.

Theoretical Hegemony

If as McComiskey argues, Berlin’s comments regarding ideology were, during the late 80s and early 90s, seemingly inevitable, then Miller’s comments and the responses her article has garnered are timely as well. And though like Berlin, there have been theorists before Miller who have been concerned with production—or a “positive” system as Bizzell calls it, and “agency” as Jones refers to it—the response to Miller’s article by theorists such as Sanchez and McComiskey potentially place a new unproductive dichotomy toward the center of composition’s pedagogical discourse—the production and the reception of texts. Put differently, Miller potentially pits reading against writing and societal analysis against rhetorical action.

A non-foundational turn in composition, however, requires that we understand the implications of Miller’s binary opposition between textual reception and textual production, and the confluence among Bizzell’s and Jones’ responses to anti-foundational conclusions regarding production. As Miller explains, the history of composition and its position within academic institutions, has enabled a response to skills instruction, an
identity change from composition’s definition as a service course for the “real”
disciplines, a co-opting of cultural studies and postmodern theory; all of which lead
Miller to a seemingly inevitable conclusion:

- urge more focused meetings of College Composition and
- Communication, more research reports that offer "news" about
- writing practices and processes, more empirical but not positivist
- studies of writing development, and more attempts to re-theorize
- the purposes and results of specific textual conventions in prose
discourse. (Miller)

Her focus on specific practices, textual conventions, and writing development and
process, as a redirection of composition’s research agenda, would unnecessarily tilt the
field away from what we might generally term as “theory.” While I agree that a continued
emphasis on research that is “empirical but not positivist” is a vital component of
composition’s non-foundational turn, to do so by further creating a rift between reading
and writing, between looking at society and acting within it, threatens to further divide
theory and practice, therefore making a non-foundational praxis all the more impossible.

The agency that Miller seeks for her students, when she argues that they need to
“assume the positions of those whose acts of writing are interventions…[and] to subvert
more and less conventional subject positions,” is based on her position that “composition
courses that frame student writing in imperatives to reflect” have “culture as an object of
study.” As Miller argues, culture, “no matter how it is studied—no more motivates
active literate practices than does reading great literature” (Miller). While I agree with
Miller’s assertion that production, action, and intervention are the grounds on which a
non-foundational turn in composition might begin retheorizing the student writer, to do so at the cost of pitting reading against writing, cultural analysis against rhetorical agency, textual reception against textual production, means undercutting the very political agency she seeks to provide her students. Though writing for writing’s sake may be useful, societal analysis is a requisite component of students’ understanding of potential audience reactions/responses to their writing.

However, Miller’s argument that agency cannot be located in the “cultural hermeneutics” of James Berlin, and that cultural analysis in general does not motivate agency are accurate and useful if we understand her argument as potentially responding to certain limited approaches to the study of culture, reading, and reflection. Though Miller’s dichotomy between textual reception and textual production undercuts the agency she seeks, and I will return to this unnecessary separation later in this chapter, it is a requisite response to the ways in which certain approaches to theory render students an unnecessary part of pedagogical discourse.

Sidney I. Dobrin probably provides the most tangible example of the kind of theorizing which leads to the response exemplified in Miller’s dichotomy. I agree with Dobrin that theory does not immediately have to answer to practice, and that postmodern and poststructural theory has “created a multiplicity of productive discussions about pedagogy” (emphasis mine, 32). However, his notion that praxis is a built-in “de-theorizer,” and that composition’s desire to “exist beyond the service role insists that we theorize in order to have our own ‘body of knowledge’” is the anti-foundational approach to composition that reiterates the dichotomy put forth by Miller. However, more problematic, is Dobrin’s epistemological approach to theory: “whether privileged or not,
both theory and practice must continue to evolve as hermeneutical systems of inquiry in composition” (25). This hermeneutical system, according to Dobrin, who quotes Gary Olson, means that “we place theory and practice in continual dialectical relationship.” As Dobrin explains, “we need tension as much as balance” between theory and practice “in order to perpetuate constructive conversation” (27). Dobrin’s position on a productive tension among theory and practice is one which most practitioners and instructors in composition would accept, and he provides reasonable claims for his argument that theory for theory’s sake is useful, however the notion that composition theory is primarily postmodern, poststructural, and anti-foundational makes such claims regarding a “free” theoretical space and a productivity among theory and practice untenable.

Lynn Worsham argues congruently to Dobrin, and suggests that a “rhetoric of theory” understands the project of inquiry as one that finds “assistance in various anti-foundationalist, postpositivist critical theories in an effort to describe method as one (historically privileged) path to persuasion and theory as a set of tropes that structure inquiry” (393). As Worsham explains, “Of particular importance is the debate about modernism and postmodernism (a key feature of which is a debate about theory), for this debate offers a way to figure the conflicting rhetorics that today claim composition studies” (399). Like Dobrin, Worsham explains that “the question of disciplinary identity has been a fundamental and motivating question for research,” yet she explains that this “question of identity cannot be isolated from the question of history, the question of knowledge, and the struggle to produce the knowledges and practices appropriate to the discipline’s institutional and social warrant.” Therefore, Worsham argues “that the kind of inquiry that is needed would be comparative and evaluative, but it would also be
rhetorical, for ultimately it would seek to influence the way that the postmodern turn occurs in composition studies” (400).

The problem with Dobrin’s and Worsham’s arguments is not the desire to see theoretical discourse remain, at some level, free from “practical” considerations as Dobrin explains, or institutional “appropriations” as Worsham calls them, because what we might call a “purely” theoretical discourse has effectively garnered a useful (if not dominant) space within the broader discourse of composition studies. Where this theoretical discourse has invited (if not provoked) the anti-theory response of pedagogues such as Maxine Hairston or the practice-focused dichotomy presented by Susan Miller is that it does not maintain the theoretical freedom it seeks. Instead, it creates a theoretical hegemony by asking for a free space from practical considerations, and then, when theory is *used* by non-theoretical “practitioners,” the epistemic apparatus of postmodernity is employed to critique theory-in-practice (which can never be “free” in the ways that postmodern theory attempts to situate itself as “free”) by displaying ways in which *uses* of language (as *representations* of knowledge) reinforce power. While this discourse certainly provides a necessary corrective for unseen associations with power, subject positions that further mystify students situated imbrication in culture, harmful identities that reproduce societal stratifications, and the co-opting and appropriation of postmodern theories by the educational institution, it is unclear how this is a *productive* discourse for pedagogy as Dobrin claims. Although Worsham concludes, quite honestly, that a refusal to acknowledge “the pedagogical imperative” is “likely to reflect a deep and abiding ambivalence” and an interest in “questions that both do and do not have answers, [and] answers that resist their status as such,” (answers can only resist their status as *answers* if
they are not used or put into practice—what other way do answers resist being answers? Only by continuing an ongoing and purely theoretical—autonomous—discourse) she, like Dobrin, fails to answer the important, implicit question raised by Miller’s dichotomy between theory and practice: what does postmodern theory do? Or, what do we do with postmodern theory?

Identifying Praxis with Rhetoric

I locate my response to the above question not in modernity (although a postmodern response to my argument will likely identify the arguments regarding production or written-action [dare I use the term authorship?] as modernist—which as I hope to show is the problem with identifying composition theory almost entirely as an outcropping of postmodern theory—especially since the act of producing both printed and digital “text” remains central to rhetoric and composition), but in the non-foundational politics of Cornel West’s “Prophetic Pragmatism,” the feminist criticism provided by Diana Fuss’s “The ‘Risk’ of Essence,” and the response to postmodern influence on postcolonial theory presented by Gayatri Spivak’s “Can the Subaltern Speak?” My argument is that if we accept that composition theory is simply an extension of postmodern and/or postructural conclusions regarding language and society, then praxis becomes the (anti)literal reductio ad absurdum we see enacted in the “postpedagogy” of Victor J. Vitanza. In other words, the only dialectical relationship between postmodernism and pedagogy is one of abstinence under a coupling of composition theory with postmodernism. As the following criticisms of postmodern
theories exemplify, anti-foundational theories do not productively interact with notions such as production, agency, and rhetorical action.

Cornel West explains that “By downplaying human agency – both individual and collective human agency – Foucault surreptitiously ascribes agency to discourses, disciplines, and techniques.” West tells readers that “isolated and atomistic individual actions [as] fully account[ing] for humans’ societies and histories, will not suffice,” but the “alternative is not the exclusive ascription of agency to impersonal forces, transcendental entities, or anonymous or autonomous discourses.” For West, Foucault’s work to “confine his attention to a specific set of operations of power, i.e., those linked to the constituting of subjects,” is based on a “Kantian framework.” By so doing, Foucault enacts an approach epistemology as it relates to the socially constituted subject that is “inextricably tied to a conception of validity [justification] that stands above and outside the social practices of human beings” (225). Based on this definition of the subject, West argues that Foucault abstains from any practical or useful discussion of ethics because “he mistakenly holds that any attempt to posit these ideals as guides to political action and social-reconstruction must fall prey to new modes of subjection and disciplinary control.” As such, Foucault’s “rejection of even tentative aims and provisional ends results in existential rebellion or micropolitical revolt rather than concerted political praxis informed by moral vision and systemic (though flexible) analyses” (226).

While West responds to the cultural and ethical implications of the individual/discursive-autonomy he reads in Foucault, Diana Fuss responds to Jacques Derrida’s move to deconstruct essentialism “by situating woman as a figure of displacement.” As Fuss explains, “While there may be nothing essentialistic about this
maneuver *per se*, one at least has to recognize that positing woman as a figure of displacement risks, in its effects, continually displacing real material women” (14). Derrida’s critique of phenomenology (the science of essence), according to Fuss, “convincingly demonstrates that essences…are pre-cultural and atemporal and therefore inescapably ontological” (15). However, Fuss notes that in order for Derrida to critique essence, and to ultimately deconstruct metaphysics, it required “activating the ‘philosopheme’ of essence under other, less obvious guises.” Derrida’s “most recognizable” philosophical phrase “always already” is a “point of refuge for essentialism which otherwise, in deconstruction, comes so consistently under attack.” Fuss tells readers that Derrida’s “always already” reveals a phenomenological assumption, and thus “‘Contradiction’ emerges as the ‘always already’ of deconstruction, its irreducible inner core without which it could not do its work” (18). Accordingly, Fuss rereads Derrida as pragmatic, and argues that an essentialist, “strategy of any kind is a risk because its effects can be ‘radically revolutionary or deconstructive’ or it can be ‘dangerously reactive’” (19). She explains that rather than considering the “risk of essence” as “‘Falling into’ or ‘lapsing into’ essentialism,” she suggests reframing essentialism as “‘Deploying’ or ‘activating’” the sign “essence,” wherein the political investments of the sign “essence” are predicated on the subject’s complex positioning in a particular social field, and that the appraisal of this investment depends not on any interior values intrinsic to the sign itself but rather on the shifting and determinative discursive relations which produced it.
As Fuss explains, “to insist that essentialism is always and everywhere reactionary is, for the constructionist, to buy into essentialism in the very act of making the charge; it is to act as if essentialism has no essence” (21). Fuss, therefore, presents a way to strategically formulate identities or subject positions in a way that is not reactionary to the practice or risk of essence, but rather deployed for the sake of cultural criticism, politics, and individual agency.

Finally, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s “Can the Subaltern Speak” questions whether postmodernity’s obsession with theorizing an “Other” can be useful for those who are actually on the “margins.” Spivak argues that the “epistemic violence” of the “remotely orchestrated, far flung, and heterogeneous project to constitute the colonial subject as Other,” actually works to homogenize the heterogeneity of the subaltern subject (24). Though Spivak is concerned with postcolonial politics and cultural studies, her criticism is useful to compositionists because it examines the way postmodern theory “obliterate[s] the textual ingredients with which such a [writing/speaking] subject could cathect, could occupy (invest?) its itinerary” (24). As Spivak argues, “The theory of pluralized ‘subject effects’ gives the illusion of undermining subjective sovereignty while often providing a cover for this subject of knowledge” (24). Therefore, Spivak argues that the affect of the postmodern move to formulate an absolute resistance to knowledge and power associations, when specifically considering the production of discourse, means silencing those who are actually subjugated and reinforcing the either/or dichotomy of Eurocentric epistemology. By obliterating anything that may in fact be associated with modernism, the colonizers, authority, or power, postmodern theory fails to offer productive approaches for discursive action.
The implicit response engendered by Miller’s unnecessary dichotomy between textual reception and textual production, between what she calls “cultural hermeneutics” and cultural participation, between societal analysis and rhetorical action, and ultimately, between reading and writing, means rethinking a strict conflation between what we generally term composition theory and postmodernism. Her response, I would argue, is necessary if we conflate general notions of composition theory with postmodern theory. If cultural hermeneutics, analysis, and reading are strictly understood as outcroppings of postmodern theory, then it is difficult for these concepts to be placed in an (inter)active relationship with the various concepts we might associate with Miller’s textual production, such as agency and rhetorical action.

While I find the conflation of postmodern theory and composition theory in Dobrin’s and Worsham’s work troubling, and problematic if it continues to promote its own hegemony by requiring freedom from practice while simultaneously finding its very theoretical efficacy in critiquing uses of “theory,” their approach to composition theory is even more difficult to reconcile with a practice that finds its historical viability not in postmodern theory, but in rhetorical education. This is particularly evident in Worsham’s “The Rhetoric of Theory” whose very title implies that rhetoric is subservient to theory. While it might seem a bit quick-and-dirty to read such a conclusion from her title, she specifically explains that rhetoric is useful for “influencing” the “appropriation” of postmodern theory in pedagogy (400). Such a distinct claim regarding the use of rhetoric, when identifying composition theoretically, serves to reinforce the notion of rhetoric as propaganda, instrument, or possibly even as mere ornament for the knowledge enabled by postmodern theory. Moreover, this is also evident in Dobrin who understands theory not
as rooted in rhetoric, but in epistemology, because “theory can influence various aspects of how we think about teaching and how we think about composition as a body of knowledge” (152).

However, I want to be clear that I am not suggesting that we strictly contain postmodern theory in the epistemic heights to which it continually seems to traverse, or require that it must have immediate practical usefulness in order to be a viable form of theory for composition, but instead I argue that we (1) do not conflate composition theory with postmodern theory but understand them as discourses mutually invested in praxis so long as (2) composition maintains a productive relationship between reading and writing, textual reception and textual production, in order to enable a shifting and indeterminate non-foundational space where student agency is privileged—praxis. When we discuss the interaction of theory and practice as a dialectical relationship based on knowledge, history, semiotics, or politics—a hermeneutics as Miller, Dobrin, and Worsham refer to it—then we return the question of praxis to the modern framework wherein we must determine some way other than internal deliberation to justify what we do as a discipline. However, if at the core, postmodern theory is about resisting the way power, dominance, and meaning are reproduced in modernism, while continuing to justify these critiques (and the discipline of composition) by reiterating the very heart of modernist inquiry—epistemology—then, like actors fighting with wooden swords, we miss the heart and slide the sword between the arm and the chest, merely appearing to provide a fatal blow. We continue to accept the pejorative notion of rhetoric, and as Chapter Four investigates, a debilitating separation of ‘knowing’ and writing, and as a result, the dialectic continues to
dominate rhetoric by systematizing hermeneutic mechanisms for the interaction of theory and practice.

Thus, if composition studies shifts praxis from the dialectical interaction of theory and practice, to a rhetorical notion based on textual production, agency, and action, then what is required is a rethinking of the ways in which theory informs and enables such a redirection. As I have argued, Miller’s unnecessary dichotomy was an implicit response to, as Worsham calls it, the postmodern turn in composition studies. However, if theorists are content with providing composition’s production focus with ambivalent answers as Worsham explains, or with simply avoiding the messy indeterminacy of theory and practice, then it means forfeiting one of the long standing productive theory-associations within composition studies—politics. As Stuart Hall argues, cultural theorists must work within the theoretical “metaphor of struggle, of wrestling with angels” (265). That is, “unless and until one respects the necessary displacement of culture, and yet is always irritated by its failure to reconcile itself with other questions that matter, with other questions that can never be fully covered by critical textuality in its elaborations, cultural studies as a project, an intervention, remains incomplete.” However, as Hall explains, if incompleteness and indeterminacy are removed from cultural studies, “you can do extremely fine intellectual work, but you will have lost intellectual practice as politics” (272).

1 See Lance Svehla’s “Philosopher Kings and Teacher Researchers”
2 Calling Vitanza’s conclusions regarding pedagogy, based on the postmodern theories of Lyotard and Foucault, an example of reduction ad absurdum (reduced to absurdity) is not pejorative or mean spirited because this is exactly what he wants to occur regarding our considerations of the “disciplinary” status of composition and the resultant pedagogical conversation.
Vitanza’s “postpedagogy” anti-[I too can be clever like Vitanza]argues (his anti-argument is a counter claim that somehow [how again does this occur?] resists becoming a “real” claim, otherwise it would be logical and modernist) that the “pedagogical-social rhetorics are composed of old, myopic, utopian grand narratives that stubbornly hang on and that are fundamental to the language game of knowledge” (162). Vitanza explains that his postpedagogy is based on “counterstrategies,” on the binary construction of “the educational institution versus the state,” on “thinking by counterexample, or counterinduction,” and it is a means of “continuous ‘dissensus’; it ‘counterhopes’ to achieve an occasional, if not permanent, place of misology” (165).

If as Dobrin and Oslon suggest, there is a productive tension between theory and practice, and if theory is conflated with postmodern theories regarding language and society, then the only dialectical or syllogistic conclusion based on postmodern assertions is the one offered by Vitanza.
CHAPTER III

REPOPULATING THE POLIS: PRAXIS AND RHETORIC

So, when on one side you hoist in Locke's head, you go over that way; but now, on the other side, hoist in Kant's and you come back again; but in very poor plight. Thus some minds for ever keep trimming boat. Oh, ye foolish! throw all these thunder-heads overboard, and then you will float light and right. -- Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*

What makes one regard philosophers half mistrustfully and half mockingly is not that one again and again detects how innocent they are -- how often and how easily they fall into error and go astray…The tartuffery, as stiff as it is virtuous, of old Kant as he lures us along the dialectical bypaths which lead, more correctly, mislead, to his ‘categorical imperative’ -- this spectacle makes us smile, we who are fastidious and find no little amusement in observing the subtle tricks of old moralists and moral preachers. -- Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*

The problem of evil poses a significant dilemma for fundamentalist Christians. As this philosophical quandary generally goes, fundamentalists believe that God is all-loving, all-knowing, and all-powerful. The problem with defining God this way is that God is also posited as the creator. Thus, when observing society, and all of its evils (suffering, disease, war, etc.), one of the ‘all-’ designations, according to this philosophical dilemma, must be called into question. Either God is all-loving and all-knowing, but is not powerful enough to change the problems that are occurring; God is all-knowing and powerful enough to change the problems, but seemingly doesn't care, and thus isn't all-loving; God is all-powerful and all-loving, but does not know that the problems are occurring. For many fundamentalists, simply accepting two out of the three will not suffice. Therefore, the fundamentalist response is to blame the problem of evil on freewill—agency. While it may seem difficult to blame natural disasters such as
hurricanes or tsunamis on the freewill of humanity, according to fundamentalist theology, these types of evil are the result of the “fall” of humanity. These evils are the result of disobeying God, and eating fruit from the tree of knowledge.

Like Christian fundamentalists, cultural theorists confront an inversion of the same dilemma. Rather than see the problems facing our society as something we have to explain or justify, we instead ask how we might effectively change them. How do we confront the drastic inequities, the implicit and systematic racism, homophobia, deeply rooted and socialized sexism, the destruction of our environment, continuing and ever-expanding poverty, violence, and genocide throughout the world, and the increasing impotence of reasonable liberals in the face of power-structures that reproduce as well as profit from all of these evils? Unlike fundamentalists, the problem of evil does not call into question the enterprise of cultural theory. In fact, these evils, and the notion that we may be able to do something to effectively reduce, if not eliminate them, remains central to the cultural critique. And, similar to fundamentalists, an inversion of the freewill answer has been our answer as well. Individuals are not in fact free. Rather, individuals are products of their culture—they are imbricated in the various meaning-making systems that are representative of their social-historical position.

Thus, cultural theorists are concerned with emancipation. Zygmunt Bauman explains: “As always, the job of critical thought is to bring into the light the many obstacles piled on the road to emancipation” (51). Bauman's “born-again communitarianism” is a “paradoxical” response to the paradoxical nature of the postmodern (read: contemporary) world's “liquid modern 'individualization',” in which the disappearance of the polis and absolute individualization, in the name of privacy,
security, and personal freedom, is a liquid and miniaturized version of the ways in which power reproduced itself in modernity\(^2\). In modernity, power was obvious, its various forms made no excuse for the ways in which communities and individuals were subjugated for the sake of profit and control. Yet, even though these power-structures were obvious, or at least explicit, those controlled by the various modern systems of power, for the most part, reciprocated the values of the ruling class or those in power—this was the observation of Marx's “false-consciousness.” However, as Bauman explains, the present condition of society calls for a reconception of emancipation, because it no longer means freeing subjugated communities, cultures, and classes from direct domination: “It is only the meaning assigned to emancipation under past but no more present conditions that has become obsolete—not the task of emancipation itself” (48).

As Bauman explains, the now obsolete “ground,” between “truth bound to remain impotent and potency bound to be unfaithful to the truth,” was “the very axis around which the critical discourse [of Marxism] rotated, [and it] is unlikely to survive that vehicle’s demise” (48). This means, as Bauman argues, that “the main strategic dilemma which haunted the founder and the most notorious writer of the original 'critical school' [Marxism] found its most vivid expression: whoever thinks and cares is doomed to navigate between the *Scylla* of clean yet impotent thought and the *Charybdis* of effective yet polluted bid for domination” (43). This approach to praxis meant that theory was privileged over practice because effective approaches to practice dirtied the theories and the “clean” ideas. Bauman notes that this version of praxis, wherein theory is privileged over practice, led to an “underestimated and underdiscussed eventuality”—that a “sole ‘totality’ recognized and acceptable was for most philosophers of the critical school the
one likely to emerge from the actions of creative and freely choosing individuals” (50). In other words, an autonomous society—utopia as it may otherwise be known—was the likely conclusion of such theory dominance.

However, Bauman notes, that a new public agenda “arises in the previously discussed gap between individuality de jure and de facto”—this new public agenda arises in the indeterminate space called praxis. In late modernity, the critical theorist accused those who should have provided the right condition for self-assertion with duplicity or inefficiency: there were too many constraints imposed upon the freedom of choice, and there was the totalitarian tendency endemic to the way modern society had been structured and run which threatened to abolish freedom altogether, replacing the liberty of choice with imposed or surreptitiously drilled dull homogeneity. (49)

This previous form of critical theory, had an “anarchistic steak” and as such “all power was suspect, the enemy was espied only on the side of power, and the same enemy was blamed for all drawbacks and frustrations suffered by freedom” (50). Unfortunately, as Bauman discusses, “little thought was given to the dangers residing in the narrowing or emptying of public space and the possibility of the reversed invasion: the colonization of the public sphere by the private” (51). For Bauman, this is the liquid modern condition, in which the subjugating powers can no longer be defined as “Big Brother,” but because they are “drastically shrunken versions” now located “inside the miniature, diminutive realm of personal life-politics” (52). As Bauman explains, “The cause of the autonomous society may [only] profit together with the cause of the autonomous individual; they can
only win or lose together” (212). Cultural theorists’ work regarding emancipation can no longer be concerned with external forms of power—material, representative, or discursive—because such an external or public form of modernity has been erased by globalization and privatization. Therefore, according to Bauman, the work of emancipation rests solely on the notion of individual choice.

Bauman’s answer to this critical dilemma, this destructuring/liquefication of power in the name of total individualization and privatization, is the “job of restoring to view the lost link between objective affliction and subjective experience” (211). It requires that we create a third space, and that praxis becomes something more than theory’s dirty interpretation into practice. Bauman argues that the “distinction between explanation and understanding has been overcome and cancelled,” and thus it “reopen[s] the allegedly shut case of explanation” by promoting the “self-formation and self-assertion of individual men and women, the preliminary condition of their ability to decide whether they want the kind of life that has been presented to them as their fate” (212). Thus, Bauman's admittedly paradoxical position explains that critical theory must now resuscitate what for the most of its history it did its best to destroy and push out of its way. Any true liberation calls today for more, not less, of the 'public sphere' and 'public power'. It is now the public sphere which badly needs defense against the invading private – though paradoxically, in order to enhance, not cut down, individual liberty (51).

In other words, we must begin repopulating the Polis.
As Stuart Hall explains in “Cultural Studies and its Theoretical Legacies,” cultural studies “refuses to be a master discourse or a meta-discourse of any kind,” and “it is a project that is always open to that which it doesn’t know, to that which it can’t yet name” (263). Like Bauman, Hall explains that the project of cultural studies “always-already” questioned “the great inadequacies, theoretically and politically, the resounding silences, the great evasions of Marxism – the things that Marx did not talk about or seem to understand which were our privileged object of study: culture, ideology, language, the symbolic” (265). This notion of culture as a “metaphor of the discursive, of textuality, instantiates a necessary delay, a displacement,” which according to Hall, “is always implied in the concept of culture.” This, however, raises pedagogical questions when institutionalized:

   The question is what happens when a field, which I’ve been trying to describe in a very punctuated, dispersed, and interrupted way, as constantly changing directions, and which is defined as a political project, tries to develop itself as some kind of coherent theoretical intervention? Or, to put the same question in reverse, what happens when an academic and theoretical enterprise tries to engage in pedagogies which enlist the active engagement of individuals and groups, tries to make a difference in the institutional world in which it is located?

Hall explains that “these are extremely difficult issues to resolve,” because it “asks us to assume that culture will always work through its textualities – and at the same time that textuality is never enough” (271).
However, combinations of postmodern theory and cultural studies within composition studies suggest that “textuality” may in fact be enough. As the previous chapter explored, strict conflations of postmodern theory and composition theory does not enable composition’s turn to emphasize production and agency. This, however, is not indicative of postmodern theories in and of themselves. Though as West and Fuss discuss, postmodern theorists such as Foucault and Derrida certainly attempt to situate their theories so that they are shielded from critique and appropriation (or, practice and use). What is required is a reconception of praxis for composition. While praxis traditionally means the dialectical relationship between theory and practice, such a conception is impossibly problematic for composition studies. It reiterates the friction between theory and practice—wherein one is seemingly fighting to “oppress” the other. However, if we accept a non-foundational framework, then what we call production or agency falls on an indeterminate continuum between theory and practice—praxis.

This is the problem which Bauman attempts to return to the center of cultural theory: “Whatever safety democracy and individuality may muster depends not on fighting the endemic contingency and uncertainty of human condition, but on recognizing and facing its consequences point blank” (213). This, as many would argue, is inherently modern—placing the communal consequence of choice on the individual, or, reminding individuals that they are responsible for their choices as they affect their communities—but as Bauman explains critiques of his position are based on outmoded approaches to emancipation based primarily on community agency (unionization, movements, protests, etc.). This is not to say that these older forms of societal change based on community models are completely obsolete, but if the point of these movements was the
emancipation of individuals and social groups, then new forms of resistance based on a community models seem all but pointless to potential participants given Bauman’s useful definition of miniaturized and privatized power-liquefication. If Bauman’s description of the liquid modern condition is at all useful, and I think it is, then it means rethinking the ways in which we theorize societal change. For Bauman, this means retheorizing the polis—repopulating the “space” that lies between theory and practice—but also literally working to rebuild a “real” polis as well. Though Bauman argues that sociology is likely best equipped to retheorize such a space, and while he effectively argues his point, I would argue that rhetoric has long dealt with the messiness of encouraging a productive polis.

James Berlin

James Berlin’s social-epistemic rhetoric attempts to triangulate theories of cultural studies, postmodernism, and rhetoric in order to formulate a praxis for composition studies. Though I admire Berlin’s implied non-foundational amalgamation of all of these theories, and the ways in which he attempts to directly connect them to the composition classroom, his social-epistemic rhetoric will serve as an example for the ways in which the dialectic’s dominance of rhetoric affects our discipline’s ongoing difficulty regarding theory and practice. As Berlin’s article, “Poststructuralism, Cultural Studies, and the Composition Classroom: Postmodern Theory in Practice” explains, “Those familiar with social-epistemic rhetoric can readily see its convergence with postmodern conclusions about language and culture” (20). However, social-epistemic rhetoric posits a methodology for counter-balancing postmodern conclusions about
language and culture—it seeks a convergence of composition’s social-turn with processes of cultural analysis and textual production. As Berlin’s *Rhetorics, Poetics, and Cultures* explains, “social-epistemic rhetoric offers poststructuralism devices for studying production as well as the reception of texts, particularly since text production has long been at the center of rhetoric’s project” (81). However, Berlin’s attempts to converge composition’s social-turn with theories of textual production are not as “readily” apparent as he suggests.

Berlin’s position on postmodern theory is that it posits language as a “pluralistic and complex system of signifying practices that construct realities rather than simply presenting or re-presenting them. Our conception of material and social phenomena then are fabrications of signifying, the products of culturally coded signs” (19). Since, according to Berlin, “signifying practices are never innocent: they are always involved in ideological designations, conceptions of economic, social, political arrangements and their relations to the subjects of history within concrete power relations,” our role then, in the composition classroom, is to teach rhetoric as “a consideration of signifying practices and their ideological involvement” (24). Using Stuart Hall and the work of the Birmingham Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies, Berlin explains that “the audience can completely resist the message, rejecting its codes and purposes to engage in a process of turning them to other ends,” and by so doing “the receiver can engage in a process of negotiation, neither accommodating alone nor resisting alone, instead engaging in a measure of both” (22).

The point of such cultural analyses on the part of our students is to help them make rhetorical choices—helping them to determine the topics, arguments, and critiques
that they will produce in the composition classroom. As Berlin explains, this process of semiotic negotiation is meant to enable “political agency,” though “never complete autonomy,” the student of the social-epistemic classroom “is to study the production and reception of these historically specific signifying practices” (22). Berlin claims that students of social-epistemic rhetoric “will enable senders and receivers to arrive at a formulation of the conception of the entire rhetorical context in any given discourse situation, and this will be done through an analysis of the signifying practices operating within it” (emphasis mine, 22). He explains to readers that “We must take as our province the production and reception of semiotic codes broadly conceived, providing students with the heuristics to penetrate these codes and their ideological designs” (emphasis mine, 24).

In “Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Class” Berlin tells readers that “rhetoric can never be innocent, can never be a disinterested arbiter of the ideological claims of others because it is always already serving certain ideological claims.” Instead, Berlin argues that “social-epistemic rhetoric views knowledge as an arena of ideological conflict.” And since the “material, the social and the subjective are at once the producers and the products of ideology,” Berlin argues that “ideology must continually be challenged so as to reveal its economic and political consequences for individuals” (489). However, ideological challenges cannot occur by directly challenging ideologies, because, as Berlin explains, “there are no arguments from transcendent truth since all arguments arise in ideology.” Rather, Berlin posits that social-epistemic rhetoric challenges ideology by asking “what are the effects of our knowledge?” Berlin explains
that these investigations are based on understanding the “dialectical notion of knowledge” (489).

As Berlin explains, “this dialectical notion of knowledge is the most difficult feature of social-epistemic rhetoric,” because knowledge is a “social fabrication rather than an eternal and invariable phenomenon located in some uncomplicated repository—in the material object or in the subject or in the social realm.” Berlin is describing the problem of being “lodged within a hermeneutic circle,” but, as he argues, “one that is not impervious to change.” Social-epistemic formulates the “real” as the “dialectical interaction of the observer, the discourse community (social group) in which the observer is functioning, and the material conditions of existence,” and because Berlin argues that “knowledge is never found in any one of these but can only be posited as the product of the dialect in which all three come together,” then social-epistemic rhetoric enables a tangible perception of this “product”—the effects of knowledge. (489)

As Berlin explains, “This means that in studying rhetoric—the ways discourse is generated—we are studying the ways in which knowledge comes into existence” (489). Berlin understands rhetoric as enabling our students to “finally” judge some texts (rhetorical formulations of “reality” via certain relationships of power and difference within imbrications of signification) as “better (“truer”) than others on the basis of their ability to fulfill the promises of democracy at all levels of experience—the economic, social, political, and cultural—providing equal share of authority in decision-making and a tolerance for difference” (23). And as a result, our students will understand that their rhetorical choices should reflect this egalitarian perspective that is engendered by an analysis of the production of knowledge.
However, Berlin’s approach to praxis not only represents a problem regarding his systematizing of rhetorical choice, but his utter reliance on an outmoded notion of societal change. Simply put, by changing the way people see, analyze, read, or understand society, cultural theorists can change how they act within it. Therefore, under this approach to cultural theory, we can solve the problem of choice—we can affect/understand how and why people make the choices they do—by affecting people’s world views, ideologies, beliefs, and values. The problem with this approach is that it is inherently foundational and modern, because it still needs to understand some mechanism of knowledge as it relates to agency. But not just this mechanism alone—it understands it as a significant influence on human action. Though, as this section explains, Berlin attempts to use postmodernism to situate that mechanism in socially constructed meanings, it is nonetheless foundational because he formulates it as an epistemic dialectic which can be deciphered to provide egalitarian answers.

“Liquid Modern” Ethics

In Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature, Richard Rorty works to “undermine the reader’s confidence in ‘the mind’ as something about which one should have a ‘philosophical’ view, in ‘knowledge’ as something about which there ought to be ‘theory’ and which has ‘foundations,’ and in ‘philosophy’ as it has been conceived since Kant” (7). As Rorty’s Mirror of Nature explains, “the Kantian picture of concepts and intuitions getting together to produce knowledge is needed to give sense of the idea of ‘theory of knowledge’ as a specifically philosophical discipline” (168). In other words, philosophy
owes the revival of “pure reason” and foundational epistemology “to the eighteenth century and especially to Kant” (4).

Immanuel Kant, in *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, presents a rationale for his foundational system of determining ethical action (“duty”). Kant’s “categorical imperative” formulates a methodology for individuals to determine duty outside of experience, inclination, emotion, or practical necessity (i.e. *a priori*):

A metaphysics of morals is therefore indispensably necessary, not merely because of a motive to speculation – for investigating the source of the practical basic principals that lie a priori in our reason – but also because morals themselves remain subject to all sorts of corruption as long as we are without that clue and supreme norm by which to appraise them correctly (45).

Kant’s justification for seeking this “supreme norm” is based on the notion that a “representation of what is necessarily an end for everyone because it is an end in itself…constitutes an objective principal of the will and thus can serve as a universal practical law. The ground of this principal is: *rational nature exists as an end in itself.*” (79) The basis of this rational nature, for Kant, is a completely free will, because if “the will seeks the law that is to determine it anywhere else than in the fitness of its maxims for its own giving of universal law – consequently in going beyond itself, it seeks this law in a property of any of its objects – *heteronomy always results*” (89). Kant’s “heteronomy” is when the reason for a duty is something other than the duty being right in and of itself. For example, heteronomy occurs when someone lies in order to save their
reputation, rather than telling the truth because it is a maxim to be willed universally, *a priori* of practical reasons.

Though Rorty, in his criticism of Kantian philosophy, is careful to explain that the “optimistic faith which Russel and Carnap shared with Kant…is not something to be mocked or deplored,” he clearly reiterates Quine’s and Sellar’s criticism of Kant’s epistemology: “It is merely to say that nothing counts as justification [for knowledge] unless by reference to what we already accept, and that there is no way to get outside our beliefs and our language so as to find some test other than coherence” (178). However, as Rorty explains, philosophers “recoil” from the claim “that knowledge may not have foundations,” because the “urge to say that assertions and actions must not only cohere with other assertions and actions but ‘correspond’ to something apart from what people are saying and doing has some claim to be called the philosophical urge” (179). In other words, the basic criticism of Kantian philosophy is that an acceptance of the “categorical imperative” and the necessity of a “pure reason” in developing a foundational epistemology, requires a metaphysics of morals based on a system of logic that is always already justified by implicit and explicit appeals to rules, laws, and duties which the community already accepts.

Zygmunt Bauman’s approach to ethics argues that letting “morality out of the stiff armour of the artificially constructed ethical codes (or abandoning the ambition to keep it there), means to re-personalize it” (138). Bauman’s criticism, congruent to Rorty’s, argues that

As a matter of fact, only such rules as withstand this

‘depersonalization’ are seen as meeting the conditions set for
ethical norms. That morality can be only collective in one way or another – as an outcome of either the authoritative legislation or of the allegedly non-deliberative, yet equally powerful a priori community ‘situating’ – is hence tautologically ‘evident’. Its truth has been guaranteed in advance by the way moral phenomena have been defined and singled out. (142)

Thus, by making a universal move to justify or determine ethical action, philosophers become more focused on justification and determinism than ethics—philosophy in attempting to determine ethical choices replaces ethics with systems of determination. Bauman responds to Kantian philosophy and argues that “Promotion of universal standards then looks suspiciously like suppression of human nature and tends to be censured as intolerance” (140). This “dream of universality,” as Bauman refers to it, “as the ultimate destination of humankind, and the determination to bring it forth, took refuge in the processual concept of universalization.” Therefore, the moral “‘we’ that stands for a ‘moral party’ is not, therefore, a plural form of ‘I’ – but a term which connotes a complex structure that ties together units of sharply unequal standing” (144). In other words, Kant’s “categorical imperative” actually contributes to immorality, both theoretically and practically. Theoretically, because according to Bauman, having to decide one’s duties, based on a test of universality or community decisions, actually impedes moral decisions because duty loses “its moral content completely the moment I try to turn it around to bind the Other” and it is in fact “the irreversibility of my responsibility, which puts me in the moral relationship” (144). And practically, because morality is “endemically and irredeemably non-rational – in the sense of not being
calculable, hence, not being presentable as following impersonal rules, hence not being describable as following rules that are in principal universalizable” (145).

Repopulating the *Polis*

An easy way out of the problem of evil is to merely allow the definition of God to be less than perfect and incomplete. This, of course, does not erase the evils that caused the philosophical dilemma in the first place. While it would difficult and unnecessary to categorize James Berlin as a fundamentalist, his epistemic (dialectical) approach to emancipation seems to mirror closely the “philosophical urge” exemplified in Kant, and reiterate an unethical moral displacement, as Bauman describes it, by reinforcing community agency rather than individual responsibility. As Bauman’s description of the liquid modern condition explains, this theoretical exit from praxis (from the *polis*) because of a distaste for theory diluted by practice, has meant that practical interests have become complete—total privatization. Privileging a communal response in order to reach the goal of individual autonomy only reinforces the way power is reproduced according to Bauman’s analysis of power. Thus Berlin’s privileged theoretical approach is also potentially fundamentalist, beyond his near Kantian framework, because his epistemic approach to ideology favors the traditional approach to emancipation wherein, as Raul Sanchez explains, “ideology’s quasi-ontological status is almost axiomatic” (756). Berlin, however, could escape this dilemma by allowing his notion of theory to change.

As Stuart Hall explains, “there is all the difference in the world between understanding the politics of intellectual work and substituting intellectual work for politics” (275). Hall argues that cultural theory needs to return from “the clean air of
meaning and textuality and theory to the something nasty down below” (264). According to Bauman, this means returning critical theory to an indeterminacy “between two similarly unappetizing prospects” (44). As Bauman explains, “The better the values preserved in thought are protected against pollution, the less significant they are to the life of those whom they are meant to serve. The greater their effects on that life, the less reminiscent will be the life reformed to the values that prompted and inspired reform” (44). This means that if we accept the problem of evil as the shifting ground for cultural theory—attempting to change the many various and ever-changing problems that affect our planet and its inhabitants—then we have to realize that the messy and indeterminate work of praxis is where our theories locate their true efficacy. Hall argues that this means holding “theoretical and political questions in an ever irresolvable but permanent tension” (272).

However, the “philosophical urge” we see exemplified in James Berlin’s version of cultural studies and composition—social-epistemic rhetoric—means erasing this tension by creating a classroom where our students’ analyses of signification reveal cultural studies’ egalitarian imperative. Essentially, it solves the problem of choice—indicating to students which significations are better than others, and as a result, how to best negotiate these significations. Such an argument is a remaking of the modern notion that clear analysis of society reveals the best possible choice. But to say that a clear perception of society will reveal the conclusions of our egalitarian value system, via Berlin’s dialectical interrogation of rhetoric, is the same as Kant’s notion that “pure reason” provides the a priori framework by which we can determine ethical choices. I’m
not arguing that we remove the egalitarian value system from cultural studies, but instead to understand this value-system for what it is—belief.

By repopulating the *polis*, and returning the grounds of justification to rhetoric and community deliberation, rather than epistemology and dialectic, we allow a reinvention of the community imperative of Marxism and/or a revival of participatory democracy under a conception of the responsibility to speak and to speak for one’s responsibilities. As Bauman explains, this is a “born-again communitarianism” where we reinforce the notion of community responsibility not by egalitarian universals and beliefs, wherein an improved social awareness somehow reveals egalitarian choices, but by reiterating individual responsibility as it affects the community. Egalitarian choices do not exist, according to Bauman, because individual autonomy and societal autonomy are inherently linked. Therefore individuals are left pondering the indeterminate tension between ethics and effectiveness, between acting on what at the time seems the best possible choice, and attempting to do so with whatever tools are presently available for action. Unfortunately, this can never be predicted ahead of time—all that we have are after the fact analyses and critiques of action that are justified by community deliberation—rhetoric.

This is where Berlin’s definition of ideology as epistemologically revealing an egalitarian value system is harmful to a co-operative relationship among ideology and pragmatism for composition. Not because of the egalitarian value system (which I too share with Berlin), but because it jumps from theory to autonomy. Berlin’s use of ideology critique allows him to move from an analysis of his “dialectical notion of knowledge” to revised ideological “interpellations” in the “interests of the greater
participation of all, for the greater good of all” so that community decisions are “continually decided by all and for all in a way appropriate to our own historical moment” (490). The problem is that Bauman’s analysis of our historical moment, if it is at all accurate, means that Berlin’s approach to cultural theory is reiterating the very form of liquid modern power that is keeping individuals from deciding “whether they want the kind of life that has been presented to them as their fate” (212). Moreover, it is potentially unethical as well because it reinforces the communal responsibility in which the “depersonalization” of individual responsibility not only allows people to unnecessarily “bind” others with their moral codes—as Berlin does to the entire discipline of composition—but also to shrug their individual role within the community because since such ethical responsibilities are communally requisite, someone else will eventually fulfill the “depersonalized” duty.

As the final chapter explains, repopulating the *polis* means not only rethinking the (inter)action of theory and practice, but also that of experience and belief. The concepts that cultural theorists are trying to get at—agency, choice, motivation, consciousness, intention, etc—are not accessible with either theory or practice. As psychotherapy in all of its changes and evolutions constantly reminds us, we hardly decipher our own motivations with any certainty—our own choices—let alone those of other individuals. Yet the notion that we might “emancipate” others, that we might provide them some measure of individual control, regardless of how deformative “helping” (or teaching) may potentially be, is based on the idea that cultural praxis can positively affect the problem of evil by enabling freewill (rather than reiterating the fundamentalist answer to the problem of evil by blaming individual choices). Though repopulating the *polis* provides
the space for praxis and agency, emancipation’s oppressive tendencies are only lessened and optimally-minimal (though never erased) when as many individuals as possible participate in community deliberation—the responsibility to speak and to speak for one’s responsibilities.

1 I use the phrase “cultural theory” loosely. While I am mostly concerned with cultural studies and postmodernity as they intersect with composition theory, it’s difficult not to confuse cultural studies with critical pedagogy. And though both are interested in what might be loosely termed “cultural theory,” as we will see exemplified in the work of James Berlin later in this chapter, this phrase probably signifies what we more traditionally refer to as cultural studies. However, since I am also interested in the discourse of ideology, which is active in all theoretical categories just mentioned, and important to nearly all cultural critiques, I want to remain flexible by using the phrase “cultural theory.” And since this section is partially intended to present a definition of “cultural theory,” by responding to arguments regarding theory in the previous chapter as well as those of Berlin in this chapter, my usage will hopefully be more secure (evident?) and a bit more definite by the end.

2 Though it may be problematic to generalize about modernity in the past tense—which denotes both a theoretical and historical past—Bauman takes this approach in his text, and I find it useful to my arguments regarding cultural theory more broadly conceived. However, by attempting to move beyond modernity both theoretically and historically, Bauman effectively shifts the framework of critique from a response to modernism to his redefinition of emancipation.
CHAPTER IV

BI-STABLE OSCILLATION: PRAXIS AS ETHICAL (INTER)ACTION

Here he seeks his last master: he wants to fight him and his last god; for final victory he wants to fight with the great dragon.

Who is the great dragon whom the spirit will no longer call lord and god? “Thou shalt,” is the name of the great dragon. -- Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*

…for in many old chronicles whales and dragons are strangely jumbled together, and often stand for each other. “Thou are as a lion of the waters, and as a dragon of the sea,” saith Ezekiel; hereby, plainly meaning a whale; in truth, some versions of the Bible use that word itself. -- Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*

In one of my final conversations with my mentor, during my theological training, I pressured him regarding the differences between heresy and blasphemy. I explained that there is no way to determine blasphemy (damning words spoken against God), because to do so, you would have to be able to define God—the person claiming blasphemy would have to *know* God. According to fundamentalist theology, knowledge was not only the cause of the “fall,” but the essential act that caused Satan to be cast out of heaven. John Milton portrays this traditional understanding of Satan’s disobedience by having the very concept of *sin* be birthed from the *head* of Satan. Thus, as I tried to argue with my pastor, we can only determine heresy—when someone’s words or arguments are against received tradition.

The problem with only being able to determine heresy, for Pentecostals, is that they are a staunchly evangelical branch of Protestantism—a tradition whose foundation is heresy regarding Catholic tradition. Not to mention, Christ in the New Testament is
portrayed as a heretic to the Jewish/Hebrew tradition. I tried to explain the contradiction of protecting tradition and doctrine, if our branch of Christianity is founded on heresy. To these words my pastor replied: “well, I guess you either believe or you don’t”

However, it is not so easy to simply reduce questions of tradition and heresy to whether one “believes” or not—the problem is not beliefs, or values, or ideologies as it is often framed—the problem is what do we do with this thing called “knowledge.” Maybe my Sunday school teacher was right—maybe eating from the tree of knowledge is inevitable. But we need not understand “knowledge” as “evil” in such a comparison. Too often we struggle with the question of what do we do with the “epistemic space,” as Eagleton, Roskelly and Ronald refer to it, that can neither be collapsed nor solved? As I have argued, this space is a not in fact “epistemic” for non-foundationalism, but an indeterminate and shifting space that contains agency and praxis. If, as my reading of non-foundationism suggests, justification for knowledge is internal, deliberative, and based only on communicative exchange, then the “epistemic space” is not to be situated in a dialectical relationship between theory and practice, societal analysis and social action, between textual reception and textual production, because to do so we enact the “philosophical urge” as Richard Rorty calls it—where our justifications for knowledge are based on transcendence.

In fact, a glaring example of the “philosophical urge” is Peter Ramus' Arguments in Rhetoric against Quintilian. Ramus is primarily concerned with responding to Quintilian's argument that rhetoric and philosophy are difficult to distinguish. However Ramus argues for a distinct separation of rhetoric and philosophy, or sophism and syllogism as he later refers to them, and concludes his opening section by telling readers
that we must “maintain that moral philosophy is not a part of rhetoric, nor is rhetoric itself a moral virtue at all, as Quintilian thought” (686). The premise of Ramus' argument is that “pure reason” is the basis for determining subject matter, and the content of argumentation (681). When thinking and language, reason and rhetoric, are confused or conflated, according to Ramus, this leads to the deplorable notion of indeterminate judgment wherein “a definition is not an argument” (693). Indeed, Ramus did not understand “argument” in the same way Quintilian did, so by suggesting that definition and argument are one and the same, Ramus sought to use pure reason to develop topics or to refine subject matter in a space outside of rhetoric. Since Quintilian saw judgment as situated, particular, and based on considering the context of the specific rhetorical situation, a universal framework regarding reason and dialectic was of little use. Ramus, however, merely saw this situated approach to judgment as Quintilian's lack of understanding regarding “fixed and enduring precept[s],” and thus Ramus argued that “a common invention can be formulated” and should “illuminate” the “classes of invention, the species of the classes, or its parts” to reveal the “light” of “true definition and partition.” (696, 697).

Richard Lanham’s response to Ramus and his subsequent explanation of Quintilian provides a tangible response to the separation of philosophy and rhetoric, and offers us a framework within which to consider the troubling schisms we find promoted and re-promoted in Rhetoric and Composition. Lanham describes what he calls “bi-stable oscillation:” a humanistic “toggle” that oscillates from “contemplating the surface of human behavior to taking a role in it” (189). According to Lanham, it is the work of rhetorical education to keep both ‘thought’ and ‘language’ in a productive tension:
To look *at* language self-consciously is to play games with it; to look *through* language unselfconsciously is to act purposively with it…And rhetoric’s long effort to preserve both kinds of attention, and both kinds of language, however self-contradictory in theory the effort may prove to be, arrests in its final loyalty to making things happen in the world. (189, emphasis mine)

When we privilege agency, production, and rhetorical action, the seemingly difficult dichotomy of Western humanism/philosophy—between societal analysis and rhetorical action—becomes less difficult because such determinations are after the fact. As Lanham argues, when “we shut down the oscillation,” it is “easy to generate despair, existential or deconstructive, from such a renegotiation” (82). Lanham notes that the “self-contradiction” of his bi-stable oscillation attempts to maintain the tension that is vital to humanistic inquiry: “social conventions have to be made by people, and change according to changing circumstance, and yet at the same time be considered as conceptually true and morally binding” (84). If we distinctly separate rhetoric and philosophy “it makes them easier to think about,” but as Lanham argues, such a move is an approach to education wherein rhetoric locates “its lost keys not where it lost them but under the lamppost, where they are easier to find” (159).

As Lanham explains, “Classical rhetorical theory assumed a full range of human motive, game, play, and purpose in ever-shifting combinations” (12). However, in order to negotiate the “ever-shifting combinations,” Lanham argues that, “We must know how to assemble and how to take apart. These are not the same activities, though as necessary to one another as breathing out and breathing in” (11). A co-operative relationship
between ideology critique and pragmatism provides composition a productive way to “take apart” and “assemble.” Ideology (re)presents a discourse that provides terminologies and frameworks that have long critiqued failed or static relationships among belief-systems/value-systems and knowledge/experience, while pragmatism (re)presents a discourse that provides terminologies and frameworks for revising belief-systems/value-systems in a reciprocal relationship with new knowledge/experience. A key difference between these discourses for composition is a rhetorical one. Ideology is concerned with external influences on the (inter)active reciprocity between belief-systems/value-systems and knowledge/experience, and pragmatism is concerned with the internal influence on the (inter)active reciprocity. Ideology is concerned with the lack of (inter)active revision, and explaining the problems associated with such false-consciousness as it may be termed, and pragmatism is concerned with displaying effective (inter)action and reproducing it elsewhere. This is the irresolvable tension between ethics and effectiveness—at what point does effectively reproduced (inter)action become ineffective and static (dogmatism)? This question, within a non-foundational framework can only be answered by community deliberation—which ought to effectively restart a productive oscillation between ideology and pragmatism for composition when this question of justification is raised. As Lanham explains:

Writers get blocked for all kinds of reasons, but the root problem remains the same as on the larger stage of life. The selective pattern of remembering rules and forgetting them, of self-consciousness and spontaneity, does not come naturally. We have to work at it, to remind ourselves that life is neither all creation nor
all revision, that it inevitably happens event by event, draft by
draft. (11)

By accepting such a framework for praxis—by reminding ourselves that a non-
foundational (inter)active co-operation between ideology and pragmatism will not only
take time, but revision and “drafting”—we make sure our praxis is reflective of what we
regularly tell our students in the classroom: that “good” writing is never finished, and
writers can always improve. In this way, we are mindful to praxis what we “preach.”

I would like to claim that “sin no longer matters,” or some equivalent for
composition studies—and some may argue that I am suggesting that “knowledge” no
longer matters, or theory no longer matters, or postmodernism no longer matters—none
of these are true. In fact, my direct arguments regarding theory or “knowledge” aside, this
thesis would most likely fit within the category of “theory” for composition studies. I
have not referred to my teaching directly or any of my past students, and I have not cited
any empirical research regarding what “works” in the classroom. My point is one of
emphasis—attempting to (re)focus on the discourses within composition that privilege
agency and praxis as a means of enabling the production of texts.

Composition’s pedagogical discourse—a polis with a paper trail—needs to
continually work to be reflective of not only the type of discourse we want to see our
students enacting in the classroom, but also reflective of the implicit and explicit
recommendations we make regarding their participation in civic discourse. This need not
reinforce some grand narrative about politics and ideology, but it similarly should not be
reduced to textual procedures that we might consider as purely “craft.” The (inter)active
rhetoric enabled by a production-focused praxis is only ethical when it indeterminately
oscillates between the many dualisms that can be associated with ideology and pragmatism. Though tradition might argue that morality or ethical choices are determined by shutting down this oscillation—such an approach usually accomplishes the opposite of what it claims—it seeks to determine choice, and is thus unethical.
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