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STYLE AND THE PUBLIC INTELLECTUAL

Rethinking Composition in the Public Sphere

In 2005, contributors to the Writing Program Administration Listserv (WPA-L) responded angrily when Stanley Fish, in a *New York Times* op-ed piece, derided decades of composition scholarship by stating that “content is a lure and a delusion and should be banished from the classroom.” In its place, Fish advocates “form,” his term for the grammar he asks students to use as they construct a new language. In his column, “Devoid of Content,” the renowned literary scholar laments the emphasis on content in composition courses because of what he argues is the field’s mistaken belief that “if you chew over big ideas long enough, the ability to write about them will (mysteriously) follow” (Fish 2005). He thus exorcises intellectual concepts, anthologized readings, controversy, and everything else except “how prepositions or participles or relative pronouns function.” While compositionists’ opposition to Fish’s critique of “so-called courses in writing” is to be expected—in a letter to the *Times*, Deborah Brandt (2005) states that “what Stanley Fish teaches isn’t writing”—their reaction is surprising in one respect: Fish (2002) had made almost the same claim three years earlier in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, where he writes that content, useful *initially* to illustrate syntactical or rhetorical points, should then be “avoided like the plague.” If Fish is merely rehashing an old argument, what accounts for the outcry over his later column only? On the WPA list, one contributor suggested that the problem was its public circulation: “Because it went to *The New York Times*, it circumvents the entire academic community and speaks directly to an audience that already believes that academics don’t know what they are doing, especially when it comes to writing” (Galín 2005).

Unfortunately, Fish's commentary on the discipline is far from an isolated occurrence. In what seems at first to be nothing more than a relatively short *New Yorker* book review of a "throwback" style guide for college students, former CUNY English professor Louis Menand (2000), now at Harvard, ends up defining rhetoric and composition for readers—and his account is anything but flattering. Menand's review of literature professor David R. Williams's (2000) how-to text, *Sin Boldly! Dr. Dave's Guide to Writing College Papers* is, simply put, a critique of composition studies, and what is particularly distressing is the way in which the staff writer for the *New Yorker* uses the piece to introduce the field in ways that are reductive, outdated, and unsupported by disciplinary scholarship. Take, for example, this early paragraph in Menand's article, "Comp Time: Is College Too Late to Learn How to Write?":

Rhet Comp specialists have their own nomenclature: they talk about things like "sentence boundaries," and they design instructional units around concepts like "Division and Classification" and "Definition and Process." These are trained discipline professionals. They understand writing for what it is, a technology, and they have the patience and expertise to take on the combination of psychotherapy and social work that teaching people how to write basically boils down to. (Menand 2000, 92)

Even though Robert Connors countered the assumption that composition uses a modal (e.g., "division and classification") and, by extension, current-traditional, approach to writing instruction in an award-winning essay published in 1981, Menand nonetheless makes that implicit claim with impunity on the pages of the *New Yorker*—not to mention reducing writing, without complicating the notion, to merely "a technology" (see Ong 1982, 81–83). The staff writer then goes on to devalue the writing process: "Students are often told, for example, to write many drafts. . . . Here is a scandalous thing to say, but it's true: you are reading the first draft of this review" (94). In this statement, Menand contradicts a common

practice—revision—that not only compositionists, but most professional writers, generally take as a given. He further misses the point of revision when he asks, “Would you tell a builder to get the skyscraper up any way he or she could, and then go back and start working on the foundations?” (93), thereby eschewing the more fitting comparison of a writer to an architect who may produce a number of preliminary designs before deciding on a “final” one that might be subject to additional changes. Menand’s somewhat flippant charge that writing instruction combines “psychotherapy and social work” is exacerbated when he equates practices like free writing (“the whole ‘get your thoughts down on paper’ routine”) with “the psychotherapeutic side of writing instruction”; attributes difficulties in invention to “subconscious phobia”; and suggests that composition’s efforts to improve the “flow” of writing will allow student writers to “conquer their self-loathing and turn into happy and well-adjusted little graphomaniacs” (94).

While Fish and Menand’s negative portrayals of composition studies are admittedly tongue-in-cheek at times—Menand even suggests that Williams’s book “will be helpful mainly as a guide to writing college papers for Dr. Dave” (94)—no such mitigating factor is at work in Heather Mac Donald’s (1995) *Public Interest* article¹ “Why Johnny Can’t Write,” which plays off *Newsweek*’s 1975 cover story with the same title announcing the nation’s so-called literacy crisis. Mac Donald quickly reveals her ostensible purpose: to condemn composition studies for what she suggests are college students’ declining literacy skills: “In the field of writing, today’s education is not just an irrelevance, it is positively detrimental to a student’s development.” In her polemic against composition’s supposed role in the decline of literacy, Mac Donald—trained in law and now a fellow at the Manhattan Institute—critiques the outcomes of the Dartmouth Conference and the process movement as a whole: “Dartmouth proponents claimed that improvement in students’ linguistic skills need not come through direct training in grammar and style but, rather, would flow incidentally as students experiment

with personal and expressive forms of talk and writing.” Hence, Mac Donald obviously attributes the decline in literacy to process movement practices like free writing and the emphasis on “growth” in student writing.

Despite Mac Donald’s apparent interest in student literacy, however, a close reading of her article reveals her real intention: exposing what she calls the disappearance of “objective measure[s] of coherence and correctness” in writing instruction. In other words, when Mac Donald suggests that “elevating process has driven out standards,” by “standards” she means a current-traditional view of grammar, style, and correctness. Thus, when Mac Donald, in an attack on multicultural classrooms and difference, writes, “Every writing theory of the past thirty years has come up with reasons why it’s not necessary to teach grammar and style” she is suggesting that composition has abandoned correctness because “grammatical errors signify the author is politically engaged.” In asserting that the omission of “correctness” in composition curricula is a function of political decisions on the part of the field, she clarifies her real interest in literacy: a desire for a return to grammar-based instruction and a point of view that sees grammar and usage, style, and correctness as essentially the same—and as part of the same prescriptive instructional method.

The excerpts from Mac Donald, Fish, and Menand point to a common problem in composition studies: Topics about writing, rhetoric, and literacy are often brought up in the public sphere, where they are discussed authoritatively by “experts” outside the field of composition. Without an answering word from scholars within the field, however, compositionists are left out in the cold. How is it possible that Fish and Menand—in remarks about composition that generally go against the theoretical underpinnings of an entire field—are able to claim *the* authoritative word on these topics for an important part of the reading public? How can Mac Donald, in words reminiscent of Fish and Menand, resurrect a current-traditional view of style and grammar under the mistaken guise of “literacy” as well as

the process movement? “In a process classroom,” she writes, “content eclipses form. The college essay and an eighteen-year-old’s personality become one and the same.” How are these inaccurate characterizations possible when, according to Paula Mathieu, composition has made a “public turn,” with an abundance of scholarship, theory, and writing by teachers and students that addresses, in her words, “‘real world’ texts, events, or exigencies” (Mathieu 2005, 1)? If composition has, as Mathieu claims, made a public turn (see also Weisser 2002, 43), with topics that hold interest for a broad range of individuals, why have writers like Fish, Menand, and Mac Donald—and *not* composition scholars—become the only ones to speak for the field in the public sphere?

COMPOSITION’S DISPLACED PUBLIC INTELLECTUALS

The answer, I suggest, involves one of the chief dilemmas facing composition studies today—the field’s lack of public intellectuals, which Fish (1995), in a different forum, defines as “someone who takes as his or her subject matters of public concern, and *has the public’s attention*” (118). A crucial question, then, is, where are composition’s public intellectuals, and why does the field need them so urgently today? I am not the first person to pose this question about the dearth of public intellectuals in composition. In a *College English* review essay, Frank Farmer (2002) asks how composition can reconstitute the concept of the public intellectual to achieve its own goals: “How can we define—perhaps more accurately redefine—the public intellectual to meet *our* needs and purposes in *our* moment” (202)? Christian Weisser (2002), whose work on public intellectuals makes up part of Farmer’s review, calls on compositionists “to rethink what it means to be an intellectual working in the public sphere today” (121) and suggests that one place to look is in “sites outside the classroom in which this discourse is generated and used” (42). Weisser hypothesizes that in composition, the sites of “public writing” and “service-learning,” in his estimation, “might very well become the next dominant focal point

around which the teaching of college writing is theorized and imagined" (42).

While Weisser's (2002) observations are promising, he bases his thinking in part on one of Fish's highly problematic claims, that is, "academics, by definition, are not candidates for the role of the public intellectual" (Fish 1995, 118)—an assertion that Fish, by virtue of his public work alone, clearly refutes. In a different context, Richard Posner also counters Fish's contention. In his book *Public Intellectuals: A Study of Decline*, Posner (2001) states, "Being an academic public intellectual is a career, albeit a part-time and loosely structured one" (41), and he goes on to suggest that academics are needed most as public intellectuals in areas that require expertise "beyond the capacity of the journalist or other specialist in communication to supply" (45). Within the context of composition studies, public intellectuals can accurately convey the field's theoretical knowledge about writing to the general public. For instance, when the widely circulated editorial by Fish appeared, it prompted one *New York Times* reader to write and advocate resurrecting the anachronistic practice of "teaching sentence diagramming as a prerequisite to proper writing" (Fahy 2005). Compositionists are ideally situated to counter just this type of public representation. As Weisser suggests, "Public writing consists of more than expressing your opinion about a current topic; it entails being able to make your voice heard on an issue that directly confronts or influences you" (Weisser 2002, 94). Applying this idea to public discourse would certainly answer Farmer's call for composition to recreate the public intellectual to fit its disciplinary needs, and, one might add, the needs of the public.

Given the field's lack of public intellectuals, what might account for the apparent disconnect between the discipline and public discourse? Clearly, the history of composition studies itself, including its gendered beginnings, offers a place to begin to answer that question. As Susan Miller (1991) asserts in *Textual Carnivals*, the field's identity is "deeply embedded in traditional views of women's roles," a fact Miller says has led the field to

try to “overcome this ancillary status” and to redefine itself “in more crisply masculine, scientific, terms” (122). In tracing the tendency to identify composition with these qualities, Miller suggests that “like women in early communities that depended on their production of live births, composition teachers were at first necessarily placed where they would accrue subordinate associations that were no less binding than those still imposed on women” (127). Miller’s connection of composition teachers to a subordinate status resonates with Michael Warner’s notion of a “counterpublic.” In his work *Publics and Counterpublics* (2002), Warner, borrowing from Habermas’s analysis of the public sphere, suggests that “some publics are defined by their tension with a larger public” and argues that “this type of public is—in effect—a counterpublic.” He goes on to state that a counterpublic “maintains, at some level, conscious or not, an awareness of its subordinate status.” In addition to sexual minorities, Warner cites “the media of women’s culture” (56) as one example of such a counterpublic. For his part, Posner indicates that a gendered divide similar to that postulated by Miller and Warner exists in the realm of public intellectuals as a whole, with women constituting just 15.8 percent of the total number Posner studied (2001, 207). Indeed, if we can extrapolate Posner’s statistics to what Miller calls the “female coding” of composition (123), it may help explain the lack of public intellectuals in the profession at large and the predominately male pool of non-composition-trained public intellectuals who seem to “speak for” the field.

In addition to disciplinary associations based on gender—and what Warner might deem composition’s status as a counterpublic—composition’s sometimes contentious relationship with literary studies, the field to which Fish and Menand belong, may account for what often appears to be the absence of recognition for composition’s independent disciplinary expertise. Thus, for example, in explaining the field to the public, Menand, a literary scholar who has taught composition, reveals his lack of knowledge of composition’s theoretical

underpinnings. Worse yet, he depicts the profession as one without any theory to be taken seriously. Fish (2005), meanwhile, in addition to attempting a kind of one-upmanship of composition studies through his “form is the way” approach, implies that composition is not doing its pedagogical job: “Students can’t write clean English sentences because they are not being taught what sentences are.” While compositionists may be tempted to discount these characterizations from those whose scholarship falls outside the field, Menand’s critique nonetheless gains the patina of legitimacy by virtue of his role as a respected Pulitzer Prize-winning author and *New Yorker* writer, while Fish’s proposal, as reflected in responses from readers, seems to be enthusiastically embraced. It’s evident that a well-educated audience is hearing Fish’s and Menand’s views with no comparable response from composition professionals. This public discourse shows what happens to disciplinary ethos when compositionists become merely “these new writing clinicians” (Menand 2000, 92) under the acerbic pen of public intellectuals with an attentive audience.

THE ROLE OF STYLE

What has brought about this state of affairs? Why as a profession are we still searching for a valid *public* forum in which to express our views? If we accept Fish’s definition of the public intellectual as someone who takes up matters “of public concern,” the issue seems clear: As a field, we have not addressed those topics the public cares most deeply about and, as a result, to use Fish’s corollary, we do not have the public’s ear. What are the topics that most concern a public audience? Even a cursory analysis of Menand’s review, Fish’s editorial, Mac Donald’s *Public Interest* piece, and regular public pronouncements on the decline of reading and writing offers a plausible answer: the areas that seem to be of chief concern outside the field are literacy, style, and grammar and usage. While much of the outcry over reading and writing issues seems to fall under the province of literacy, I argue that style, often viewed through the lens of literacy or

grammar and usage, is of paramount importance. Mac Donald's article, for instance, suggests her interest—albeit a narrow, reductive one—in style. Menand (2000) seems to care most about the grammatical aspects of writing when he suggests that using red ink or lowering a grade for confusing “it’s” as the possessive of “it” amounts to “using a flyswatter on an ox” (92). Yet, his deft use of metaphor here actually shows his reliance on style. Similarly, Menand approaches the topics of “voice” and imitation (aspects of style) when he critiques “Dr. Dave’s” preference for “voices that are out there,” like Camille Paglia’s: “It is not completely settled that even Camille Paglia should write like Camille Paglia; what can be said with confidence is that she is not a writer whom college students would be prudent to imitate” (94).

The problem of style and the public intellectual is thus paradoxical: the very areas that seem to be of chief concern outside the field are generally disdained or ignored inside it. Our disciplinary abandonment of style in particular, I argue, has precipitated the incursion of the public intellectual into composition studies. Put differently, in its neglect of style as a topic of serious scholarly inquiry (as well as grammar and literacy, to varying degrees), the discipline of composition and rhetoric has ceded the discussion to others outside the field—generally to self-described public intellectuals like Menand, Fish, Mac Donald, and others. Hence, by adopting a hands-off approach to the study of style—and without putting forth our own group of public intellectuals to articulate composition’s theories and practices—the field is left with popular, and often erroneous, views that have displaced our own. This situation is part of a scenario that has led composition studies itself to adopt a reductive characterization of style, that is, as merely equivalent to certain current-traditional conceptions of grammar, usage, or punctuation (similar to Mac Donald’s, for instance). While compositionists do resist such portrayals—especially in light of our broader rhetorical knowledge of stylistic practices and recent scholarship on style (see, for example, Connors 1997, 2000; Johnson 2003; Micciche 2004; Johnson and Pace 2005;

Duncan 2007)—the field is, at the same time, paralyzed by it, powerless to refute popular, often reductive characterizations for which there is no public counterargument.

In light of this impasse, I propose that it is time for composition and rhetoric to take back the study of style—to redefine the way the conversation is being framed and to rethink that concept in the public sphere. The urgency of this “call to style” goes beyond a desire to reanimate stylistic practices in composition. Indeed, it implicates the politics of the entire field. I contend that one reason composition has been unable to make its case publicly in virtually *any* arena of scholarship or practice, including literacy, is that it has failed to address the study of style (or to articulate a clear position on the difficult-to-limit area of grammar). Regrettably, our neglect comes at our own peril. In failing to articulate ideas about those language topics in which the public seems most invested, the discipline is left without sufficient credibility to bring up other concerns it considers pressing. What’s more, this lack of response from composition-trained public intellectuals makes it difficult to dispel pejorative constructions of the field—or downright neglect—from outsiders who treat composition as less than the transformative discipline it is. To reiterate, if one analyzes the nature of the public discourse on language issues, the majority of that discourse arguably concerns the study of style, often appearing in the form of grammar, punctuation, and literacy. When style is discussed, it is frequently associated with current-traditional approaches to the topic (e.g., see Mac Donald 1995). To counter this tendency, it is essential for the field to go public with a renewed emphasis on style and to employ its disciplinary expertise.

While composition as a discipline has recently expressed some renewed interest in the study of style, it seems safe to say that, since around 1985, the field as a whole has largely ignored stylistic theory and practice and rendered it invisible. In fact, even as the study of style multiplied during the Golden Age, some were already retrospectively labeling it a “static” practice or including it as part of “current-traditional rhetoric.” Mac Donald’s

Public Interest article attempts to make just that association while advocating the superiority of a product-based approach. Yet, I contend that the association of style with current-traditional rhetoric is not historically accurate (see Chap. 3). This period of style's ascendancy also included the development of what Connors (2000) has called "sentence-based rhetorics" (98) or the practices of sentence combining, generative rhetoric, and rhetorical imitation, the first two largely concerned with syntax. Connors questions the disappearance of these stylistic practices from composition theory and pedagogy and begins the tangible reemergence of discussions about the role of style in the field. T. R. Johnson's (2003) *A Rhetoric of Pleasure: Prose Style and Today's Composition Classroom* and Johnson and Tom Pace's (2005) *Refiguring Prose Style: Possibilities for Writing Pedagogy* offer an eclectic approach to studying style, while Richard Lanham's (2006) *The Economics of Attention: Style and Substance in the Age of Information* makes the claim that style and substance have, in effect, been reversed as we vie for attention in a technologically oriented society. Lanham writes, "If attention is now at the center of the economy rather than fluff, then so is style. It moves from the periphery to the center" (xi-xii).

THE STATUS OF GRAMMAR IN COMPOSITION STUDIES

In 2006, the WPA listserv responded quickly when an article about grammar instruction appeared in the *Washington Post*. In "Clauses and Commas Make a Comeback: SAT Helps Return Grammar to Class," staff writer Daniel de Vise (2006) features a high-school English teacher in Virginia who has resurrected "direct grammar instruction"—in other words, noncontextual grammar drills—in his classes, apparently in response to the new writing section of the SAT that consists primarily of grammar questions. Perhaps the most controversial aspect of the article is an erroneous assertion de Vise makes about a supposed change in NCTE's policy on grammar: "The National Council of Teachers of English, whose directives shape curriculum decisions nationwide, has quietly reversed its long opposition to grammar

drills, which the group had condemned in 1985 as ‘a deterrent to the improvement of students’ speaking and writing.’” As NCTE President Kathleen Blake Yancey (2006) wrote on WPA after the *Post* article appeared, “This claim—that NCTE has changed its stance on grammar—is false, and we’ve spent the better part of the day trying to get it corrected. . . . You spend hours and hours trying to get some attention paid to what you stand for, and this is what they pick up. And of course, it would be about grammar.” While de Vise (2006) fails to cite specific authority for this claim, the article does quote Amy Benjamin of the Assembly for the Teaching of English Grammar, a group affiliated with NCTE, who tells de Vise that “our time has come.” However, Benjamin’s group—which de Vise says has evolved into “standard bearers” on language issues—does not speak for the national organization of NCTE, and is clearly at odds with NCTE on this issue.

It is important to acknowledge the extent to which the so-called “grammar question” remains particularly vexed in a field that has approached the subject with ambivalence for some time. For years, the study of style has overlapped with the discourse of grammar in a number of crucial respects. What de Vise’s *Post* article shows, however, is that the public discourse about grammar tends to revive and, indeed, promote a prescriptive approach that the field officially abandoned long ago. Yet, even Menand (2000) assumes grammar’s centrality to the field when he tries to dispel some “grammatical superstitions” and then goes on to discuss the composition teacher’s “almost hopeless task of undoing this tangle of hearsay and delusion [that grammar and usage involve]” (92). Ironically, Menand’s review is concerned primarily with stylistic issues—not the grammatical ones with which they are often confused or conflated. Indeed, the continued misunderstanding of composition’s position on grammar suggests that this is another area in which the field could profit by clearly articulating a public position. Any effort to do so, however, would require an examination of the history of composition’s relationship with grammar, including the importance of Patrick Hartwell’s (1985) article “Grammar,

Grammars, and the Teaching of Grammar” in which the author suggests that there are five different definitions of grammar, succinctly summarized by David Blakesley (1995) as follows:

(1) the set of formal patterns in which the words of a language are arranged in order to convey larger meanings; (2) linguistic grammar, which studies these formal patterns; (3) linguistic etiquette (usage . . . which is not grammar, per se); (4) school grammar (the grammar of textbooks); and (5) stylistic grammar (grammatical terms used to teach style). (195)

In his conclusion, which echoes some of the findings of a 1963 NCTE study by Richard Braddock, Richard Lloyd-Jones, and Lowell Schoer, Hartwell (1985) argues that teaching formal grammar out of context does not help and in fact can harm the teaching of writing. He states, “One learns to control the language of print by manipulating language in meaningful contexts, not by learning about language in isolation, as by the study of formal grammar” (125). That claim, it seems, has remained the field’s leitmotif on the role of grammar in composition instruction, as NCTE’s position statement affirms. Even though Hartwell’s conclusion that both style and grammar are inherently rhetorical may be accepted by most compositionists, however, I contend that when the “grammar question” arises in the public arena, it is not enough simply to reiterate Hartwell’s conclusions. Instead, I argue that the field must publicly articulate a view of grammar that others can better relate to and understand. Is it possible, as compositionist Janet Zepernick seems to imply on the WPA listserv, that our often visceral reactions to public assertions about grammar have contributed to our invisibility within the public sphere?

One of the public relations problems we face as a discipline is that instead of responding to the pro-grammar movement among non-comps by saying, “Yes, we see what you want. We call it X, and here’s how we do it and why it works so well when we do it this way,” we’ve generally responded by circling the wagons and writing diatribes against the grammar police. (Zepernick 2005)

Zepernick's concerns seem precisely on point, especially in light of the regular recurrence of the topic in what might be called composition studies' "private" sphere, the WPA listserv. In addition to discussions of the recent article on teaching grammar in high schools, list members responded en masse in 2004 when David Mulroy (2003), in *The War against Grammar*, directly took on NCTE and what Mulroy considered the professional organization's position that "instruction in formal grammar did not accomplish any positive goals" (15). Mulroy is effectively attacking NCTE's official adoption of the Braddock, Lloyd-Jones, and Schoer (1963) position that "the teaching of formal grammar has a negligible, or, because it usually displaces some instruction and practice in composition, even a harmful effect on improvement in writing" (37–38). NCTE's position so incensed Mulroy that, according to a review of the book, the author "set aside his special interest, translating Latin and Greek poetry, and devoted several years to researching the history of the study of grammar" (Reedy 2003, 15). In his book, Mulroy argues that university professors have ignored grammar instruction for the past 75 years and that the United States should adopt a policy similar to England's National Literacy Strategy, which offers workshops for teachers "deficient" in their knowledge of grammar and punctuation. Nick Carbone's (2004) response to the discussion on WPA-L is representative of compositionists' position:

There is no war against grammar. There is instead a struggle to teach writing. That's a different thing. In that struggle we've come to believe, based on sound evidence and experience, that grammar in isolation, rules-only, skill and drill as the best approach for learning the basics of writing doesn't work. So teaching grammar for grammar's sake in a course that's a writing course or meant to help students write better, we're not for. (WPA-L, February 25, 2004)

In the aftermath of the WPA listserv discussion of *The War on Grammar*, Joe Hardin summarized his view of the field's complicated position on questions of grammar and style. Hardin

(2004) goes beyond Carbone's statement to express the centripetal effect of the term "grammar" as it draws a host of disparate ideas within its nomenclature, making it difficult for the field to articulate its position clearly:

It's really a complex argument that is linked to the whole contemporary language theory. Many believe that it's an argument against standards. It's not. Many believe that it suggests that we abandon style and syntax and sentence-level work completely. It doesn't. It's mostly an argument against the traditional way of teaching "grammar" and the goals of that tradition. It's an argument for a correction of terms and what those terms imply—what traditional books teach is "usage," not grammar, for instance. It's an argument against the transferability of the rules-example-exercises approach to the production of good writing. (WPA-L, March 10, 2004)

As Hardin suggests, the study of style (including syntax and sentence-level work) often gets indiscriminately wrapped up in the field's general prohibition against formal noncontextualized grammar instruction. In other words, we have come to confuse style and grammar, conflating it in the same way that those without disciplinary training do. What's more, because the field has adopted various rhetorical approaches to grammar that fall more accurately under the rubric of style, my discussion of the field's response to grammar—to the extent I discuss it here—relates to the study of style. In his article, Hartwell himself treats style (what he calls "stylistic grammar" or "Grammar 5") differently from his other four categories of grammar and makes it clear that style is useful in ways that grammar *per se* is not. In fact, in his discussion of stylistic grammar, Hartwell (1985) writes, "When we turn to Grammar 5 . . . we find that the grammar issue is simply beside the point" (124).

STYLE, GRAMMAR, LITERACY, AND STUDENTS' RIGHT TO THEIR OWN LANGUAGE

Part of the fate of style, grammar, and literacy in the field today originates in an important document promulgated by the

Committee on CCCC Language in 1974, the “Students’ Right to Their Own Language.” The resolution on language begins: “We affirm the students’ right to their own patterns and varieties of language—the dialects of their nurture or whatever dialects in which they find their own identity and style” (Committee on CCCC Language 1974, 2). CCCC’s adoption of the Students’ Right resolution, with its affirmation of the diversity of literacy, style, and grammar in a multicultural society, precedes by a year *Newsweek’s* “Why Johnny Can’t Write” issue (1975), which has resonated in the public sphere for decades (see, for instance, Mac Donald’s 1995 article with the same title). In short, the connection between writing and “non-standard” dialects that the “Students’ Right to Their Own Language” supports has dictated disciplinary policy and thinking ever since. Among the points made in the document is that content should be emphasized: “If we can convince our students that spelling, punctuation, and usage are less important than content, we have removed a major obstacle in their developing the ability to write” (Committee on CCCC Language 1974, 8). The statement about the importance of content is clearly at odds with Fish’s (2005) statement about form’s paramount place in composition classes and may explain compositionists’ response to Fish’s op-ed piece. What’s more, the Students’ Right document, with its emphasis on content, may also help explain the resistance to style within the field itself. Paradoxically, however, what perhaps no one has recognized up to this point is that the Students’ Right document is fundamentally—and has been since its inception—an explicit and implicit call to style for the field.

In other words, the “Students’ Right” resolution proposes an interpretation of dialect, variation, and other language matters that suggests, in short, not only an explicit view of style—that is, “students’ right to their own patterns and varieties of language . . . in which they find their own identity and style”—but an innovative one as well. The authors write that “in every composition class there are examples of writing which is clear and vigorous despite the use of non-standard forms . . . and there

are certainly many examples of limp, vapid writing in ‘standard dialect’” (8). It seems evident, then, that if composition as a field embraces the idea of difference in various dialects, that idea is inextricably linked to the idea of variation as a fundamental aspect of style. Thus, it is crucial that compositionists rethink the idea of style in conjunction with “Students’ Right to Their Own Language”—rather than in opposition to it. Along the same lines, the authors of the Students’ Right document are effectively making an argument for style (while not necessarily calling it that) when they discuss the importance of embracing difference in student writing. That admonition occurs when the document describes writing in nonuniform dialects:

Many of us have taught as though the function of schools and colleges were to erase differences. Should we, on the one hand, urge creativity and individuality in the arts and the sciences, take pride in the diversity of our historical development, and, on the other hand, try to obliterate all the differences in the way Americans speak and write? Our major emphasis has been on uniformity, in both speech and writing; would we accomplish more, both educationally and ethically, if we shifted that emphasis to precise, effective, and appropriate communication in diverse ways, whatever the dialect? (2)

Indeed, as the Students’ Right document suggests, the question of whether the form of a person’s dialect or home language can be separated from its content—and content in this case implicates a person’s very identity—continues to trouble composition as a discipline. Thus, “Students’ Right to Their Own Language” reflects the continuing relevance of the most important issue in style theory.

As part of reanimating style in composition, then, the field ought to draw more on the “Students’ Right to Their Own Language” and the guidance it offers. Now almost thirty-five years old, the document often seems to go unnoticed. In terms of its reception in the public sphere, it arguably serves as the basis of misconceptions about how the field treats writing and how it has construed the very nature of difference with respect

to language, dialect, and style. Within composition studies itself, the document, unwittingly perhaps, has given impetus to a reductive view of style that is, ironically, just the opposite of what the document's authors envision. It has perhaps produced an internal tension within the field that would, if explored more fully, help composition and rhetoric articulate far more clearly a position that could reinvigorate interpretations of style—and of the field—in the public sphere.

COMPLICATING “CLARITY” IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE

As “Students’ Right to Their Own Language” suggests, the field of composition has a number of innovative ideas with respect to language that should be introduced in the public sphere, if only because they challenge conventional wisdom. One example of this is the complication of the notion of “clarity,” which is often taken as a given not only in public discourse, but in the field, as well. Consider, for instance, Mac Donald’s (1995) *Public Interest* article, which begins with the assertion that “the only thing composition teachers are not talking and writing about these days is how to teach students to compose clear, logical prose.” Mac Donald’s emphasis on clarity in writing is echoed by Menand (2000), who gives a list of speech characteristics that writing teachers should help students eliminate from their writing “in the interest of clarity”; these include “repetition, contradiction, exaggeration, run-ons, fragments, and clichés, plus an array of tonal and physical inflections—drawls, grunts, shrugs, winks, hand gestures—unreproducible in written form” (94). Yet, the idea of clarity is, in fact, more problematic than Menand or Mac Donald allows. At least one composition scholar, Richard Lanham, began to question the common assumptions about clarity as early as 1974. Recognizing that the term “clarity” itself is impossible to define (because it is a rhetorical concept that shifts), Lanham (1974) writes, “Obviously, there can be no single verbal pattern that can be called ‘clear.’ All depends on context—social, historical, attitudinal” (33). Lanham reveals the chief principle he sees at work in most theories of clarity:

the tendency to want to make writing transparent, or to have it seem invisible to those reading it, as if it points to some definitive underlying reality.

Thus, at least part of the problem in the disappearance of stylistic study, I argue, is that composition has essentially been interpellated by myths regarding clarity as well as other public myths about style. By “interpellation” I mean that there has been a tendency to accept prescriptive standards of grammar, punctuation, and style that support a reductive view of the canon. By “myths” I mean that frequent repetition makes the so-called “rules” take on a life of their own, raising them to the level of prescription. As an example, in opposition to what many claim as the inherent transparency of a clear style, Lanham proposes instead the idea of an opaque style that calls attention to itself. He states, “Either we notice an opaque style as a *style* (i.e., we look *at* it) or we do not (i.e., we look *through* it to a fictive reality beyond)” (Lanham 1983b, 58). Lanham recognizes that an opaque style is seen as “the enemy of clarity” and that a binary has developed favoring a clear or transparent style. “Transparent styles, because they go unnoticed, are good,” he writes. “Opaque styles, which invite stylistic self-consciousness, are bad” (47, 59).

Lanham’s theory thus complicates the notion of clarity in writing in important ways. He argues persuasively that the injunction to “be clear” refers “not to words on a page but to responses, yours or your reader’s” (Lanham 1983a, 2). In another nod at the inherently rhetorical nature of the concept, he goes on to suggest that the idea of clarity indicates how successful a writer might be in getting his or her audience “to share our view of the world, a view we have composed by perceiving it” (3). In *Publics and Counterpublics*, Warner offers a similarly rhetorical view of clarity: “It could be argued that the imperative to write clearly is not the same as the need to write accessibly, that even difficult styles can have the clarity of precision” (139).² Warner and Lanham’s highly contextual views of clarity, however, differ markedly from the normal “take” on the

notion, especially in the public sphere, where many writers, like Menand and Mac Donald, accept as a given its relative merits. Lanham's view, on the other hand, reveals that the concept of clarity is not as simple as it generally seems, but is extremely complex and difficult to explain in a style manual or an easy-to-digest formula. If we take Lanham's argument seriously, then, the major proscriptions against "muddy" writing become mere shibboleths that displace more nuanced positions in composition studies about what it means to "be clear."

The reason it is important to articulate such a position is that the meaning of "good writing" in the field is ultimately at stake. As Warner points out, the common conception is that "writing that is unclear to nonspecialists is just 'bad writing'" (138). Yet if style is not opaque or "ornamental"—in other words, if it does not call attention to itself in any way—then all that is left for us to discuss regarding "good" writing are the prescriptive views of clarity (and other myths) regularly reproduced both outside and inside the field. Taken to its logical conclusion, then, this conception of clarity implies that a clear style *has* no style and serves only as a mirror to an underlying meaning. This unquestioned acceptance of a transparent style, as Lanham points out, has read out of the equation any potentially interesting notions of an opaque or self-conscious style. As the clarity discussion demonstrates, the perpetuation of popular myths about style has unwittingly held the field hostage, rendering it unable to move beyond certain public perceptions despite the efforts of scholars like Lanham to challenge their underlying rationale and use. Indeed, in the public sphere, the field of composition might point to writing styles that are complex, nuanced, and yet highly effective at complicating and enriching the discussion of difficult ideas. Composition scholars could use the public sphere as a forum in which to explain the value of styles that may not, at first glance, appear transparent or clear to most people.

One instance where the explanation of a complex, yet meaningful style would have been helpful is in a "Readings"

section of *Harper's Magazine* (Vitanza 1994) that quickly betrays its real purpose: to make its subject, composition professor Victor Vitanza—and, in turn, the field itself—seem vain, inarticulate, and, in the form in which it's presented, unclear. In “Reading, Writing, Rambling On,” the *Harper's* (1994) piece undermines Vitanza by taking excerpts from his larger interview in *Composition Studies* (1993) conducted by Cynthia Haynes-Burton, without giving the broader context for his ideas. When, for instance, Haynes-Burton asks, “Who do you think your audience is?” Vitanza's theoretical response, reprinted in *Harper's*, shows some of his conflicted sense of the field: “I am always giving writing lessons and taking writing lessons. I don't know, however, if I am Levi-Strauss or if I am that South-American Indian chief in *Tristes Tropiques* that Levi-Strauss indirectly gives writing lessons to. Perhaps I am both. Which can be confusing” (29). On the surface, of course, Vitanza's (1994) statements appear opaque, even comical, even though they are arguably a stylistic tour de force in which the author uses the rhetorical trope of *periphrasis* to show the difficulty of capturing the rhetorical situation of literacy, which he names “inappropriation” (1993, 52). Yet, the *Harper's* excerpt does not capture Vitanza's dilemma or his uncertain relationship with the very notion of “audience,” which he examines at length in the *Composition Studies* piece. In a portion of that interview omitted in *Harper's*, Vitanza states, “I think that audiences are really overrated!” (1993, 51), and one solution, he explains, is to rethink the relationship between writers and audiences.

Later, after Vitanza expresses doubts about how he positions himself as a researcher in the field, Haynes-Burton asks him to “please start over,” and Vitanza's conflicted reply includes the following paragraph reproduced in *Harper's* (1994):

Okay, so what I have said so far: I very consciously do not follow the field's research protocols. And yet, of course, I do; most other times, however, I do not. And yet again! Do you feel the vertigo of this? I hope that my saying all this, however, does not come across as if I

am disengaging into some form of “individualism,” or “expressionism,” for I do not believe in such a fatuous, dangerous concept as practiced in our field (29).

In the context of the full interview in *Composition Studies*, Vitanza expresses the point of view that as a field, composition has always been positioned among research protocols borrowed from various disciplinary interests, and he is acknowledging how, as a scholar allied with postmodern theory, he is torn trying both to conform to and resist those protocols. Yet, by focusing on these contradictory positions without giving additional context, the magazine attempts to ridicule Vitanza’s equivocation. Nonetheless, his words express brilliantly the lack of clarity he obviously feels on this subject. Likewise, the debate over expressionism in the field is complicated by years of disciplinary discussion, and while Vitanza is in a camp that might indeed label expressionism “fatuous,” the *Harper’s* excerpt provides none of the background necessary for readers to understand its historical complexity, making the scholar again seem out of touch with the field—and certainly with his audience.

ONGOING DISCIPLINARY DIVISION

While much of the misunderstanding about the role of style in composition comes from outside the field, the abandonment of the study of style has led to the perpetuation of certain preconceptions from within the discipline as well. In a *College English* opinion piece, for example, Peter Elbow (2002), one of composition’s best-known scholars, suggests that style is now almost exclusively a part of the “culture” of literary studies. In “The Cultures of Literature and Composition: What Could Each Learn from the Other?” Elbow, calling for a kind of revival of style in composition, suggests that currently it is literature—and *not* composition—that has “a culture that considers the metaphorical and imaginative uses of language as basic or primal” (536). In other words, Elbow suggests, the discipline of literary studies has become in essence *the* province of style:

The culture of literary studies puts a high value on style and on not being like everyone else. I think I see more mannerism, artifice, and self-consciousness in bearing . . . among literary folk than composition folk. Occasionally I resist, yet I value style and artifice. What could be more wonderful than the pleasure of creating or appreciating forms that are different, amazing, outlandish, useless—the opposite of ordinary, everyday, pragmatic? (542)

Granted, Elbow does not go so far as to dismiss the role composition plays in a so-called culture of style. However, his acknowledgment that the “culture of composition” does not ignore “metaphor and imaginative language *altogether*” is really so much damnation with faint praise (536; emphasis added). Echoing in important respects the same assumptions often made about the field in the public sphere, he says that composition generally adopts a “literal language . . . that seems to assume discursive language as the norm and imaginative, metaphorical language as somehow special or marked or additional” (536). Elbow’s concept of style is, of course, somewhat circumscribed in this instance, even though he suggests, as Lanham does, that style has an opaque quality he considers desirable. It’s clear that Elbow is advocating a revival of style, yet instead of looking at style’s important roots in composition, the only model he considers is literature.

By locating stylistic studies almost exclusively within the domain of literature, however, and by dichotomizing “literary” and “discursive” language, Elbow effectively initiates a “divide” or schism between literature and composition that mimics the divide between popular and academic views of style in the public arena. In other words, Elbow seems to create a public within a public (see Warner’s “counterpublic”) in the academic realm itself. Like Fish, Menand, and Mac Donald, however—and indeed, as I have argued, like composition studies as a whole—Elbow is failing to account for the broad body of scholarship on style in the field. For example, as Lanham, Edward P. J. Corbett, and others have pointed out, a wide variety of rhetorical figures (e.g., tropes and schemes) has been used throughout

the history of stylistic studies and in the teaching of writing. Furthermore, by dividing literary or poetic style from what he labels composition's supposed focus—which he regrettably calls an “orientation toward grammar”—Elbow clearly adopts a view challenged not only by many scholars in the field itself (see, for example, Hartwell 1985; Carbone 2004; Hardin 2004), but by linguist Mary Louise Pratt. In *Toward a Speech Act Theory of Literary Discourse*, Pratt (1977) critiques that very binary when she argues that the supposed division between “poetic” and “non-poetic” language is based on an unverifiable split between poetic language (the language of literature) and linguistics (everyday language, the so-called “discursive” language Elbow refers to as the province of composition).

According to Pratt, this “poetic language fallacy” is a false division because it presupposes certain elements unique to literary or poetic language and ostensibly nonexistent in nonpoetic language. Pratt essentially challenges the claims of the Prague Circle—a group of linguists and writers interested in language in Russia during the 1930s—that there is a metaphorical *langue/parole* relationship unique to literature: “The fact that . . . there is a real *langue* shared by literary and nonliterary utterances alike is quite overlooked and seems almost irrelevant” (10). She goes on to argue that the faulty analogy between *langue* (as literary) and *parole* (as nonliterary) has widespread implications for style and underlies “the overwhelming tendency to view style as an exclusively or predominantly literary phenomenon and to equate style outside literature with mere grammaticality and conventional appropriateness” (15; emphasis added). Clearly, this is the very separation that Elbow makes when he writes about the difference between literary and conventional discourse (i.e., the discourse of composition).

Even though I obviously share Elbow's claim that there is a problematic absence of attention to style in composition, I do not see the stylistic schism he hypothesizes between composition and literary studies. Instead, I argue, the problem is the inability of compositionists to articulate a clear view of

the value of stylistic study in the field. Elbow suggests that the existence of a gap in stylistic study is currently filled by literary studies. Yet, it is evident that public intellectuals outside the field—many of whom are not literary scholars—are filling this gap in their own way. Elbow, like Menand and others, simply represents a different instantiation of the same disciplinary problem: the inability of composition to use and articulate its longstanding knowledge base. The field clearly has a rich tradition in the study of style. By reclaiming it, composition studies has nothing to lose and much to gain, both immediately and over the long term, in asserting knowledge about practices of style that have a rich disciplinary history. Illuminating those stylistic traditions for the public would give the field a claim to the very expertise held by composition scholars. It would establish the importance of composition studies by reclaiming language concerns that are important both inside and outside the field. Compositionists would be seen as public intellectuals with valuable theoretical positions on an array of language matters, including stylistic ones.

RESPONDING IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE

If the field of composition is to write in the public sphere, it has to start somewhere. I begin that process here by responding to Fish, Menand, Mac Donald, and others who have represented the field—often inaccurately, in my view—in the public sphere. I aim to show the benefit of writing as a public intellectual in public discourse.

In making the argument that form in composition courses is more important than content, Fish is stating a notion that is far from new—yet incorrect. Why? For years, a form/content dichotomy has existed, with form considered by some—like Fish—as a container that can be filled with any content. The idea that form (which includes style, structure, grammar, and so forth) can thus be separated from content led composition scholar Louis Milic to propose a dualistic view in the 1960s that he called the “theory of ornate form.” Milic (1965) states that

form is separate from, and, he implies, more important than, content because “ideas exist wordlessly and can be dressed in a variety of outfits depending on the need or the occasion” (67). For Milic, then (and we can assume Fish agrees), the opposite idea, which states that form and content are inseparable because the two are an “organic” whole, is erroneous. If this organic theory, which he calls “Crocean aesthetic monism,” were correct, writes Milic, and there were, in fact, “no seam between meaning and style,” then even a small change in form would necessarily mean a change in content—and that implies there *is* no form (or style) but only “meaning or intuition” (67). Milic claims that ornate form is the only theory that allows composition instructors to teach style by making it separate from content.

However, Milic’s idea is mistaken: form (style) and content (meaning) are actually inextricably linked, and here is the reason why. While it’s true that ideas can be put in any number of ways—indeed, this is the very notion of style—what Milic and Fish both overlook is that the form itself carries meaning. How so? When Fish dismisses content, he is assuming that words carry only a denotative (or explicit) meaning. This denotative meaning, like the form/content division itself, is based on a positivist assumption that sees language narrowly in terms of one possible transparent meaning. However, much of what we take to be meaning is not denotative at all. Rather, it is connotative (suggested or implied) and comes from various rhetorical elements—e.g., humor, irony or sarcasm, emphasis, and even ethos, or the credibility/character of the writer—as well as cultural and social understandings, and thus a great deal of connotative meaning is conveyed through *form*. Form itself, then, often expresses meaning above and beyond the denotative meaning. Take Fish, for example. His column for the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, written before his *Times* piece, is entitled “Say It Ain’t So” (2002), an ironic title that in its lexical choice (“Ain’t”), its register (colloquial), and its use of allusion (a kind of cultural “gotcha”) conveys, through form, a great deal about

his resistance to conventional wisdom. This is an instance, then, when form, which is clearly significant in and of itself, works in conjunction with meaning, including the prior meanings attached to this expression without which the title itself would have a different meaning. Indeed, if Fish were to teach his students the way form can be used to alter meaning, it seems that he might reach a different conclusion from his decision to banish content from his classroom teaching.

If one idea could be said to characterize Menand's ideas in his *New Yorker* review, it would likely be his reliance on psychoanalytical theory to describe the process of writing in composition classrooms. As a matter of fact, issues of writing have long been tied to psychology, especially in the study of the writing process. Yet, comparing writing to issues of psychotherapy is rare. It is true that in a special double issue of *College English* on psychoanalysis and pedagogy, guest editor Robert Con Davis (1987) concludes that "the problematics of psychoanalytic therapy (defined by 'resistance,' 'transference,' and 'repression') are the same as 'the problematics of teaching'" (622), and Menand's ideas seem informed by similar considerations. Yet, when he talks about writing pedagogy as a "combination of psychotherapy and social work" (92), Menand (2000) is actually more interested in portraying composition in one light—as influenced by the theory of expressivism, or a movement that focuses on the idea that writing involves exploring personal experience and voice. The expressivist movement has generated a great deal of debate even in composition, as Vitanza's repudiation of it indicates, but Menand, as well as Mac Donald, confuse readers with their insistence that expressivist rhetoric, not to mention process, are the enemies of grammar and style.

This is where an important explanation is useful: Menand's and Mac Donald's characterizations of the field assume a view of writing based on current-traditional rhetoric, which emphasizes product over process, as Fish (2005) does in his *New York Times* op-ed piece. Current-traditional rhetoric is concerned with, among other things, grammar, usage, and

mechanics—essentially aspects of language affiliated with the textual product rather than with the process of producing it. Menand’s critique of the so-called psychotherapeutic approaches (voice, freewriting, drafting, revision, etc.)—along with Mac Donald’s criticism of the Dartmouth Conference—basically amount to the same thing: a desire to return to a strict emphasis on the textual product and to throw out the process writers use to achieve it. Why is that harmful? Research has shown that all of the techniques associated with “process” are useful to writers in accomplishing their writing goals. They are productive not only for student writers, but for professional writers as well. The process movement has never ignored the textual product, but has looked at the individual, social, cultural, and public considerations that make up the text. When they write about the field, however, Menand and Mac Donald do not take these considerations into account, and therefore they dismiss a great deal of useful knowledge that has been acquired by writers and teachers over time.

It is the job of composition studies to develop writing through many processes. In doing so, the field shares the same goals as Fish, Menand, Mac Donald, and others who have portrayed us in public: to produce excellence in writing. Like these public intellectuals, we want to help writers compose with attention to style and contextually appropriate grammar and vocabulary. However, we have discovered methods for achieving good writing that allow writers to take into account the way they arrive at their product. Along the way, both form and content—and everything that goes along with these concepts—are important to composition professionals and should be to all writers and readers everywhere.