Writing With Elbow

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The work of expressivist (sometimes referred to as expressionist) compositionists in general and Peter Elbow in particular has been criticized for its attention to the personal dimensions of writing and to the individual rather than to social or political dimensions of reality, often by critics with a Marxist or Marxist feminist orientation. James Berlin in “Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Class,” for instance, finds that, for Elbow, power resides within the individual. And although Berlin admits that Elbow’s pedagogy includes a denunciation of economic, political, and social pressures to conform, Berlin sees that the form of resistance implied by Elbow’s world view is limited because it is always construed in individual terms (486–87). Collective action, a strategy that Berlin supports given his Marxist orientation, poses a threat to individual integrity in Elbow’s work, according to Berlin (487). Lester Faigley, citing Berlin, speaks of Elbow as belonging to the “moderate wing” of expressivists because he defines power in terms of the individual (58). Susan Jarrett in “Feminism and Composition: The Case for Conflict,” also drawing on Berlin’s analysis of Elbow, asserts that the emphasis on the individual in expressive pedagogy such as that of Peter Elbow and others has “coptive potential.” She says, “The complexities of social differentiation and inequity in late-twentieth-century capitalist society are thrown into the shadows by the bright spotlight focused on the individual” (109). Jarrett also sees Elbow’s perspective as a form of naive expressivism that associates teaching with maternal nurturing, associations that fail to make any reference to “the psychological complexities around the conjunction of mothering and teaching” (112). Elbow and other expressivists, according to Jarrett, also fail to recognize that our culture regards mothers with “deep ambivalence” (113).1

Although Elbow’s work is often associated with pedagogies that ignore social difference and social inequities, I argue here that his work is actually considerably more politically progressive than it might at first seem. His earlier work is in many ways more radical than moderate, and his later work moves in the direction of postmodernism. I suggest that his earlier work is radical in that it critiques modernist Enlightenment epistemologies and it challenges structures that are deeply embedded in our culture. This work can be usefully situated
within the contexts of nineteenth-century Romanticism and twentieth-century feminist expressivist composition and contrasted with nineteenth- and twentieth-century manifestations of Marxism, a perspective that accepts rather than challenges modernist Enlightenment thought. In his early work, Elbow repudiates modernist academic structures, methods, and discourse and calls for a reduction in the authority of teachers. I also argue, however, that Elbow is careful, especially in his later work, to acknowledge that modernist structures and approaches can coexist with radical ones, and hence his perspective in some ways moves in the direction of postmodernism. Surely representations of him as a naive idealist or as one unconcerned about diversity or inclusivity are inaccurate. To demonstrate that Elbow’s earlier work is politically radical, I will discuss it within the contexts of early nineteenth-century Romanticism and expressivist feminist composition and contrast it with late nineteenth-century Marxism. To demonstrate that his later work moves in the direction of postmodernism, I will situate it within the context of Bakhtinian postformalism and postmodern feminism.

First, though, I will contrast the three perspectives that inform my argument: (1) modernism, especially modernist Marxism as a late nineteenth-century inheritor of the Enlightenment as well as a perspective that still informs work in the present; (2) antimodernism, including early nineteenth-century Romanticism and late twentieth-century feminist expressivist composition; (3) late twentieth-century postmodernism, including postmodern feminism, as a critique of modernism rather than an opponent of it.

Relating Elbow’s work to these three different perspectives, all of which have epistemological, pedagogical, and political implications, is a challenge since Elbow himself carefully avoids labels and since his work is complex and often defies easy classification. I nevertheless take the risk of doing so in order to make evident that his work is neither politically moderate nor an unchanging manifestation of expressivism. I also demonstrate that Elbow does not always focus exclusively on individuals. Situating Elbow’s work in relation to political and intellectual traditions such as the Enlightenment, romanticism, Marxism, and postmodernism is crucial at this moment in the development of the field of rhetoric and composition because the histories of the field are too often insular, disciplinary, and unconnected to larger political and intellectual movements within other fields.

MODERN, ANTIMODERN, POSTMODERN

Modernism derives from the Enlightenment with its commitments to empiricism and rationalism. A key figure in the development of Enlightenment thought is Descartes, who associates human essence with disembodied thought.
For Descartes, the search for truth begins with skepticism and is accomplished through cultivation of the mind. The Enlightenment also gave rise to the scientific revolution and the scientific method, with its belief in the objectivity and value neutrality of the observer. As numerous contemporary thinkers have pointed out, however, the Enlightenment is also associated with such reprehensible developments as colonialism, racism, and imperialism and with the development of repressive social and pedagogical structures and institutions. Michel Foucault makes clear in *Discipline and Punish*, for instance, that the Enlightenment resulted in the development of penal structures and academic disciplines and disciplinary structures that are punitive, coercive, and elitist.

It is common to associate late nineteenth-century Marxism and its twentieth-century manifestations with Enlightenment modernism. John Trimbur in “Agency and the Death of the Author: A Partial Defense of Modernism,” for example, speaks of “Marxism’s modernist metanarrative” (289). Working against the widespread perception among postmodernists that the Enlightenment was politically reactionary, his essay suggests that there are aspects of the Enlightenment, namely the French Revolution, that were valuable. He associates the Revolution with “the emergence of the masses as subjects of their own history” (294). Trimbur considers the work of Marx himself to be modernist, as well as the work of twentieth-century Marxists such as Walter Benjamin, Berthold Brecht, and others (296).

Like Trimbur, I see Marxism as deriving from eighteenth-century modernist Enlightenment commitments to scientific inquiry and to rationality and thus as a late nineteenth-century manifestation of modernism. For Marxists, inequity is a structural problem caused by an economic system that oppresses the proletariat and favors those who control the means of production. In a pedagogical context, teachers become intellectuals committed to changing the social and economic order through a process of making students aware of inequities and sending them forth to make changes beyond the classroom. Marx’s extensive writings form the basis for modern social scientific research, and Marx makes clear in his work that he values objective scientific methods and rationality. Marx and Engels in *The German Ideology* speak of the inquiry as a study of people in “their actual, empirically perceptible process of development under definite conditions” (119). They are optimistic about the possibility for progress and improvement and link that progress to scientific and technological advancement. “It is only possible to achieve real liberation in the real world by employing real means, that slavery cannot be abolished without the steam-engine and the mule and spinning-jenny, serfdom cannot be abolished without improved agriculture” (133).

Marxist and Marxist feminist pedagogies of the kind advocated by Berlin, Faigley, and Jarrett aim to make students aware of social inequities and
encourage them to become participants in social transformation. These pedagogies aim to teach students methods of social critique, including critique of the university with its inevitable commitments to capitalism and its inevitable support of hierarchical structures. Change will be accomplished by redeploying the methods and procedures advocated by the modern university for progressive political ends. The transformative strategy of Marxist pedagogue Paolo Freire, for instance, is to teach middle-class, well-educated, and highly literate social activists how to enable the rural poor of South America to become literate. In a Marxist pedagogy, the teacher plays a crucial role because it is the teacher who is an intellectual and critic, responsible for enlightening uninformed and uncritical students.

Romanticism is antimodern in that it reacted against Enlightenment thought by challenging the authority of scientific knowledge and the Enlightenment belief that technological development is necessarily beneficial and progressive. The Romantic Movement resisted scientific and technological advancement with its concomitant commitments to objectivity and rationality, and called for a return to nature and to contemplation as a way of healing individual depression and social alienation. The Romantic poets dwell upon themes of dejection, melancholy, isolation from nature and from others, industrialization, urbanization, and overpopulation and see a return to a simpler past as a way of dealing with a present and future dominated by uncontrolled scientific and technological advancement. Common settings for Romantic poems are often medieval castles and remote islands, and common characters are rustics, shepherds, and individuals educated through communion with nature rather than through formal educational systems and structures.

Romanticism does have a politics, but it differs from that of traditions influenced by Enlightenment thought. Wordsworth and other Romantics saw promise in revolutionary movements like the French Revolution with its (failed) attempt to replace monarchy with democracy. But instead of welcoming scientific and technological development as the instrument of change, the Romantic Movement opposed it, seeing such development as the cause of individual and social problems and advocating withdrawal, resistance, and the return to a simpler economy and lifestyle. For Romantics, social institutions impede progress and growth. The child is the father of the man because the child is closer to nature, less tainted by the alienating effects of education and work.

Feminist expressivist composition is a late twentieth-century manifestation of antimodernism. Feminist expressivist compositionists see modernist educational institutions, with their emphasis on evaluation and objective assessment, as impeding the development of writers. Feminist expressivist compositionists emphasize, instead, that good writing is the expression of a relatively
autonomous self. For them, writers will develop best in encouraging environments that emphasize the process of writing and rewriting over criticism of the final product. Feminist expressivist compositionists, including Wendy Goulston, Mary A. Quinn, Rebecca Faery, and Cinthia Gannett, advocate listening to the student writer and encouraging student writers to shape and reshape their work until it is understandable to a reader. They often recommend pedagogical strategies such as journals, freewriting, and preliminary writing activities that foster free association and digression. Their work has been influenced by feminists Nancy Chodorow, Mary Belenky (coauthor of *Women’s Ways of Knowing*), Carol Gilligan, and Sara Ruddick, scholars who identify and valorize women’s different developmental, intellectual, and ethical perspectives and who advocate collaborative learning and the creation of nurturing environments where connection rather than competition is emphasized. If modern perspectives are androcentric, emphasizing detachment, objectivity, and judgment, antimodern ones are gynocentric, emphasizing engagement, subjectivity, and nurturing.

While antimodernism opposes modernism directly, postmodernism critiques modernism without directly opposing it. It looks for alternatives to Enlightenment commitments to objectivity, detachment, and the scientific method, without resorting to antimodern subjectivity and opposition to science. A good example is Bakhtinian dialogism. Bakhtin is careful to distinguish his position from a Romantic one. He is not advocating individualistic expression. Rather, he describes speakers as engaging in dialogue in complex intertextual situations with other speakers and writers, past and present. These dialogues are multivoiced, heteroglossic, and hence dialogic. For Bakhtin, such dialogue disrupts static, univocal authoritative discourse and thereby serves a democratizing function. Within a pedagogical context, postmodernists attempt to find alternatives to traditional academic discourse, sometimes recommending the creation of hybrid forms that interweave objective and subjective elements. Another strategy is to introduce students to traditional academic discourse while pointing out its limitations, namely its disembodiedness and its situatedness, despite its attempt to appear value neutral and objective.

One manifestation of a shift toward a postmodern perspective within the humanities is what is often referred to as the autobiographical-turn characteristic of discourse in a variety of fields, a turn that is often postmodern feminist in orientation. Suzanne Fleischman in “Gender, the Personal, and the Voice of Scholarship: A Viewpoint,” for example, describes the widespread attempt in a variety of fields such as law, art history, media studies, anthropology, sociology, women’s studies, literature, and even the hard sciences, to restore to
scholarship the person of the scholar. She observes, as have numerous others, that scholarly writing arose out of the context of rationalism and empiricism and aims at objectivity, transparency, and authority (977). It is believed to be a transparent transmitter of natural facts. Fleischman finds that the term scientific voice is synonymous with scholarly voice (978). According to Fleischman, academic writing is characterized by (1) salient use of the passive voice; (2) heavy use of nominalizations; (3) use of the preposition in rather than by for citing authorities; (4) use of authors’ initials in place of first names (979-81). She provides numerous examples of attempts to disrupt traditional academic discourse by inserting the personal into it in a variety of ways. She observes that some disciplines, especially the social sciences, history, and cultural studies, lend themselves to personalized writing, but that it is in literary studies that the “autobiographical turn” has had the greatest impact. Here personalized writing takes the form of personal writing, autobiographical writing, performative writing, or narrative criticism (996). According to Fleischman, personalized writing alters the founding metaphor for writing from the lecture to the conversation (983). Some work by postmodern feminist compositionists deals explicitly with ways of having students incorporate personal narrative into their writing. Lillian Bridwell-Bowles in “Discourse and Diversity: Experimental Writing Within the Academy,” influenced by Kristeva and other French feminists, explores ways in which teachers can invite students to imagine new forms of discourse, new kinds of academic essays. According to Bridwell-Bowles, these new forms include “a more personal voice, an expanded use of metaphor, a less rigid methodological framework.” Such a writing process allows for a combination of hypothesizing and reporting data and the expression of multiple truths (44).

Each perspective—modernist, antimodernist, and postmodernist—has a different politics (and a different epistemology and a different rhetoric). Modernism gave rise to the creation of democratic institutions, the scientific method, and traditional academic discourse, as well as to the development of oppressive institutions and structures such as racism, colonialism, and imperialism. Antimodernism, in contrast, reacts against modernist disembodiedness, skepticism, and objectivism by emphasizing spirituality, psychic renewal, and subjective creation and observation. Postmodernism does not oppose modernism but recognizes its considerable limitations and attempts to find alternatives to its structures, institutions, and genres. I argue, then, that it is useful to situate Elbow’s work and his political orientation within the contexts of both antimodernism and postmodernism. Doing so illuminates his political and intellectual orientations and clarifies important traditions within the field of rhetoric and composition.
ELBOW’S RADICAL EXPRESSIVISM

Elbow’s earlier work is antimodern and hence radical in that it directly challenges deeply entrenched ways of thinking, rooted in Enlightenment epistemologies. In describing what he calls “the doubting game” and “the believing game” as opposing perspectives and privileging the latter, he calls for a pedagogy that attempts to minimize the oppressive authority of teachers and encourage the development of cooperative, collective, and relational ways of thinking and being. If a modern pedagogical perspective is committed to objectivist detachment, skepticism, and faith in scientific development and technological progress, an antimodern one is rooted in subjective expression, believing, and emotional commitment. If modernists, including Marxists, see that change is best accomplished through a transformation of existing structures, antimodernists like the early Elbow call for resisting the alienating effects of traditional structures, including educational ones, by attempting to work outside them or at least attempting to mitigate their damaging effects.

The title of Writing Without Teachers makes evident Elbow’s radical expressivist conviction that learning is best accomplished outside of modernist educational structures and without the aid of teachers. Students need to learn how to write independent of their teachers, who may inhibit them by giving them intimidating models and constraining rules. What students need to learn to do, at least initially, is to write freely, on their own. They need to be able to make mistakes, take risks, generate imperfect text. Elbow explains in the preface to the book that he is writing primarily for individuals attempting to learn to write outside a classroom context (viii). If his methods are used within a classroom context, he explains, the teacher’s authority must be reduced, if not eliminated entirely. Elbow minimizes his own authority by writing along with his students and, in a sense, becoming a student. “I can only set up something like the teacherless class in my own class if I adopt more the role of a learner and less the role of a teacher.” Elbow explains, further, that good writing teachers are exceedingly rare. Students, he says, do not need teachers in order to learn (ix).

Although Elbow, in his early work, does tend to focus on the individual as opposed to the social dimensions of writing, there are foreshadowings of his turn toward postmodern social perspectives on writing as early as Writing Without Teachers (1973). The book was published well before social construction was in vogue in the field of composition studies; he nevertheless describes a meaning-making process that is communal. He sees that meaning is constantly “curbed” by the speech community of the speaker (154). He recognizes, however, that there is never only one speech community but many overlapping ones (155).
Meaning in ordinary language consists of delicate, flexible transactions among people in overlapping speech communities—peculiar transactions governed by unspoken agreements to abide by unspecified, constantly changing rules as to what meaning to build into what words and phrases. (156)

Words, then, though capable of extreme precision among capable players, “nevertheless float and drift all the time” (156). He speaks appreciatively of the work of Thomas Kuhn and sees perception and thinking as acts of construction (172).

The antimodern philosophical and political foundation of the views that inform Elbow’s radical perspective is clearest in the essay appended to Writing without Teachers, “The Doubting Game and the Believing Game—An Analysis of the Intellectual Enterprise.” Elbow ultimately affirms that the doubting game, which he associates with Enlightenment thought, and the believing game, which is described as opposing Enlightenment thought, are, though entirely different, both necessary and interdependent. His position is a radical one, however, in that he is primarily concerned with pointing out limitations of the doubting game and strengths of the believing game. He feels that the doubting game has dominated our culture for centuries, and so efforts must be made to reinstate the believing game and to diminish the authority of the doubting game. His ideal seems to be a balance between the two, something he thinks we have not achieved at the present.

In pointing out the limitations of the doubting game, Elbow is actually pointing out the limitations of Enlightenment rationality and empiricism, given that he makes a direct connection between the doubting game and a Cartesian world view. For him, Descartes is the ultimate doubter. He says of Descartes, “He felt the way to proceed to the truth was to doubt everything. This spirit has remained the central tradition in western civilization’s notion of the rational process” (150). According to Elbow, the scientific method depends on falsification and on dividing things into classes (165). It is a dialectic of propositions. It attacks the problem of the self-interest of the perceiver by attempting to “weed out the self” (171). The goals are to make thinking mechanistic and impersonal, and to achieve objectivity (172). Its counterpart in literary studies is the New Criticism, in which meaning is located entirely in the text and a work of art is characterized by coherence among elements (159).

The believing game, in contrast, deals not with universals but with the particular, the unique (165). It is the opposite of the doubting game in that its method is to affirm, believe, not to argue (165). In literary criticism, this amounts to making better readings available rather than discrediting bad readings (166). If the doubting game is a dialectic of propositions, the believing
game is a dialectic of experience (171). It proceeds by indirection, by believing in all assertions presented (148). It is not adversarial in that there is an attempt to consider and believe in all perspectives one at a time rather than to compare and rank them. The believer looks not for errors but for truths and then commits herself to them, tries to see things from the perspective of the proponent of the truth. The self is not extricated as it is in the doubting game but is inserted, projected. An assertion is not analyzed logically but extended through metaphor, analogy, and associations (149).

Elbow’s doubting game, associated as it is with modernist science, technology, rationality, empiricism, and with Enlightenment ideals and procedures, involves an acceptance of the dominant values within our culture. The believing game, in contrast, with its opposition to Enlightenment ideals, is radical and resistant. Although Elbow does not emphasize the gendered nature of the two games, the doubting game seems to have a masculine valence, the believing game a feminine one. The extent to which the two perspectives are dichotomous and oppositional becomes clear in Elbow’s list of their characteristics (178–79):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Doubting Game</th>
<th>Believing Game</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>extrication, disengagement</td>
<td>involvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>detachment, perspective</td>
<td>projection, commitment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rejecting or fending off what is new</td>
<td>willingness to explore what is new</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>closing, clenching</td>
<td>opening, loosening</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>literal</td>
<td>metaphorical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rigid</td>
<td>flexible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>stubborn, hanging on</td>
<td>yielding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>impulse for security</td>
<td>impulse for risk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>centered, unmoving self</td>
<td>floating self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>learning to be sharper, finer, more</td>
<td>learning to be larger, more encompassing,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>piercing, harder, tougher</td>
<td>softer, more absorbent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>aggressive: meeting threat by beating id down</td>
<td>nonaggressive: meeting threat by bending,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>incorporating; nonviolent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>deflating</td>
<td>supporting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>competitive</td>
<td>cooperative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>solitary or adversary activity</td>
<td>working in a group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>talking, noise, arguing</td>
<td>listening, silence, agreeing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Elbow is clearly promoting the terms on the right and making evident the limitations of the terms on the left. The terms on the left are negative in tone; those on the right are considerably more positive. Society will be improved, Elbow suggests, if it embraces antimodern communal and collective values that result in cooperation, listening, agreeing, and nonaggression, qualities that are associated with women’s ways of knowing by the Women’s Ways of Knowing
collective, Chodorow, Gilligan, and others. In addition to learning to disengage and detach—modernist activities promoted by the scientific method—we need to learn to become involved and committed. In addition to learning to develop literal approaches to language and closed interpretations, as in a modernist pedagogy, we need to learn to appreciate metaphorical language and open-ended interpretations. In addition to developing modernist conceptions of the self that are centered, we need to learn antimodernist processes of decentering. Elbow makes clear that he is not calling for an elimination of the modernist doubting characteristics. Both believing and doubting are important and necessary. What he ultimately affirms is coexistence of the two, and such coexistence anticipates his later movement in the direction of postmodern epistemologies and politics.

Elbow’s characterization of the believing game as the opposite of the doubting game as discussed above reveals his Romantic propensities, as does his use of metaphors that suggest natural growth and organic processes. He speaks in Writing Without Teachers of “growing your meaning” (21) or trying to “help words grow” (23) or treating words “as though they are potentially able to grow” (24). He compares writing to riding a horse, “which is constantly changing beneath you,” or to Proteus, “changing while you hang on to him” (25). He says, “It is characteristic of living organisms, cell creatures, to unfold according to a set of stages that must come in order” (43). Writing, for Elbow, is a natural process that necessitates careful nurturing. It will be unsuccessful if it is forced or coerced. There are no rules that can be followed and no procedure that will be the same for everyone. The successful writing class is a “culture to be preserved. Yogurt” (139).

Elbow’s antimodern radical political views are often implied rather than directly stated in Writing Without Teachers. In What is English? a description of the 1987 English Coalition Conference, they are also often implied, given that he is frequently describing the opinions of other participants at the conference. In many ways, however, the book is a reflection of his own pedagogical and political perspectives, perspectives that are evolving and that sometimes differ in emphasis from his earlier work. In What is English? Elbow more often brings up political issues, no doubt because they were on the official agenda and in the air. He speaks, for instance, of language-oriented teaching and learning as aimed at making students better citizens (32). He also attends to issues regarding linguistic differences and focuses on the issue of tracking, which he clearly sees, as do other conference attendees, as elitist and counterproductive. “As experienced teachers in tracked and nontracked situations, conference participants asserted that the same educational approach is right for both the best and the worst students: a learned-focused, interactive approach” (35).
What is English? provides Elbow an opportunity to discuss the similarities and differences between his own pedagogical and political perspective and that of colleagues who have a Marxist or cultural orientation. Elbow describes an exchange between himself and Gary Waller, in which Waller suggested that Elbow wasn’t doing enough justice to the constraints and limits on human beings; he saw Elbow as implying naively that we write, whereas Waller emphasizes that we are written. Elbow responds, characteristically, that he prefers to define the student as a subject rather than an object (19). Later in the book, he reflects on differences between his own position and that of Waller and Kathleen McCormick. He sees McCormick as emphasizing that “our interpretations are a product of our situatedness—our class, gender, interests, culture, and so forth; we don’t write, we are written on.” Elbow works out a compromise. We are at once free and bound. He attempts to find language that does justice to both sides of the contradiction (83).

Antimodern expressivists such as Elbow are not Romantic poets; they are working in a different era and a different context. It is useful nevertheless to point out their commonalities with the Romantic Movement and with the perspectives of individual Romantic poets. Expressivists are committed to democratic principles and to social and political equality, but their vision of why inequality exists differs from that of Marxists, as do their solutions to the problem. For expressivists such as Elbow, the educational institution within which the teacher works is a repressive structure, with its uncritical acceptance of the promise of scientific and technological progress, its concomitant commitment to industrialization and urbanization, and the inevitable alienation that results from such acceptance and commitment. From an expressivist perspective, teachers are the representatives of the modernist educational system and thus reinforce its values and socialization processes. Students will be better off if the authority of teachers is limited. For an expressivist, the educational structure works against the development of writing abilities because it is alienating and intimidating. The expressivist sometimes suggests that the best thing a teacher can do, given the debilitating nature of the modern university, is to absent herself, allow students to find their inner voices, their own emotional and spiritual depths. Students will accomplish this through reflection, contemplation, removal from the pressures and considerable constraints of modern educational structures and processes. Marxists, in contrast, tend to emphasize the importance of the teacher since the teacher is the enlightened intellectual who can awaken students to the realities of political and social inequities. Marxists tend to see the transformative potential of teachers and educational institutions, whereas radicals like Elbow tend not to.

As I have suggested, contrary to a widespread view within the field of composition studies, the work of Peter Elbow is neither politically moderate nor
entirely individualistic. Rather, it is in many ways radical and can usefully be compared to the ideals of the Romantic Movement and of expressivist feminist compositionists and can also be contrasted with Marxist political perspectives. In privileging the believing game over the doubting game, Elbow challenges pervasive modernist Enlightenment thinking and structures and calls for anti-modern approaches that emphasize relationality and connectedness. His early work evolves and matures, however, in response to reactions of individuals to these early perspectives, as well as to his experience as a scholar and teacher, and a changing climate within the field as a whole that focuses directly and explicitly on the political dimensions of writing.

ELBOW AND POSTMODERNISM

As Elbow’s work matures, it moves in the direction of a politics that has more of a postmodern cast, a perspective that is anticipated in Elbow’s discussion of the importance of both the doubting and the believing games in Writing Without Teachers and in his attention to the social, as well as the individual, nature of writing. A good example of his evolving perspective is the introduction to his 1994 collection, Landmark Essays on Voice and Writing, entitled “About Voice and Writing.” Unlike Writing Without Teachers and Writing With Power, the essay makes use of traditional academic style and is clearly aimed at other academics. He also provides a more fully developed explanation of how his perspective relates to other intellectual traditions than he did in Writing Without Teachers. He does not label what he calls “discourse as voiced utterance” expressivist or “discourse as semiotic text” objectivist (xii). Nor does he associate the two perspectives with the doubting or the believing game. Clearly, though, “discourse as voiced utterance” can be associated with the believing game and with subjectivist epistemologies; “discourse as text or semiosis” with the doubting game and with objectivist epistemologies. He also makes even clearer here than he does in his discussion of the doubting and the believing games that both perspectives are important and necessary. He is not calling for the elimination of objectivist perspectives.

In the objectivist perspective, which he associates in Writing Without Teachers with Enlightenment thought and which he now associates with the New Criticism and with structuralism and semiotics, discourse is seen as text, and language is disembodied (xii). Through this lens, people, the historical drama, the body, the actual person is removed. Elbow fully admits that it can be useful to look at natural language as pure disembodied meaning. He acknowledges that the New Critics made us better readers. He finds that semiotics, sign theory, and structuralism in linguistics and literary criticism also showed us how to see impersonal patterns in literature or other forms of discourse (xiii).
The textuality metaphor, he says, highlights the visual and spatial features of language and emphasizes language as an abstract, universal system (xiv). It calls attention to the commonalities between one person’s discourse and that of others and of the culture (xiv).

But Elbow’s primary aim, of course, is to demonstrate that the other lens, the one that emphasizes that discourse is always historically situated and always comes from persons and is addressed to others, is also extremely useful (xiii). And here he departs from his earlier position in Writing Without Teachers by associating his preferred perspective with the work of Russian post formalist Mikhail Bakhtin. From the “discourse as voiced utterance” perspective, sound and hearing are emphasized over vision, and linguistic meaning is seen as moving historically through time rather than existing simultaneously in space. Seeing discourse as voiced utterance calls attention to the differences from one person to another (xiv). There is a problem, he thinks, if discourse is always referred to as “text” and never as “voice” (xiii). He invokes Bakhtin, who he says describes discourse in terms of “voices” and “speakers” and “listeners.” He leaves no doubt that he is primarily concerned with celebrating the “discourse-as-voice lens” but he also makes clear that he is not trying to eliminate the “discourse-as-text lens.” (xiv). “About Voice and Writing” makes evident Elbow’s movement in the direction of a postmodern epistemology and politics. In the essay, it becomes clear that the doubting game is related to intellectual traditions such as semiotics and structuralism. It also becomes clear that the believing game is related to Bakhtinian post-formalism.

CONCLUSION

Elbow’s work has been misunderstood because its intellectual, cultural, and political underpinnings have not been sufficiently elaborated. He has been characterized as being concerned only with the individual divorced from social and political context and hence as politically moderate. It is certainly true that his politics are not Marxist or Marxist feminist in orientation. He does not share the political framework that informs the work of James Berlin, Lester Faigley, and Susan Jarrett. His work is nevertheless informed by a progressive and often a radical political perspective that is antimodern, has its roots in the Romantic Movement, and can be usefully compared to feminist expressivist composition. And given that he moves, especially in his later work, toward an acceptance of both subjective and objective epistemologies, his work becomes increasingly postmodern in orientation. Rather than espousing beliefs that are hopelessly out of date, Elbow’s earlier work is radical, and his later work parallels the autobiographical and postmodern turns within composition studies, feminist studies, and the humanities as a whole.
NOTES

1. Miriam Brody in *Manly Writing*, in contrast, associates Elbow’s work with male aggression rather than female nurturing. She argues that Elbow associates doubt with femininity and belief with masculinity, privileging the latter, and finds that Elbow valued “masculine control and force of meaning” in writing (183). Brody concludes her discussion of Elbow by associating him with “phallic writing” and with initiating the writer into “the power of the fun” (187). It would seem that Elbow cannot win. He is criticized for associating teaching with female nurturing and for associating writing with male aggression.

2. Elbow is not a naive idealist, but he does see himself as a visionary, as his title “Writing Assessment in the 21st Century: A Utopian View” makes clear.

3. I provide fuller explanations of these perspectives in “Rescuing Postmodernism” and in *Feminism Beyond Modernism*.

4. There is by no means consensus within the scholarly community about the nature of the politics of the Romantic Movement or about its relationship to Marxism. Forest Pyle in *The Ideology of Imagination* makes a connection between Marxist concern for the contradiction between matter and spirit and this contradiction as addressed and thematized by the Romantic imagination (11). John Williams in *Wordsworth: Romantic Poetry and Revolution Politics*, in contrast, establishes a connection between Wordsworth’s politics and eighteenth-century political protest, finding that “his reiterated appeal through nature to a transcendent, unifying moral authority governing political action . . . suggest the absorption of political principles rehearsed and fiercely debated in the shadow of the Glorious Revolution” (8). I find more compelling, however, Carl Woodring’s characterization of the Romantics in *Politics in English Romantic Poetry* as emphasizing “private emotion, the individual, the particular, the local; organic growth, organic unity, imagination, symbol, and myth” (326). Nicholas Roe in *The Politics of Nature* speaks of the disillusionment that resulted from the failure of the French Revolution and the extent to which this turned the Romantics toward a politics of nature, a politics that emphasized the private experiences of friendship and love (153).

5. Elbow makes clear his opposition to tracking in “Writing Assessment in the 21st Century: A Utopian View.”