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LITERARY CRITICISM, COMPOSITION, AND "PASSING THEORY": CONFLICTS AND CONNECTIONS

A Thesis

Presented to the

Faculty of

California State University,

San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

in

English Composition

---

by

Judy Ann Filsinger

June 1994

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June 1994

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ABSTRACT

Composition research is still a relatively new field. Therefore, composition instructors have often relied on the assumptions found in related disciplines. But it is possible that many of those assumptions work against the essential elements of composition instruction. In particular, composition instructors have turned to literary criticism when they sought theories, principals, and direction. So, it is imperative to understand the ways various ideas of literary criticism can affect the composition classroom.

Further, it is imperative to understand that there are other fields of research that can offer insight for composition instructors and their students. One such piece of research comes from the language and philosophy studies of Donald Davidson. His explanation of "passing theory" yields a remarkable parallel to beliefs about the actual process of composing. In addition, his theory presupposes meaning while literary criticism often poses such difficult questions to meaning as to render meaning-meaningless.

If composition instructors are to ask students to write and re-write, then their reasons for asking must be built on assumptions that will support the request. Otherwise students may come to doubt the validity of revision, and

from there they may come to doubt their own ability to understand or be understood.

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CHAPTER I

Student Writers and Meaning

Studies in composition are centered in meaning, but given the fact that composition has only recently been studied as a discipline of its own, teachers of composition have not always gone sure-footed over a bedrock of previous research in meaning as it pertains to writing. Many ways of thinking about meaning have been borrowed from other disciplines. While some of these ways may be well suited for use in the composition classroom, others may leave the basic student writer permanently confused, and understandably so, since at one time or another, meaning has been placed in the hands of the writer, the reader, or the text itself. Studies in literary criticism have even gone beyond these obvious connections to place meaning in the political and environmental surroundings of writer or reader, or in the psychological make-up of writer or reader; or when frustrated, scholars and literary critics have simply denied meaning altogether. They have said meaning is too relative to ever be determined and that individuals can know nothing apart from their own experience or conceptual scheme (our own categories and ways of organizing information). But wherever it exists (and if), meaning is what writers hope will be the product of their labor to be

understood, and to be understood is a basic and unavoidable human need. We anxiously ask, "Do you know what I mean?" But given our difficulty in defining meaning and our relativistic challenges to its nature, it is possible that the answer to our question must be, "How could I?"

But where would this leave the student writer attempting to answer a margin note of "What do you mean here?" It is safe to assume that since being understood is a human need and human needs have remedies, for example, air for our need to breathe, food for our hunger, water for our thirst, and rest for our weariness, that there is also a remedy for our need to be understood. In many composition classrooms students are taught that the remedy lies in rhetorical strategy. Erica Lindemann, in A Rhetoric for Writing Teachers, says that we teach "rhetoric to develop strategies for creating an effect in our audience (37). This clearly suggests that the writer can orchestrate the reader's response. The writer can "create" predetermined results through careful use of rhetorical strategy. Moreover, according to Lundsford and Edes, in their essay "On Distinctions between Classical and Modern Rhetoric," "...rhetoric provides the means through which we may both achieve identification with an other and understand that identification through the attribution of motives" (46).

Rhetoric holds that language is power and that those well versed in the use of language will advance toward whatever goal they desire, whether noble or not. Fortunately for some, rhetoric is no longer bound to the Platonic idea of ethics beyond the user's. But as writing instructors ours is not to judge the writer's intended meaning but to help the writer in bringing it to fruition. Few methods seem to offer as much help in this goal as rhetorical strategy which empowers writers, gives them reason to perfect their skill, and provides a method by which to be understood.

But in other composition classrooms the power of rhetorical strategy is diminished by the belief that meaning resides in the reader, suggesting that, like beauty, meaning is in the eye of the beholder. As Stanley Fish observes, "The shape of belief...is responsible for the shape of interpretation" (As in Dasenbrock 8). In this view reading breathes life into the words and with its breath makes the words its own. Meaning is like the colors in a child's "paint with water" book. Even though color was placed in the picture by the manufacturer, it cannot be seen until the purchaser of the book adds water. And as we know from science it is quite possible that no two people "see" color in the same way, so the manufacturer can only assume the shades seen by the purchaser. And so too the writer merely

placed the words on the page, and whatever he or she originally meant (or thought that they meant) by that action, cannot be known without the reader. The writer's intent and hope to be understood are disregarded, thereby posing a serious threat to rhetorical strategy as remedy, since the writer can only hope that the reader sees it the way the writer intended.

The belief that meaning is found in the reader is known as reader response. Reader response began as a theory in literary criticism, and it is only one of many literary approaches to meaning that can challenge the writer's ability to be understood. Literary criticism branches out in lush variety and can be found in one form or another in most composition classrooms. As Keesey says, "...the names for the types or 'schools' of criticism are bewildering in their number and diversity. We hear of moralists, humanists, and esthetes, of historians, antihistorians, Freudians and feminists, structuralists and deconstructions, old New Critics and new Critics" (Contexts for Criticism 3).

Ironically, it seems that meaning encourages diverse definitions and eludes the human effort to understand it. Still, we try. Those who are interested in understanding meaning and language have borrow ideas from science that tell them that to classify is to know. And they have

classified theories about meaning in hundreds of ways. And the problem becomes not whether these are valid theories and categories: most certainly they are. Rather the problem is what effect they have on the students writing under them. How does the writing student cope with conflicts over meaning? How do we justify the seemingly endless exercises of revision if the writer must relinquish claim to meaning once the words are put to paper, or once the words reach the reader? Why study rhetoric? Why revise? Why write? Ways of thinking about meaning that diminish the writer are flawed for use in the composition classroom. For if writers cannot produce and in some manner control meaning, on what grounds do we ask them to write? And where is our remedy for the need to be understood?

Studies in child development suggest that as infants we are utterly self-centered and that as we mature we move outward. I suggest that as writers we are never too far from the self as center. Even though student writers are taught to consider audience, they are taught to consider them, not as individuals who may teach us something about our own writing, but as subjects to be swayed. Successful writers find ways to bring the audience into sympathy with the writer's own views. The audience must be seen as willing recipients of the writer's meaning in order to

achieve this objective, not as the creators of meaning. Lindemann quotes the first position from "Teaching Composition: A Position Statement,"

> Writing is a powerful instrument of thought. In the act of composing writers learn about themselves and their world and communicate their insights to others. Writing confers the power to grow personally and to effect change in the world (226).

I believe this to be a reasonable view of writing and one that is held by most students. After all, pieces of writing have changed, and continue to change, the world. But the key word in the above quotation is "their." Writers learn about "their" world and communicate "their" insights. Writers are first concerned with self as suggested again in the second section of "Teaching Writing: A Position Statement," which says that while composing, "the writer uses language to help an audience understand something the writer knows about the world" (226). Writers write in order to be understood on their own terms. They are fundamentally self-centered. Any concern with others is to further the writer's own need. The writer's desire to have his or her truths known by another is further noted in Rhetorical Traditions and the Teaching of Writing when Knoblauch and Brannon advise writing teachers that "they must begin with what matters most to those [students] writers, namely, the making of meaningful statements consistent with the writer's

own purposes..." (122). Writers wish to create a knowable meaning-their own. This is the writer's reason for writing, whether or not it is the result. And some beliefs about meaning encourage this reason, while others do not.

Therefore, it is important to examine the theories about meaning that are most likely to enter the composition classroom and that work either for or against the writer's reason for writing.

CHAPTER II

Literary Criticism and Its Influence on Composition

One of the most accessible areas of research to the composition teacher is literary criticism. Nearly all composition teachers have studied the literary approaches to meaning. Further, they have made judgments regarding their worth and have designed discussions and assignments around favored literary approaches. In this way, literary assumptions about meaning move about the classroom as silently as dust and are in turn inhaled by the students, most of whom will not go on to study these theories for themselves, but may come to value or devalue writing because of them. Thus, the need to understand assumptions about meaning as they pertain to composition becomes apparent since in some form or another, conscious or unconscious, these theories about how to approach meaning help form the foundation and define the structure of teaching composition. Although literary criticism is not the only foundation from which assumptions about meaning are drawn, literary based assumptions are among the most prevalent. So, it is essential to evaluate their influence on student writers.

In looking at the role of literary criticism in the composition classroom, it seems advisable to establish some working terms. Donald Kessey has developed a useful system

of categories for literary criticism which deal with author, work, audience, reality and literature (3). I would like to borrow three of his terms to provide an overview of literary criticism and its influence on student writers. Those terms are Genetic Criticism, Formal Criticism, and Affective Criticism (3). And simply defined, genetic criticism is concerned with the writer, formal criticism is concerned with the text, and affective criticism is concerned with the reader.

Actually, with genetic criticism it is more precise to say that the concern is with the writer's life, since the writer is considered a product of his or her life influences, and these influences are thought to be the cause of the writing. Genetic criticism became the approach of choice in most universities through the early part of the twentieth century. This was a time of impressive strides in science, and the literary community desperately needed to prove itself against the empirical method. Genetic criticism offered that chance. It provided literary scholars with an objective and orderly scheme. In fact, seeking to understand the rapid gain of genetic criticism's favor by considering the mood of scholarly study at the time is an example of its appeal.

Genetic criticism can be defined as the in-depth study of a writer's life in order to find meaning in the writer's work. Or, as M.H. Abrams says in "Orientation of Critical Theories," "A work of art is essentially the internal made external .embodying the combined product of the poet's perceptions, thoughts, and feelings" (17). And , in most studies of genetic criticism, the combined product includes the poet's world. With varied emphasis, this approach reaches beyond the writer's personal life into the political, economic and religious environment under which the writer lived and worked. Genetic criticism rests on a foundation of determinate meaning. Here it shares in Plato's search for "the" truth, though for the genetic critic "the" truth or meaning is not found in the remembrance of ideal forms but in the thorough examination of the writer's life and times. Thus, given its belief in determinate meaning, genetic criticism sets about its work in a teachable way. The genetic critic studies the historical context of the text and collects data on the author. This knowledge is then applied to the text, believing that these things influenced the text itself. As Donald Keesey says in his introduction to Contexts for Criticism, "...if a poem is the product of an author and the author the product of an age, then nothing less than a full

understanding of that age-the author's entire political, social, and intellectual milieu-is required if we are to fully understand that author's art" (11). It is a compelling argument, but often the writer's intent is obscured by the details of his or her life and times. Genetic criticism holds that readers must be equipped with an historical context if they are to uncover textual meaning, much the same way that one searching for gold should first have acquired a map.

However, one problem for this approach seems to be how to limit the period to be studied. It seems only too easy to move from studying the "entire political, social, and intellectual milieu" of the author, to studying not only the author's relationships to friends and enemies, parents and children, but to children's friends and enemies and parent's friends and enemies as well as spouse's and associate's. We must study not only the political and social environment in which the author wrote but the political and social environment in which he or she grew up and in which his or her parents grew up. If we say that we need a context, beyond the words on the page, within which to understand meaning, then we must also need a context within which to understand our context, ad infinitum.

And still, with a great deal of information about the writer's private and public life and all the elements that surrounded it, how can we know in what way all this affected the writer? As Donald Keesey reminds us, "There are writers who had tortured relationships with their fathers and who wrote haunting allegories about harsh and inscrutable deities. Others had tortured relationships with their fathers and wrote very different kinds of books(14).

So, since the one seeking the meaning to the text cannot know just how the author's life and world affected the author, except by the author's own words, which are held suspect due to the conditions of his or her life, genetic criticism becomes a circular search for meaning. And it is a search aggravated by relativism, even though genetic critics would argue for its objectivity. Whether the glass was deemed half full or half empty by the rest of society does not tell us how it was viewed by the writer. We must trust the writer's writing for that.

Thus the problem in teaching composition from this perspective is that genetic criticism, while it acknowledges the writer, does not trust the writer's words. It reads the words and then looks to the writer's environment to find meaning, which suggests to student writers that they are not the masters of meaning. Writers become victims of their

surroundings and must write through the lens of their time. While it is possible that this is true and that we are all bound in this way, it is not motivation for grappling with revision. And if it is true, what, then, do we do with visionaries who create meaning beyond the bounds and restraints of their own time and place? Student writers need to sense the possibility of their own visionary promise and to believe that there are ways of helping others to "see."

There is, however, at least one positive condition that can occur in a classroom where there is a foundation of genetic criticism: the genetic critic does admit an intended and perhaps knowable meaning and searches for that meaning. Knowing that others put this much effort and thought into at least trying to understand what the writer meant, translates into someone working hard to find meaning in the student's writing, which in turn excites the human need to be understood. It says someone cares about the writer's idea of meaning even though the writer's reality is subject to a myriad of influences. It says to the student writer that someone will try to know them, though it cannot offer any guarantee that anyone will succeed. While genetic criticism relegates the writer to a position somewhat less than his or her surroundings, it nevertheless gives the writer some part

in the puzzle of meaning. It does not deny that the writer can still "impart" knowable information, a basis for writing, but this is nonetheless outweighed by the problem of attributing all information to influences beyond the writer's control. This idea, whether accurate or not, weakens the force that propels writing-our need to be understood on our own terms and to believe that we are individuals capable of original thought. Genetic criticism, even with its apparent interest in the writer, still challenges the writer's ability to control meaning and thought. Perhaps writing experience or maturity renders this challenge less effective, but in the beginning a writer must believe in his or her own power over meaning.

Where genetic criticism challenges writers' control over their own understanding of and reaction to the circumstances of their lives, formalism challenges the writers' control over their own words. Formalism, as defined by Donald Keesey, is the belief in "The status of the poem [writing] as an 'object,' as something that exists independently of its creator and independently of its readers ..." (75). The student writer here may begin to feel little more significant than her pen.

Formalism suggests that the text is all, surviving in, as M.H. Abrams has observed, ..."a world of its own,

independent of the world into which we are born, whose end is not to instruct or to please but simply to exist" (21). Therefore, what came before the work and what follows the work are inconsequential since the text is only a moment in the writer's life, only a gathering of experiences that then became an experience of its own. It is the offspring that leaves the parent and though conceived by the parent is still absolutely unique. Therefore, some would say, it is not necessary to know the parent in order to know the child. This idea is supported by the way a writer's work is said to change even from the writer's own intent. As Donald Murray says in his essay "Writing as Process: How Writing Finds Its Own Meaning," "At the end of the composing process there is a piece of writing which has detached itself from the writer and found its own meaning, a meaning the writer probably did not intend" (3). This is a difficult piece of information for the basic student writers who have worked through various invention techniques in order to discover their own intention, labored to employ correct rhetorical strategies in order to present their intention, and revised many times in order to protect their intention, only to arrive at a meaning they "probably did not intend."

True, in the abstract one could argue that the "unintended" meaning is really the purest form of the

"intended meaning," but student writers may not enjoy this detour through philosophy when they are having enough trouble getting through composition. Yet, formalist argument goes, the text is "an object of determinate meaning existing apart from author or audience" (Kessey 77). Since each moment in life forms a never repeated pattern, the meaning of that moment can only exist in one singular stroke of the pen. That moment, then, and meaning, is captured only in text. It is sovereign and complete.

Formal critics, like genetic critics, also sought to legitimize the study of literature by somehow objectifying it. But instead of gathering historical details concerning the period in which the writer wrote, formal critics turned to the text itself as the most objective of all, "...free from the entangling difficulties and irrelevancies of author and reader psychology" (Keesey 73). This approach divorced itself from either cause (writer) or effect (reader) and found itself replacing genetic criticism in universities by the early 1950s.

This approach can be quite appealing for the interpreters of a work. They need not spend time educating themselves on the period in which the writer wrote or on the writer's particular psychological make-up. They need only have the work before them and the knowledge that somewhere

within that work lies meaning. Formal critics advise readers that "we can and should establish what the poem [text] 'means' apart from what the author might have 'meant' and that the public nature of language and our knowledge of its norms and conventions guarantee the validity of this distinction" (Keesey 77). In other words, you do not need the carpenter after the shelves are built. The construct defines its own use.

Ideas of meaning existing solely in the text itself and having the ability to break free from the writer's intention, as suggested by Murray, would be likely to work against the student writer's efforts in several ways, but mainly, to undermine the writer's control, which makes revision a hard sell. Since composition theory places its belief in writers' abilities to say what they mean, most composition students are asked to revise not just at the sentence level, where most see some reason, but to the depth of discovery. This means a major reconstructing effort, a process Nicholas Coles calls, "so painstaking and time consuming" (168). And what do we offer in return? Referring again to Murray we offer, "a meaning the writer[s] probably did not intend" (3). We ask them to control the uncontrollable. Perhaps after studying theory, working through practice, and developing a crazed desire to

understand the writing process, many dedicated writers are able to reconcile revision with "unintended" meaning, but not basic student writers. As Coles also points out, "Those [students] whose teachers have specifically asked for revision may have come to see the request as evidence that the first draft was a mistake and as confirmation that revision itself is a form of punishment" (167). To effectively convince students of the value of revision, we need to free it from the realm of the useless and the punitive. While not impossible, selling ideas of revision from a perspective of the basic principals of formal criticism requires, at the least, a directed and careful presentation.

For example, if we go back to the idea of a construct defining its own use (we cannot use the shelves as a means of transportation), then the idea of meaning being the property and creation of text could be presented in a way less devaluing to the writer. After all, it is the writer who designs the construct, in this case-text. So, the writer's intended meaning is afforded some protection. And the more carefully the writer designs (uses rhetorical strategy)-the less variation of use. This could allow a usable connection between literary criticism and the teaching of composition since it could be argued that formal

criticism is a complement to rhetorical strategy. The writer works to create a text that as closely as possible approximates his or her reality and passes that text into the hands of the reader, who works to discover the meaning of the text (which again if constructed properly should limit the possible meanings to the intended one or nearly so). Of course, "should" is the operative word, and how are we to know?

Questions concerning our ability to ever "know" meaning in the same way as the writer intended are the domain of the affective critic. Affective critics doubt the value of writer or text in the determination of meaning They share the formalist position that the writer is irrelevant, then move on to say that text is just a system of signs, with no meaning beyond a community of interpreters who are in agreement on the significance of the signs. Therefore, the only place to consider meaning is in the reader's response to the text. As Kessey describes it,...each reading is a new creation and the poem that results is the creature of whatever 'interpretive strategies' the reader has employed. The poem 'in itself' has quite disappeared" (137). And so, too, the writer and the reason.

In fact, affective criticism, of all the forms of literary criticism, may pose the greatest challenge to the

basic student writer. Here the reader is the rhetorician employing rhetorical strategies of his or her own for purposes of interpretation and, at the end of this line of reasoning, for creating a new meaning. It is the idea of a "new" meaning that is most threatening to the writer's reason for writing. It is an overwhelming dilemma to be faced with not only the human need to be understood, but the need to fulfill a writing assignment in which others are helped to understand when "The overarching principle is: identity re-creates itself, or, to put it another way, style-in the sense of personal style-creates itself. That is, all of us, as we read, use the literary work to symbolize and finally to replicate ourselves" (Holland 124). Of course, other affective critics would say that we do more than "replicate" ourselves as we read-we grow in our own self-awareness. But neither reader self-replication nor reader self-awareness was the goal of the writer. And this forsaking of any effort to understand the writer's need and intention would be nearly intolerable to the basic student writer who must struggle through several revisions in an effort to "reach" his or her audience, an audience whose only concern is "re-creating" itself. In affective criticism we have the problem of both the writer and the reader working from a place of self.

Interestingly, affective criticism rose in the 1960s, corresponding with a period of rebellion and elevation of the self over institutions. Absolutes in religion, government, and even science were being looked at suspiciously. It wasn't as popular (or necessary) to align one's beliefs with the methods of science. So, in a time of enhanced personal freedom, affective critics freed meaning from the supportable "truth." In turn, they freed the reader from the search and discovery inherent in genetic and formal criticism. But they left the writer without cause.

Affective criticism moved along a steady course. At first it sought meaning in the reader's response to the text. When affective critics first moved from the text to the reader, it seemed only a directional change, that is meaning could be found at the end of the line of writer, text, reader. But soon meaning moved even beyond the reader and into the reader's community or system of beliefs, creating a new problem for writers in their effort to make "their" meaning known. In the essay "Is There a Text in This Class?," Stanley Fish defines the move from reader to interpretive community. Early in this essay Fish shares the story of running into a colleague at Johns Hopkins University. This colleague tells Fish about being approached by a student who had just completed a course

taught by Fish. Since apparently the student would then be taking a course from Fish's colleague, she asked him, "Is there a text in this class?" (305). Fish then goes on to explain how his colleague naturally thought the student was referring to a textbook, when in realty she was questioning a philosophy. Having taken a course in literary criticism from Fish, the student's concern was, "I mean in this class do we believe in poems and things or is it just us"? (305). Fish uses this illustration to defend affective criticism and further to define and expand the idea of the interpretative community.

First, to defend affective criticism Fish addresses his critics, namely, Meyer Abrams, by saying,

> But the answer suggested by my little story is that the utterance has 'two' literal meanings: within the circumstances assumed by my colleague (I don't mean that he took the step of assuming them, but that he was already stepping within them) the utterance is obviously a question about whether or not there is a required textbook in this particular course; but within the circumstances to which he was alerted by his student's corrective response, the utterance is just as obviously a question about the instructor's position (within the range of positions available in contemporary literary theory) on the status of the text. Notice that we do not have here a case of indeterminacy and undecidability but of determinacy and decidability that do not always have the same shape and can and in this instance do, change (306).

Fish is working here against the charge that under affective criticism we have a world "in which 'no text can

mean anything in particular' and where 'we can never say just what anyone means by anything he writes'" (305). Fish is showing that language itself is not meaning, that given the norms of understanding language, we could not know what the utterance meant. He is saying that the utterance has meaning only within the experiences of the professor and the student and within their shared institution. In other words, we cannot look at the mere words, "Is there a text in this class?" and discern the student's meaning. But, Fish would argue, this does not mean that we must arrive at any wild and "willful" meaning we so choose. After all, the professor in the story did arrive at the appropriate meaning; he did not "impose" his own. This, Fish says, is the result of the "constraints" of "the understood practices and assumptions of the institution and not the rules and fixed meaning of a language system" (306).

While it is evident that the words "Is there a text in this class?" do lend themselves to more than one interpretation, it seems more than reasonable to believe that the appropriate interpretation was arrived at not by the "constraints" of the "practices and assumptions of the institution" but by the "student's corrective response." But Fish discounts the student's role in bringing about the correct interpretation. Fish states that "we do not have

here a case of indeterminacy or undecidability" (306), but I believe we could have had such a case without the student's further explanation. And if we replace the student and the professor with the writer and the reader, we have a excellent argument for asking writers to revise and for asking readers to abandon, at least temporarily, their preconceptions since without the writer's "corrective" measures we could have an "imposed" and "willful" meaning.

But, again, comes the troublesome issue of the difference between the validity of asking the reader to abandon his or her preconceptions and the actual ability to do so. As Fish goes on in his essay, he explains the idea of the interpretive "situation." In this explanation he both expands the idea of interpretive communities and opens the door for a notable attack on this type of idea. But most of all he suggests that the reader cannot escape the interpretive community, the "world of already-in-place objects, purposes, goals, procedures, values, and so on" (304).

This idea contains so much that works against the writer's reason for writing that it deserves close consideration lest it undermine the teaching of composition. First, the idea of meaning being dependent on the interpretive community severely diminishes the writer. In

the same way that little credit is given in Fish's illustration to the student for averting misunderstanding, so too, under reader response criticism, little (or no) credit is given to the writer. Fish claims that the professor moved from assuming that the student was inquiring about a textbook to the understanding that she was inquiring about a philosophic perspective because "he must already be thinking within those circumstances" (313). Further, Fish states that the professor was able to do this because "...it was already part of his repertoire for organizing the world and its events" (313). In this same way, Fish suggests that some people "get" his story of the student immediately while others do not. Those who "get" it are those who "...come to hear me [Fish] speak because they are the people who already know my position on certain matters" (312). Therefore, they came not to be challenged or changed-but to be confirmed. This is what many affective critics say happens when we read.

But, if this is so, how did those people come to know Fish's position in the first place? Did they all arrive at the conclusion simultaneously while Fish simply articulated it? Is this method of making meaning (interpretive communities) one of those "already-in-place objects"? If so, why didn't everyone "get" it? Because the idea of

interpretive communities was not "already-in-place" even within its own interpretive community. It was a unique branch that had been cultivated from a certain variety of thought. And it needed its originator to use his best rhetorical strategy to explain its uniqueness. Certainly, it was most easily explained to those who had previous knowledge of its genesis, but even they had to make adjustments in their schemes (or ways of knowing) to accommodate and finally accept it. Given careful enough construction of explanation and argument, even a person with no prior knowledge of literary theory, (from outside the interpretive community) could come to understand the idea of such a community, thereby suggesting that it is the writer's methods that "constrain" meaning-not the interpretive community.

So, unless we believe that writers do not care what shape their thoughts are made to take, we must be careful with ideas of affective criticism. It is, at least, discouraging to the student writer. We cannot ask student writers to revise if we believe that they could not possibly end up saying what they "mean." We cannot ask them to revise while stealing their vision or sealing them in the vacuum of "conceptual scheme." We cannot ask them to revise if we believe they hand their efforts over to an all powerful,

self-centered reader, who plunders with impunity. We can only ask them to revise because revision works. And revision only works if it produces the intended meaning and lets writers share who they are and what they believe with other human beings who are willing to go and "know" beyond themselves.

Many will argue that this is a severely limited overview of literary criticism and does not do justice to its theories. I agree. But this is just what most students writers get. They are not students of literary criticism. They come into contact with it as students from many disciplines needing to get through required writing courses, and literary criticism comes at them in pieces and slogans and partial premises. On the surface, at least, it seldom supports the writer which can make it a hostile presence in the composition classroom.

Writers write to be understood, to be exposed. That is what makes writing frightening. That is what makes it irresistible. Like the moth to the flame, writers are drawn to the light of self-expression. When the writer writes to the audience, it is with the faith that audiences read first to understand what is before them. As writers we expect a certain integrity from readers. We expect that in as much as possible they will try to move beyond who they are and

into who we are. We expect them to become partners in our self-expression. Perhaps that is selfish and naive. Perhaps given ideas of conceptual scheme and interpretive communities that is impossible. Nevertheless, honor demands it.

And if there is to be honor in the writer/reader relationship then we must be careful with literary criticism, and in particular, we must be careful with ideas that the reader is a hapless victim tossed about within the safe confines of his or her own scheme. In the same way that believing the writer cannot escape a predictability of thought based on the consequences of time and place can destroy a writer's motivation, so, too, believing that the reader cannot escape those confines destroys the motivation of each.

On the whole, whether it encourages or discourages, literary criticism, in its many forms, does affect the student writer. The effect may be a function of form, as appears in the case of how affective criticism seems to work more against the student writer than does formal or genetic criticism, or it may be a function of presentation. Even affective criticism could be shown in a somewhat favorable relationship to the writer's purpose in that readers and writers share in the activity of attempting to know the

self, and that knowing the self may not preclude knowing and understanding others. Thus it becomes important for the writing instructor to know the self also, so that choices in form and presentation can be made to give student writers a reason to write and to keep writing through revision. But more important the instructor needs to stay open to ideas of meaning and how they work in the composition classroom. The instructor needs to believe in the possibility of meaning and the methods for sharing personal meaning with others. As M.H. Abrams reminds us,

> The paramount cause of poetry is not, as in Aristotle, a formal cause, determined primarily by the human actions and qualities imitated; nor, as in neoclassic criticism a final cause, the effect intended upon the audience; but instead an efficient cause--the impulse within the poet of feelings and desires seeking expression...(17).

Of all the choices given to the world when it encounters a piece of writing, one should be that the writing represents just what the writer hoped it would, and conveys exactly that to the reader. With all its variations, literary criticism still does not offer that choice. And yet literary criticism does have influence in the composition classroom. Perhaps the choice that writers can impart their meaning to others is idealistic, but there are theories that suggest it is possible, and if not possible why do we bother to ask "Do you know what I mean?"

CHAPTER III

"Passing Theory" and Composition

Of course, teachers of composition do not rely solely on the theories of literary criticism as a basis for composition instruction. Recent research in composition has offered new directions for composition instructors, but these directions center mainly in methods and assignments. With new understanding of how writers do what they do, the rush is naturally toward application. When writing instructors think about meaning, they are usually still drawing from sources established and defined by literary criticism. And, as shown in the previous chapter, defining meaning under the terms of literary criticism can create a conflict of interests. On the one hand, are the choices that meaning lies either in the circumstances of the writer's life, or is made apart from the writer altogether, or is made by the reader. On the other hand, is the need to convince student writers that it is they who make meaning.

This battle over the nature of meaning has long been and will probably always be. If we take a pragmatic approach, it may not need to be resolved in order to instruct writing students from a place of conviction regarding the students' control of meaning. We simply need to acknowledge that ways of writing, such as rhetorical

strategy, can help the writer create a piece of writing that can be understood by a reader. And, furthermore, composition instructors need to acknowledge that even though writing itself is recursive it does not simply lead readers back to their old ideas; in composition, an old form is used to create a new form. Instead of entering a process and undergoing complete disintegration only to return to our former construction, we emerge from the writing process, to varying degrees, changed. We emerge from the process with new possibilities of thought. We emerge from the process already through the entrance to further exploration.

The recursiveness of the writing process, the way that a writer looks backward into his or her writing to chart the next forward movement, leaves the writer strangely connected to endings and beginnings. While in composition the smallest addition or deletion can make an idea suddenly unique - separate from its past yet ready to assist in the creation of its future - recursiveness nevertheless leaves the writer in flux, fully separate from neither past nor future. The writer is still looking back, waiting for the old to become new again.

As Sondra Perl states in her essay "Understanding Composing,

> We have advocated the idea that writing is a recursive process, that throughout the process of

> writing, writers return to substrands of the overall process, or subroutines (short successions of steps that yield results on which the writer draws in taking the next set of steps); writers use these to keep the process moving forward" (115).

Perl goes on to list three elements of recursiveness as follows:

> 1. The most visible recurring feature or backward movement involves rereading little bits of discourse. Few writers I have seen write for long periods of time without returning briefly to what is already down on the page...
>
> 2. The second recurring feature is some key word or item called up by the topic. Writers consistently return to their notion of the topic throughout the process of writing. Particularly when they are stuck, writers seem to use the topic or a key word in it as a way to get going again. Thus many times it is possible to see writers 'going back', rereading the topic they were given, changing it to suit what they have been writing or changing what they have written to suit their notion of the topic.
>
> 3. There is also a third backward movement in writing, one that is not so easy to document. It is not easy because the move, itself, cannot immediately be identified with words. In fact, the move is not to any words on the page nor to the topic but to feelings or non-verbalized perceptions that surround the words, or to what the words already present evoke in the writer. The move draws on sense experience, and it can be observed if one pays close attention to what happens when writers pause and seem to listen or otherwise react to what is inside of them. The move occurs inside the writer, to what is physically felt...(115)

If we accept the idea of the recursive nature of writing (and I am unaware of any opposition to it since it is an observable and recordable phenomena), then the

shortcomings of literary criticism, particularly affective varieties, for use in the composition classroom become even clearer. None of the literary theories so far studied allows for this type of movement since they are linear. The literary critic seeks to place meaning at a specific point along the line of writer-text-reader (or beyond). While there may be some recursiveness within each point, each point remains, nonetheless, separate. Placing meaning in this type of isolation may serve the literary critic well, but, again, it does not serve the writing student.

One of the main objectives of teaching composition is to help a writer to make his or her thoughts and feelings understandable to another. And, in part, this objective relies on recursiveness which, of course, does not work with points along a line. Recursiveness in composing builds from reading the previous sentence in order to create the next sentence to searching through the previous idea in order to create the next idea.

To further illustrate the scope of recursiveness in writing let us consider the following explanation of the writing process from a beginning level writing text, Contexts. The authors identify three stages of writing: preparation, reading/writing, and review. Though the names of these stages change from text to text (another common

version being pre-writing, writing, and revision), the stages themselves represent the currently agreed upon beliefs regarding the general stages of the process of writing. But they are not seen as necessarily coming in that order, or as stages to be completed before moving on to the next. The function of the stages, as they are used by writers, is fluid. Or as also described in Contexts, "Writers and readers may therefore move back and forth between the stages, proceeding to one before completing another or returning to an earlier one before moving forward again. Or they may engage in two stages at the same time"(3).

Therefore, we can establish an important distinction between literary theory and composition theory. The literary critic places meaning at a fixed point, but the composition theorist works recursively, placing meaning in overlapping junctions. It follows, then, that the assumptions found in literary criticism, no matter how carefully presented, are not naturally compatible with what is known about how (and why) writers compose. What, then, shall we tell student writers about meaning? Again, it must be admitted that literary criticism offers compelling and generally accepted arguments about meaning, and that it is present in the basic assumptions of composition teachers.

But what must also be present is the belief that purposeful and effective composition can be taught, composition, here, meaning both a set of skills (rhetoric) and body of knowledge, together presenting workable solutions for composition students regarding meaning.

The body of knowledge in composition is supported by studies of how writers write. Because of the work of Flower & Hayes, Janet Emig, Donald Murray and countless others who broke ground by moving composition from practitioner experiences to supportable research, teachers can tell students what is known about the process of writing. They can assure students that while it seems chaotic to wander back and forth within the sentences, ideas, and stages of process, for many writers this is the way it is done.

Further, they can show students how this seeming chaos leads to meaning. But as teachers they must believe all this is true. With this belief, teachers can more effectively teach students rhetorical and editing skills. They can tell them that these skills enhance, clarify, and protect meaning. But they must believe this too. In order to be a workable theory in the composition classroom, the theory must accommodate recursiveness and treat meaning as something obtainable by teachable/learnable methods. If the theory embraces these two tenets, the instructor does not

risk the conflict of interest that can occur when composition instruction attempts to build on a foundation of critical literary theory. Since literary theory cannot in its present stage of development be made to fit the needs of the beginning writing student, we should look at other related theories; one elegantly compatible theory comes to composition from the philosophy and language studies of Donald Davidson.

Davidson's work includes "passing theory," a theory that appears to be in direct agreement with composition theory. But before looking at how "passing theory" can be applied to composition, it is important to note that Davidson's work does not deny the various theories of literary criticism; it greatly expands them. It gives interpreters (or readers) credit to accept new truths as they become evident:

> We get a new out of an old scheme when the speakers of a language come to accept as true an important range of sentences they previously took to be false (and, of course, vice versa). We must not describe this change simply as a matter of their coming to view old falsehoods as truths... A change has come to the meaning of the sentence because it now belongs to a new language ("On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme" 188).

For the purposes of composition, we could say that this "new language" came by way of the writer. Further, we could say that the writer was able to accomplish this through

careful construction of the writing. "Coming to view old falsehoods as truths" or conversely coming to view old truths as falsehoods is within the domain of both writer and reader.

For the writer, believing that old falsehoods can become new truths or that old truths can become new falsehoods affirms the process of writing. This possibility is a remedy for the need to be understood. This makes understanding achievable and, therefore, worth striving to impart and obtain. One of the considerations in teaching writing is that in addition to the reader coming to understand something not previously understood, the writer, too, might come to a new understanding. But both of these possibilities are lost if we accept certain elements of literary criticism, for example, if we accept that we are all (both writer and reader) bound to our own conceptual scheme as seen in both affective and genetic criticism, or if we accept that even the writer cannot really understand the words after they leave his or her mind as seen in formalism.

But Davidson offers a reasonable alternative, one that does not leave either writer or reader trapped in a closed system, one that allows a free exchange of energy and thought. Davidson begins with many of the notions common in

literary criticism, but in keeping with his theories, he does not end there. "Passing theory" allows Davidson three overlapping points from which to enter into interpretation. And while Davidson, too, struggles with ideas of meaning, he suggests that the elusive nature of meaning does not deny the possibility of it. And neither do questions of meaning deny the possibility of interpretation.

Included in Davidson's philosophies about meaning is an interesting explanation of how interpretation is accomplished. Though Davidson is mainly discussing interpretation of speech, his work applies nicely to interpretation of the written word. Davidson offers an extremely reasonable account of what goes on between speaker and hearer. He believes that speaker and hearer (and I believe in much the same way, writer and reader) come together at a certain point in time with all their prior theories about language and truth and how to use language to understand and be understood. "The speaker wants to be understood, so he utters words he believes can and will be interpreted in a certain way. In order to judge how he will be interpreted, he forms, or uses, a picture of the interpreter's readiness to interpret along certain lines" (A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs 443).

By this statement, Davidson suggests a spirit of cooperation between speaker and hearer (writer and reader). Davidson believes that while the speaker and interpreter do not encounter each other with exactly the same prior theories, having different prior theories does not eliminate the possibility of understanding as it does in Fish's explanation of reader response theory. This is the point of divergence between Fish and Davidson and between literary criticism and composition theory. The difference is not in the belief in either prior theory or conceptual scheme, but in the implications of such. What does it mean that readers and writers come from various backgrounds and accepted truths? For Fish it means there can be no way of knowing the truth of another. For Davidson it simply means that the reader and writer come from different backgrounds and accepted truths. For Fish it is the end. For Davidson it is the beginning.

As Davidson explains, "In any case, my point is this: most of the time prior theories will not be shared, and there is no reason why they should be. Certainly, it is not a condition of successful communication that prior theories be shared..." (A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs 443). So, even though every individual comes from a unique background and this unique background has led the individual to develop

personal strategies for understanding (conceptual scheme), this does not mean that the interpreter can never know the words of the speaker in the way that the speaker knows them.

Applying Davidson's theories, it seems the very pronouncement that knowing the truth of another is impossible is confirmation that it is possible. For the only way that we could know that our truth is different from another's truth is to understand the truth of another.

And applied to writing, it seems reasonable that the reader, working from his or her own conceptual scheme, can also come to know the words of the writer in the same way the writer knows them, which would fulfill the very purpose of writing. This is not to say that this will happen every time a reader encounters a piece of writing, only that this type of coming to terms with a writer's meaning is available to the reader. And beginning writers in particular need to know this.

Next, in Davidson's work on meaning, comes the theory that makes understanding possible. This is the theory Davidson calls "passing theory:"

> I have distinguished what I have been calling the prior theory from what I shall henceforth call the passing theory. For the hearer, the prior theory expresses how he is prepared in advance to interpret an utterance of the speaker, while the passing theory is how he **does** interpret the utterance (442).

Further, Davidson stresses that passing theory is "... where, accident aside, agreement is greatest." If we take passing theory into the writer/reader experience, we could say that the reader enters the text with prior theory, but upon reading the writer's words, the reader must adapt prior theory to accommodate any part of the writer's words or meanings that do not fit into the prior understanding. This accommodation does not necessarily mean an instant meeting of the minds between writer and reader, but it does mean a change in the reader's prior theory with each development of passing theory. This is essential to anyone ever coming to understand concepts new to them; and the progress of the human race is evidence that we can come to new understandings, proving that we are not prisoners to our conceptual schemes either personally or collectively.

To take our understanding of the implications of Davidson's theories on writing even further, we can turn to an article by Reed Dasenbrock in College English called, "Do We Write the Text We Read?" Dasenbrock uses Davidson's work to support the study of literature, since the study of literature itself would become rather moot under a system of conceptual relativism. Why study a piece of writing if the only possible conclusion to be drawn is the one the

interpreter held to begin with? Dasenbrock quotes Jonathan Culler as saying, "A reader who creates everything learns nothing" (As in Dasenbrock 14). And Dasenbrock then goes on to say himself that, "Interpretations are not always self-confirming; interpreters do not always produce interpretations utterly consistent with their prior beliefs and theories; theories are sometimes adjusted to fit experience rather than vice versa" (14). This is sound reasoning in support of the study of rhetorical strategy and in the practice of revision; it would serve no purpose to select correct rhetorical strategy and revise to clarify meaning if the reader is not able to adjust his or her theories to accommodate all this effort on the writer's part.

Other of Dasenbrock's arguments in support of literary studies work equally well in support of current composition theory. Dasenbrock provides an illustration of a classroom where the students enter "with an unconscious but tenacious prior theory that works of literature can teach us about life" (15). Only in this classroom the instructor enters with a theory based in affective criticism, that (in essence) nothing means anything, since we are "doomed...to write the text we read according to our own beliefs and values" (15). Here are two conflicting "prior theories"

regarding the study of literature, but Dassenbrock continues to develop his point by discussing the students' reaction to the novel The Age of Innocence. As the students encounter the end of the novel, they are challenged by an ending that moves outside of the predictable. In other words, it is not what the students believe they themselves would have done in that situation, nor is it what they would have liked for the characters to do. The action of the characters is beyond the students' past experience. Therefore, part of the students' "prior theory" cannot accommodate this new experience. But the students also held a "prior theory" that "literature can teach us about life." So, here the students must either adopt a new theory to account for the ending of Wharton's novel or they must abandon the old theory that literature teaches them about life. Either way they cannot simply return to the old conceptual scheme.

The Age of Innocence ended as it ended. It did not end as expected. The thing has happened and must now be dealt with. Dasenbrock shows how this can be done using "passing theory." Since "passing theory" is a place to begin, students start to ask questions regardinq the novel, its ending, and its author. Dasenbrock states that the, .students encounter someone who shares much of their beliefs (about, for example, the importance of love)" (16), but this

same someone then acts in a way contrary to those beliefs. Through reflection and discussion and questioning, the students then adjust prior theory to allow for the action taken by the character in The Age of Innocence. This can be done whether or not the student accepts that the action was correct. The students may in fact disagree with the action, but the fact that someone might see the action differently, or that this action is indeed a possibility, has been incorporated into the students' prior theory. Dasenbrock sums it up quite well:

> In short, to interpret another's utterance we begin by assuming provisional agreement on what we believe to be true. But that provisional, heuristic step is necessary only because as we actually interpret, we encounter anomalies, sentences that don't seem to agree with what we hold true. Our immediate reaction when we encounter difference is to refuse that difference, to preserve the maximum of agreement, and there are times when this works, when we get away with assuming that we are saying the same thing if by different words. But the interesting moments are when this doesn't work so well, when we realize that what we are interpreting does express beliefs different from our own (16).

Dasenbrock does not return to the instructor of the class that he used as an example. But it would seem an easy step from Dasenbrock's discussion of how the students responded to building a case on how all this affected the instructor who held that we are "doomed ... to write the text we read according to our own beliefs and values" (15).

The instructor held this belief as his prior theory upon entering the classroom. She, like the students, was then in the position of encountering something that did not fit her prior theory or her conceptual scheme. Based on her prior theory she would need to either discount the entire experience of the students and convince herself that in realty they had learned nothing or to abandon her prior theory. If she chooses the first, then there is no purpose to her profession. If she chooses the second, then she admits the possibility that the reader does more than "write" the text. She admits the possibility that the reader comes to understand the text in not previously understood terms, that instead of the reader defining the text by his or her reading of it, the reader was able to redefine his or her own understanding. Therefore, it seems possible to suggest that the writer was able to impart his or her own "meaning" to the reader.

That the reader then accepts the new understanding as correct or appropriate remains another matter. What is important to beginning writers, and those who teach them, is that imparting a writer's own meaning is possible. With this the writing instructor can effectively teach what is known about writing. The writing instructor can share the tools of rhetorical strategy and the methods of process.

The instructor can convincingly stress the benefits of revision and editing. This can be done because of the assumption that meaning exists and is translatable. And this assumption is quite compatible with Davidson's passing theory." In fact, if considered side by side, "passing theory" and composition theory create an interestingly similar pattern.

First, composition students are instructed to consider their audience and to select from the available writing styles the one most likely to "move" that particular audience. Or as Erika Lindemann has said in A Rhetoric for Writing Teachers, "When we practice rhetoric, we use language, either spoken or written, to 'induce cooperation' in an audience" (36). Clearly, the belief here is that writers are writing to malleable readers. And Davidson's "passing theory" of interpretation works with the same kind of belief. Passing theory, again, holds that the reader/interpreter enters into interpretation with a full set of prior beliefs and experiences, but that the reader (interpreter) is not limited by these beliefs and experiences; rather, the beliefs and experiences of the reader/interpreter fill only one space within the mind. There are other spaces. And it is within these other spaces that new truths are born. It is also within these other

spaces that writers can "induce cooperation." For a composition instructor to be effective, he or she must believe in these other spaces. For the composition instructor steeped too strongly in literary theory, especially reader response, it is difficult to believe in these other spaces.

Composition instructors also discuss the ways in which rhetorical and grammatical choices can protect the student's meaning. This, of course, assumes that meaning exists. Davidson also assumes that meaning exists, although for Davidson the concept of meaning is the product of the translation of sentences or the "truth" of the sentence. "Having identified his utterance as intentional and linguistic, we are able to go on to interpret his words, we can say what his words, on that occasion, meant" ("Radical Interpretation" 125). Much of Davidson's effort is directed at designing theories of how we are able to understand the utterances of another, to grasp their meaning. In his essay "Belief and the Basis of Meaning" Davidson states that "Theories of belief and meaning may require no exotic objects, but they do use concepts which set such theories apart from the physical and other non-psychological sciences..."(154). In order to advance theories on meaning it is necessary to accept the existence of meaning. And so,

too, the act of creating meaning within ourselves and capturing it in writing for others requires an acceptance of meaning's existence.

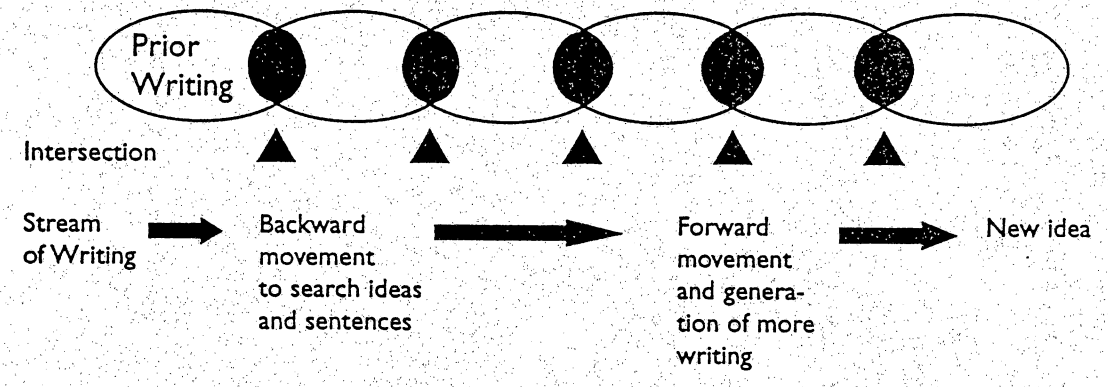
In addition to discussions of audience, rhetoric, and grammar, the concept and act of recursiveness is explained in the composition class. Here the instructor might share studies where writers have recorded on tape their thoughts and actions during an actual writing exercise. With this it can be seen how real writers go back and forth, searching the prior ideas and sentences for the elements and impetus of the next set of ideas and sentences, moving back to gain the thrust to move forward. The students might be told that some people do this with every sentence while others move back at certain points of idea development, and still others move back at some private signal when for some unknown reason the flow of words simply stops. This recursiveness is often drawn out for students on the board as a series of overlapping lines. Interestingly, Dasenbrock's account of Davidson's theories can be shown by the same pattern of overlapping lines (see illustration pg. 50). Going back for a moment to Perl's list of the elements of recursiveness, it can be seen how these elements are present in Davidson's theory. First, Perl states that "Few writers...write for long...without returning briefly to what is already down on

the page...(115). Second, writers return to "their notion of the topic" (115). And third, writers go back and "seem to listen...to what is inside of them" (115). This compares well to Davidson's "prior theory," passing theory" and "new prior theory." (See illustration on following page.)

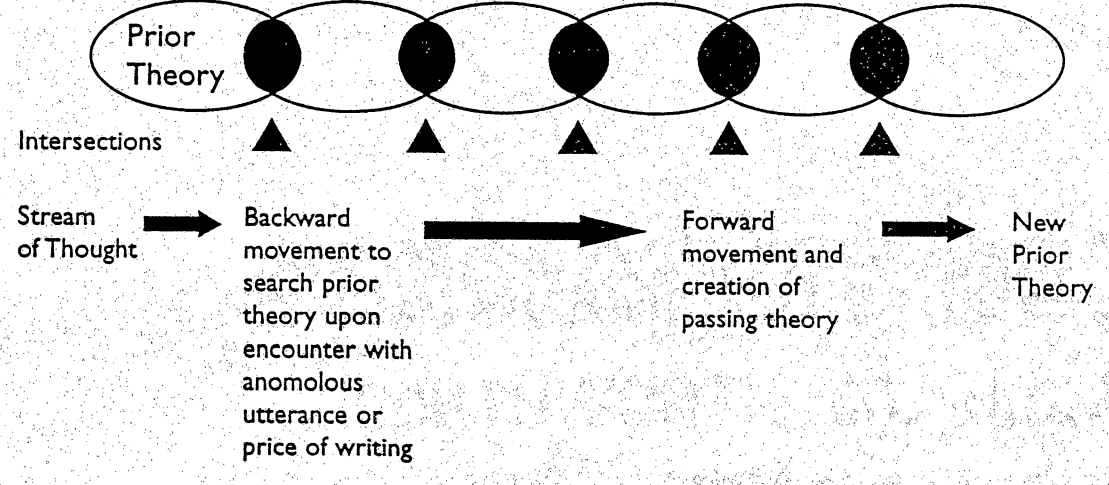
Clearly, the elements of recursiveness described by Perl and the ways of "passing theory" described by Davidson have strong parallels. Perl explains how writers go back and draw against existing knowledge to create new knowledge, and Davidson's explains how interpreters go back to prior theories to create new theories. Davidson's work on "passing theory" allows the composition instructor to believe in a transferable meaning.

Beliefs guide our choices in life, and beliefs about composition guide our choices in teaching. Choices in teaching come in the form of methods, priorities and assignments, all based on assumptions about meaning. Methods are the ways instructors present their beliefs about their subject. In Eight Approaches to Teaching Composition, Timothy R. Donovan and Ben W. McClelland explain eight methods of teaching, all based on a belief in writing as a process. Donovan and McClelland assert that the teaching of composition has broken away from traditional instruction in much the same way that a scientific theory breaks away from

RECURSIVENESS OF THE WRITING PROCESS



RECURSIVENESS OF DAVIDSON'S THEORIES OF INTERPRETATION



previous theories. In other words, once it was proven that the world was not flat, there was no longer any need to address questions dealing with at what point one would fall off. And now that we understand that writing is more than form, that we do little if we teach a student where to place commas but not how to access ideas, we no longer need to address questions of the best way to achieve correctness. The questions have changed and with them our beliefs have changed. So, too, the methods of instruction have changed, requiring that we hold our methods up to our assumptions and test the fit.

Eight Approaches to Teaching Composition further identifies the most widely used current methods as "The Prose Model Approach," "The Experiential Approach," "The Rhetorical Approach," "The Epistimic Approach," "Basic Writing," "The Writing Conference," and "Writing in the Total Curriculum." Each of these approaches represents an overriding belief in the writing process, but as has been discussed, under that belief still lurk many seeds of literary criticism. And now that composition has a growing body of research, research that is defined by writers and the ways of writing and not by the finished product, the seeds of literary criticism can be left to grow in their own

field and not formed into hybrid versions in support of the teaching of composition.

Each of the methods of writing instruction described in Eight Approaches to Teaching Composition relies in its own way on three characteristics. The first of these characteristics is the existence of meaning. And for this, writing instructors are not necessarily bound to understand the nature of that existence. They take it on faith. For without meaning, they have no cause to ask writers to write. The second characteristic is that there are ways of improving a writer's chances to impart meaning. Third is that there is an audience that is capable of translating the writing. And here translating means not just understanding the words but also having a willingness and capacity on the part of the reader to look beyond the reader's own sense of the words.

These are the ways of teach writing and the conditions that those ways rest upon. But searching out theories to support those ways and meet those conditions is not an attempt to validate the writing instruction. It is an attempt to unify the instruction with the beliefs that govern it. It is not an attempt to discount the theories of other disciplines; it is an attempt to examine and adopt those that work most closely with what is known about

composition. Searching out theories is the act of reaching back to what already exists in order to create something new. And it is being pragmatic enough to accept what works best in a given situation. For composition instructors that given situation is the composition classroom. In that classroom, thinking in terms of "passing theory" could yield effective teaching of composition.

There is a uniqueness in the teaching of composition and a madness in the relationship of the writer and the writing. The uniqueness is in the on-going nature of writing. Many writing instructors tell their students that the writing is never really finished. And this is true. This unfinishedness is what creates the madness of the relationship. Since the writer is changing with every word he or she writes, it is important to understand that this is natural, that this is both the way and the reason we create.

Students can become easily disenchanted with this lack of closure unless it has purpose, which the belief in meaning provides. Again, in the first position of "Teaching Composition: A Position Statement" we are told that "...writers learn about themselves and their world and communicate their insights to others" (226). But the belief in the ability to "communicate" insights to others is

constantly challenged by many of the theories of literary criticism.

For purposes of teaching composition it may be wise to simply accept that writing is teachable, that writing can impart the writer's intended meaning to others and that readers read to understand the meaning of another not just to forge that meaning into the reader's own scheme. Certainly, all these ideas are supportable. They are supported by composition research that tells us that writing is a recursive process that challenges writers to understand themselves and teaches them the art of sharing that understanding with others. It presupposes that such an exchange is possible. They are supported by the studies of Donald Davidson in his work on the translatability of language and "passing theory" which elegantly argues that unless we accept that there are ways of knowing what another means, we can "make sense neither of our own beliefs or the beliefs of another" (Dasenbrock 10). And they are supported by readers who have had the experience of breaking from their old theories in an elegant moment of new understanding.

In one quiet, glorious moment we understood. And we remain eternally grateful to the writer who worked to make that moment possible-the moment when we said, "Yes, I know

what you mean." This is the experience and the hope that composition instructors can pass on to their students, not the belief that it will happen every time to everyone, but that that moment is possible.

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