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# Romantics on Writing: Liberal Culture and the Abolition of Composition Courses

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## Romantics on Writing: Liberal Culture and the Abolition of Composition Courses

David R. Russell

On no one subject of education has so great an amount of effort been put forth as on the teaching of English composition, with so little satisfactory to show for it.

Thomas R. Lounsbury, 1911

I believe that the standard college course in Freshman composition has done much more harm than good, and the greatest service that college teachers of English could render to their profession and to collegiate education in general would be to urge the immediate abolition of the course everywhere. Oscar James Campbell, 1937

In the century or so that required freshman composition courses have been in existence, critics have often called for their abolition. Indeed, no other subject of study in the university has been so -persistently and bitterly attacked, as historians have often noted (Berlin, Rhetoric; Greenbaum; Parker). I cannot in this space recount the whole history of the attempts to abolish composition courses. Instead I will analyze the arguments that the abolitionists used to attack the courses, and in doing so explore the assumptions which lay behind their opposition- assumptions which continue to fuel the conflicts within English studies: between teachers of literature and of literacy, between exponents of competing theories of the composing process, and, finally, between those who favor and those who oppose wider access to the academic community.

Though English departments were founded at the close of the nineteenth century largely to teach writing, and freshman composition has been the most constant part of a shifting elective curriculum ever since, composition courses have rarely been a full part of the university. Dismissed as remedial or preparatory, condemned as ineffective, passed down like old clothes to junior faculty, graduate students, or part-timers, the courses have generally remained on the periphery of the institution, a necessary evil to many administrators (and students), and an unavoidable nuisance to English departments who depended on them for enrollments. Freshman English was thus an easy target for those who wished the English department and the university to preserve the elite character of the institution, which had faded at the turn of

the century with the rise of the comprehensive modern university and its decidedly middle-class, professional emphasis.

The core of this opposition lay in what Laurence Veysey and others have called "liberal culture," which espoused a "Brahminical romanticism" (Berlin's term) in opposition to the democratic, vocational, and scientific orientation of the new university. Centered in the new English departments, advocates of liberal culture resisted the encroachments of scientific and professional fields as middle-class barbarisms, which thwarted liberal culture's Arnoldian ideal of the "well-rounded man," a person with "a wide vision of the best things which man has done or aspired after" (qtd. in Veysey 186). Though liberal culture purported to be the successor of the classical tradition in the university, it resisted the teaching of classical languages and rhetoric, preferring instead modern literature, particularly English and French.

Significantly, liberal culture viewed this literature in Romantic terms, with a heavy emphasis on idealist and transcendental interpretations, as distinct from the logical or scientific study of texts in the philological tradition (which it also resisted). The study of literature, wrote a Cornell professor in 1894, achieves "the true aim of culture," which is "to induce soul states or conditions, soul attitudes, to attune the inward forces to the idealized forms of nature and of human life produced by art, and not to make the head a cockloft for storing away barren knowledge" (qtd. in Veysey 185). Moreover, advocates of liberal culture were elitist, suspicious of the democratic reforms sweeping the university, particularly rising enrollments and the specialized elective curriculum. They saw these as a threat to the standards of taste that liberal culture defended—often with terms borrowed from social Darwinists. In 1909, for example, Reed College president William T. Foster attacked "this democratic leniency toward the unfit, favoring self-supporting students at the expense of intellectual standards" (qtd. in Veysey 211). Given these attitudes, it is not surprising that many advocates of liberal culture resisted the idea that the English department should offer a "service course" for the very scientific and professional fields which threatened the position of the humanities in the new comprehensive university. In his recent history of twentieth-century writing instruction, James Berlin says, "The educational ideal of liberal culture did not survive as a major force" after the 1930s, though he goes on to point out its continuing influence, particularly in the New Criticism of the 1950s and 1960s. (46, 72, 107-11).

My analysis of some fifteen calls for abolition published over the last eighty years suggests that liberal culture has indeed had a deep and continuing influence on writing instruction, not only within the classroom, but in the role writing instruction plays in the university. 1 To assess this influence, it is necessary to expose the assumptions that undergird the position of liberal culture on writing.

Almost all abolitionists based their arguments on the Romantic assumptions that informed literary study during the rise of the modern university. As Richard Young has suggested, Romanticism, "with its stress on the natural powers of the mind and the uniqueness of the creative act, leads to a repudiation of the possibility of teaching the composing process, hence the tendency to become a critical study of the products of composing and an act of editing" (31). Young, Berlin, and, most recently, Lester Faigley have already explored the implications of

this conflict for composition theory and pedagogy. In this essay I will explore the political implications of the conflict by analyzing the rhetoric of two important abolitionists, who carried Romantic assumptions to their logical conclusion: If ultimately writing cannot be taught, then composition courses should be abolished. And, they went on to argue, if composition is merely editing, then it is antithetical to literary study and, indeed, to higher education-so much so that the university has a moral obligation to remove it. Thus, for these abolitionists, the existence of composition courses in college English departments represented a challenge to their fundamental beliefs about the nature of both writing and of higher education.

## Two Abolitionists

In 1911 Thomas R. Lounsbury, emeritus professor of English at Yale and one the most distinguished literary scholars of his age, published a screed against compulsory composition courses in *Harper's*. During his forty-year career, he had witnessed the birth and growth of composition courses, and was admittedly bitter about having spent "for a quarter of a century . . . a distinctly recognizable share of my time reading and correcting themes" (866). With the *Harper's* article, Lounsbury entered a debate raging in the popular press over the role of English departments in the new mass education system, a debate which led to the founding of the NCTE in the same year by Fred Newton Scott, Wilbur Hatfield, James Hosis, and many midwestern and New York City public school teachers. The NCTE opposed the position of Lounsbury and others in the eastern literary establishment, centered at Yale and Princeton, which advocated more restrictive enrollments and the teaching of liberal culture through literature (Berlin, "Rhetoric" 40).

In 1937, a quarter of a century later, Oscar James Campbell of Columbia published "The Failure of Freshman English." He was a former assistant to Barrett Wendell, who followed A. S. Hill, the founder of the course, in developing what is now called current-traditional rhetoric. Campbell had become disillusioned with composition instruction, and as a young professor at Michigan was a leader in the battle with Fred Newton Scott's rhetoric department over control of the curriculum. Campbell's "Harvard Men" eventually won out over Scott's "Michigan Men" (though only after Scott had retired), and Campbell went on to chair the 1934 NCTE committee on college English, which was highly critical of composition.<sup>2</sup> He moved to Columbia in 1936, where freshman composition had been abolished in favor of an Oxbridge-style tutorial system of graduate student "preceptors." There, he became a leading advocate of the New Criticism.

Though the personalities and the rhetorical contexts differ, the rhetorical strategies of Lounsbury and Campbell are remarkably similar, and the two men represent the thought of all but a few abolitionists. Both begin with a cardinal principle of Romanticism: writing-"expression" as the Romantics called it-cannot be taught, at least not in a composition course. Says Lounsbury, "The fundamental fallacy ... is that the art of expression is something which can be made a matter of direct instruction, just as arithmetic can be or history or chemistry or any foreign tongue" (870). Campbell develops this theme. The traditional Freshman English course "is based on a fallacious notion that good writing is a Ding an Sich, a separate, independent

intellectual vacuum" (178). Good writing, they both argue, is too mysterious, too individual to benefit even from "the mastery of all the rhetorical rules ever invented" (Lounsbury 875). For proof, Lounsbury points sarcastically to the fact that the growth of writing courses has not led to a proportional increase in the number of great writers, "the speedy coming of a spotless linguistic millennium" (869). Campbell is equally sarcastic: English departments have "pretended time out of mind and to the tune of hundreds of thousands of dollars that we operate a writing shop located in the clouds near the famous thinking shop that Aristophanes built for Aristotle" (180).

The abolitionists explain the unique status of composition as a subject by invoking the Romantic model of the composing process. Writing-expression-is the outpouring in language of preexisting and fully formed ideas and emotions. "Clear thinking precedes clear writing," says Lounsbury, "and does not follow it" (874). "One cannot write any better than he can think," Campbell insists. "Bad writing is nothing more than the outward and visible sign of bad thinking" (179). Thus, the only way to improve students' writing is to improve their thinking, and this, they point out, is a very slow process which cannot be hurried by direct instruction. "The pretensions of the teachers of this course in Freshman Composition," Campbell complains, "are perhaps the most dangerous symptom of the American belief in educational short cuts, in showy, rather than sound values" (179). Lounsbury falls back on the organic metaphors of the Romantic tradition: "The ability to write is a growth, and ... the rapidity and extent of this growth depend upon several agencies which the individual may not and usually does not employ with that particular end in mind" (873). It happens unconsciously, mysteriously in the great unfolding of Life. "All life, if it is worth living, contributes to ability in expression." Even Romantic suffering plays a role: "There is nothing like misery to improve the style" (875).

What role, we might then ask, does education play in improving writing? The abolitionists are ready with an answer. A proper education produces deep thoughts, which cannot help but find their proper expression. And the thoughts that most improve one's writing naturally come from studying the great writers, the masters of the art which cannot be taught. Lounsbury at his Romantic best: "He who of his own accord has sat reverently at the feet of the great masters of English literature need have no fear that their spirit will not inform, so far as in him lies, the spirit of their discipline" (878). Here, then, is the central paradox of the Romantics' position: It is the study of literature, not rhetoric, that ultimately improves students' rhetoric. And the role of English departments in writing instruction is thus to teach liberal culture through imaginative literature.

If the abolitionist argument stopped here, composition instruction would be merely a waste of time, but the bitterness of the abolitionist invective suggests a deeper conflict. Composition not only wastes time, it corrupts the English department by introducing an alien philosophy which is antithetical to the department's true mission. To understand this argument, one must see Romantic literary theory in historical context. Romantics since at least Wordsworth had viewed literature in transcendent terms. Poetry was the noblest expression of the human spirit, lifting man out of the mundane, fact filled scientific age into a higher realm of permanent values and true free dom. In the new American university of the early twentieth century, with its scientific

and professional orientation, its middle-class goals, professors of literature tended to see themselves as embattled defenders of humanist values in an age of Babbitry. With the decay of Latin instruction and the old classical curriculum, the English department emerged as "the backbone of the humanities," as Frederick Rudolph puts it in *Curriculum* (140). The study of literature thus came to be seen as an antidote to the spiritual ills of the university and, indeed, of society. Lounsbury casually asserts that in "the great masterpieces of our literature, lies for the college student his linguistic and literary salvation" (878). In contrast, composition is "a popular delusion," a "superstition" which "stands in the way of all real progress" (882).

Critics such as F. R. Leavis and I. A. Richards, who exerted a powerful influence in American English departments, were successors to the Roman tics in this regard. For Leavis, the study of imaginative literature was a last ditch defense of liberal humanism against the chaos and depersonalization of mass society in the scientific age (see Eagleton 30-53). As Richards baldly put it, poetry "is capable of saving us; it is a perfectly possible means of overcoming chaos" (82-83). Thus, the English department has a vital mission. "The success of the democratic state," Campbell asserts, lies in "cultivating the sensitivity of the individual," a goal literary study is uniquely suited to accomplish. From this point of view, composition instruction is a dangerous distraction. Its existence in the English department "obscures for everyone concerned the extremely important service that English literature, as one of the still living humanities, must render to college students and through them to this disordered world of ours" (182).

Given these attitudes, it is not surprising that the abolitionists portray composition in terms of corruption and enslavement-the very terms Roman tics used to describe technology and business. Both students and instructors are prisoners of compulsory composition. "The average student loathes it ... he has to have it forced down his throat," says Lounsbury, and qualified instructors "will not persist in carrying on this most distasteful of occupations, unless compelled by necessity" (877). Campbell is even stronger. Composition corrupts. It "inevitably stultifies the English department" (179). First there is the hypocrisy of leading students to believe that a composition course or two will teach them to write anything and everything well. Then there is the oppression of "the harried instructor in Freshman English ... who labors valiantly to accomplish the impossible"-deluded into thinking that his labor will lead to a professorship. He "meekly submits to serving as vicarious sacrifice for all the sins of all the other departments of the college," which have failed to give students the sound knowledge which is prerequisite to writing. Moreover, self-serving senior professors build graduate programs on the backs of these poor instructors. "The Freshman English machine"-Campbell's equivalent of the evil industrial machine - has created an "academic proletariat": "Crowds of young men and women have been lured into the teaching of English by the numbers of positions annually open at the bottom of the heap, and there they stick, contaminating one another with their discouragement and rebellion" (181). And he darkly warns that they may overthrow the system if composition is not abolished.

## The Rhetoric of Exclusion

But behind these pleas for compassion and liberation lies a deeper motive. What most disturbs the abolitionists is not the hypocrisy of writing instruction; it is the influx of students who have come to the university not to absorb liberal culture but to prepare for mundane professional careers. The required composition course represents an intrusion into the English department of people who do not share its values. Though Lounsbury and Campbell insist that writing cannot be taught, they favor elective writing courses in the English department for those who are willing-and able-to learn. Campbell encourages courses in literary writing for "the freshman who possesses a sincere interest in some form of artistic writing and a demonstrated aptitude for it" (185) (*italics mine*). And Lounsbury would gladly teach composition to the "minority" of students "who would most profit by it" instead of wasting his time "in vain efforts to overcome the repugnance of the unwilling or to animate the torpid." (881)

Writing of the kind the abolitionists are willing to teach is not for the masses, who do not have the talent or the need to write. The idea that every one needs to write well, says Lounsbury, is "a notion born of modern conditions" (by which he means the mass education system). The fact that many do not learn is actually a blessing. "There is but one way of keeping certain persons from writing wretchedly, and that is by keeping them from writing at all" (881). With a characteristic late nineteenth-century social Darwinist fusion of *laissez faire* economics and Romantic idealism, he insists that those men of genius who have something truly important to say to the world will find a way to say it, whatever their training (880). The effect of this reasoning is of course to exclude most students from the writing instruction and, as we shall see, from the university itself. In the final analysis, the rhetoric of complaint is the rhetoric of exclusion.

This is especially evident in the two ways the abolitionists define writing. For the gifted it is an art; for the rest it is a useful but mundane skill- mechanical and grammatical correctness. Lounsbury would require enough of this practical kind of writing instruction "to enable everyone to transact the common business of life" (878). Unlike the art of writing, correctness can be taught to anyone, chiefly by drill, but it "ought to be learned at a comparatively early age." If students have not learned it by the time they arrive at the university, they were not meant to learn it, and should not be admitted (878). Campbell would also exclude students without adequate skills and recommends Columbia's plan for dealing with those who are admitted by mistake: the ill-prepared student is assigned to a tutor, who gives him a few rules and exercises "which are of use to a man in his unfortunate predicament," and tells him that he will not be invited back, for "only through systematic effort of his own can he master the necessary skills at this late stage in his education" (184) (*italics mine*). In any case remediation should not be the English department's responsibility. The teaching of literature, Campbell insists, is not for "mere grammarians" (182).

The abolitionists never explicitly exclude students on the basis of their educational or class background; those with talent and strength of will can succeed on their own, and will receive the benefits of a humanistic education. The rest will be content with enough grammar for

"transacting the common business of life." But the general tone of irony in the abolitionists' attacks betrays their elitist stance. Irony is a useful strategy for confirming shared beliefs and prejudices, not for convincing the skeptical, and Lounsbury and Campbell clearly pitch their appeals to a sympathetic audience. Ironic hyperbole is a common trope. Campbell's portrait of the composition course as the modern equivalent of Socrates' thinking-shop in the clouds comes to mind, with its classical allusion for the erudite, or his personification of composition as "an alien intruder . . . who obscures our values from ourselves and hides them in the rest of the academic world" (183).

Lounsbury's irony is even more direct. Reminiscing on the beginnings of composition at Harvard in the 1880s, he recalls one advocate of required composition who proposed that Harvard adopt a system of theme correction developed at a seminary for girls in Brooklyn (which, incidentally, it did). Lounsbury sneers: "It was certainly consoling to learn from this inspired writer that there was balm in Brooklyn if no longer in Boston" (868). For Lounsbury (and presumably his audience) Harvard had nothing to learn from a girls' seminary-especially one in Brooklyn. By looking down their noses at composition students and their harried instructors, by attacking composition as futile and laughable, the abolitionists are reinforcing the insular, defensive position of the liberal culture, and reasserting the superiority of their values over those of the mass education system and the mass society which created it. The rhetoric of complaint preserves the distinctions that proclaim the values and identity of the English department as separate from the common order of society.

### Old Debates and the New Rhetoric

If the abolitionists were merely confirming shared values, preaching to the saved, what effect did they have? Though the profession rarely faced directly the issues-theoretical or practical-their ideas exerted a long and pervasive influence. In the first three decades of the century, composition courses on the current-traditional model became entrenched, and resisted the attacks of the abolitionists. Very few schools abolished composition requirements, though a few elite private colleges (most notably Reed and Princeton) taught composition exclusively as literary study. But in many state universities, advocates of liberal culture achieved a compromise. The second semester of freshman English became a course in imaginative literature, a tradition which has endured in many institutions (Aydelotte; Berlin, *Rhetoric*). In the thirties the abolitionists renewed their attacks, bolstered this time by the empirical research from the twenties which showed that composition courses were ineffective (see Dudley, "Does"). Amid the decade-long controversy in which Campbell played a central role, many institutions, like Columbia, experimented with general education programs that attempted to integrate composition instruction into the required "core courses," though these experiments were largely confined to private liberal arts colleges with selective enrollments and sufficient funds to hire "preceptors" to give individual instruction in writing. The vast majority of institutions maintained the status quo, unruffled by the abolitionists. Depression-era defenders of required composition calmly insisted it "naturally belongs" in the department of English literature (Dudley, "Success" 22); it is "ubiquitous, inevitable, eternal" (Green 593).



Warner Taylor, composition's chief defender, calls Freshman English "an institution, for such it really is, which shares the imperfections of all things human"-but is essentially sound (301).

For these defenders, abolition was hopelessly idealistic, and flew in the face of the efficient mass education system. Moreover, required composition subsidized a steady stream of graduate students in an era of austerity-a fact which abolitionists cited as further evidence of hypocrisy. Berlin has thoroughly treated the influence of liberal culture in the post-war years, when it competed with the communications movement (Rhetoric 107-11). In the cold war climate of the fifties, a newly self-conscious literature profession, armed with New Critical methods, attempted to convert composition courses to literature courses using "democratic" rationales enunciated in the 1939 "Committee of 24" report (in which Campbell played a central role). Literature would produce self-reliant individuals with "civilized values," who could resist the coercion of anti-democratic forces and safely deal with "socially subversive emotions," as the committee put it (qtd. in Berlin, Rhetoric III).

Abolition really came into its own in the sixties, when almost one fourth of four-year colleges and universities dropped the composition requirement, with many of them abolishing freshman composition altogether (Smith 139). The social upheaval of the sixties, first evident on campuses, brought to the fore the Romantic values which abolitionists had always held. In many quarters composition was dismissed as irrelevant to the urgent and higher task of rescuing society from institutional depersonalization and middle-class morality. The composition requirement, many argued, was part of an oppressive system, trampling on free expression and individual choice (Hoover; Wilcox). On a more mundane level, the massive influx of baby-boom students-particularly in the humanities-made it easier to limit admissions and keep graduate literature programs full without graduate assistantships. But in the sobering atmosphere of the 1970s, with widespread open admissions policies and a host of new institutions clamoring for enrollments, the university faced the task of educating newly enfranchised students who needed a great deal of writing instruction. Requirements not only returned, but increased (Witte 2-5), and the profession changed accordingly.

The last great abolition debate, which took place at the 1959 NCTE convention, forms an interesting coda to the abolitionist movement and points out the direction the profession took with the revival of rhetoric in the sixties and seventies. Warner G. Rice, longtime department chair at Michigan, used many of the same arguments for abolition as his predecessors, though with a more pragmatic approach (composition simply costs too much). Freshman English, he says, should be a course not in rhetoric but in language and literature, "the subjects which the English department is best prepared to teach" (361). Abolition will "improve morale" and "result in the diversion of teaching energies into different, more attractive channels" (362). Composition instruction should be handled by high schools or in "no credit, extra-fee" college courses. He concedes that composition might be taught in college, though it is "late for elementary instruction." Rice, unlike Campbell and Lounsbury, believes that composition can be effectively taught at the college level, but it would require "an enormous effort to train college teachers for freshman work, the employment of many more experienced (and more expensive)

instructors, and the provision of attractive academic careers in the field-all developments long sought, but not probable on a large scale" (363).

Rice's opponent was Albert Kitzhaber, the young composition director at Kansas, who proposed just such a massive change in the profession, and in the next decade did more to effect it than perhaps any other person. In his rebuttal he freely admits the failures of the course, but instead of abolition, he advocates the "transfiguration" of composition into rhetoric. "English teachers, as well as speech teachers," he says, "work in the main stream of the rhetorical tradition", (369). The failures of writing instruction are due to "the continued survival of a set of desiccated rhetorical principles devised by second-rate theorists in the nineteenth century, and the fantastic state of innocence in some English teachers regarding language instruction in the last half or three-quarters of a century" (372). And he ends by suggesting that in addition to the New Criticism, the profession "begin thinking about the desirability of working out a New Rhetoric, surely long overdue" (372). Of course, the profession took his suggestion. The "new rhetoric" born in the early sixties has steadily grown and today flourishes to the extent that the study of writing is regarded in many quarters as a discipline. Composition teachers and courses have made measurable though modest gains in academia.

### The Abolitionist Legacy

It would thus be easy to end the discussion here, to dismiss the abolitionists as defeated, along with current-traditional rhetoric and the Romantic assumptions which lay behind it. Yet the battle is far from over. It has in fact widened, moving to other fronts with other names.

One front is in the English department itself. As composition teachers attempt to make their courses and their discipline a full part of the academic community, professors of literature resist. In the last decade these battles-Mandarin wars, as Maxine Hairston recently dubbed them in her CCCC presidential address-have been even more divisive and bitter than the abolitionist controversies of the past. Though there are few public calls today for removing composition courses from English departments, those who oppose full status for composition often employ the arguments of the abolitionists-not surprisingly, since they often share the same Romantic assumptions about the nature of writing and the role of the English department in the university. As Hairston puts it, literature teachers "already know a priori that the best way to teach students to write is to have them read good literature and write about it," that without literary analysis composition courses "have no content," and that students who are not prepared to study complex literary works do not belong in the university (275). Hairston is, as she admits, stereotyping the position of composition's opponents, but it is clear that the assumptions of literature professors about writing are a source of the conflict. Their "a priori" knowledge of composition derives from the tradition of literary theory which undergirds the English department, and has been a source of tension-theoretical, pedagogical, and political ever since departments of English replaced departments of rhetoric and oratory almost a century ago. Despite attempts to 'bridge composition and literature (those of Winifred Bryan Horner and James Porter come first to mind), the conflict rages on. For ultimately the gap is

ideological, a chasm between two ways of seeing the role of higher education in society and, thus, the role literacy (and literature) play in the university.

A second front in the war over composition courses lies within "the new rhetoric" itself. As Young, Berlin, and, more recently, Lester Faigley have pointed out, a great many composition teachers advocate approaches based on neo-Romantic or "expressivist" assumptions about the nature of the writing process. Expressivist approaches began just after the turn of the century and continued through many versions—perhaps the most influential being Rohman and Wlecke's 1964 study of prewriting (Berlin, *Rhetoric*; Kantor). Today, Peter Elbow, Ken Macrorie, William Coles, and many others focus on cultivating the student's inner promptings, her originality, imagination, integrity, and authentic voice—the very qualities that Romantics prize. But these are also the qualities, Young points out, that lie outside the domain of rhetorical principles (133). And consequently these teachers, like the earlier Romantics, distrust direct methods of instruction, preferring to evoke writing from students with techniques designed to stimulate the innate potential of the unconscious mind. Often these techniques are drawn from models of therapy—gestalt, self-actualization, meditation of various kinds—which attempt to free the student writer from those inhibitions which block his creativity.

The relationship between neo-Romantic expressivism and the liberal culture of the abolitionists is complex. As Berlin points out, in the twenties "the ideal of liberal culture indirectly encouraged the development of expressionistic rhetoric through its philosophical idealism and its emphasis on the cultivation of the self, both derived from its Brahminical romanticism" (*Rhetoric* 73). However, it is important to note that today's Romantic expressivists do not wish to abolish composition requirements. Furthermore, most do not wish to abandon rhetorical principles, but rather to expand the techniques available to writers for invention, an area that current-traditional rhetoric almost completely ignored, and to provide greater freedom for student inquiry and experiment than traditional methods of instruction allow.

Nevertheless, the history of abolition attempts does suggest that this "dis harmony in the new rhetoric" (Young's phrase) has implications not only for classroom practice, but for the role of composition in the university. As Kitzhaber pointed out some twenty-five years ago in his landmark survey of freshman composition, *Themes, Theories and Therapy*, the dominant view of freshman composition has always assumed that "the course exists to provide immediate therapy for students whose academic future is clouded by their inability to manage the written form of English" (2). Whatever that therapy consists of—current-traditional "remediation," Rogerian self-actualization, transcendental meditation, or any other—it may isolate composition instruction from the university, and keep writing courses on the fringes of the institution.

Thus, if writing is seen as an essentially subjective, mysterious response to experience, and its teaching a set of techniques for evoking that response, then composition courses can and will be attacked as an "intellectual vacuum." The courses may continue to be set apart from the academic main stream, condemned as "subfreshman," "remedial," fit only for graduate students, junior faculty, and those "retreads" who cannot find positions teaching literature. (Indeed, the popularity of neo-Romantic methods in the last decade may be in part a

result of the large number of PhDs trained in literary criticism who were forced into composition teaching by the shift in the job market.) Finally, the old abolition battle is being fought on the wider front of public educational policy. For almost a century, composition requirements have served a gatekeeping function in the mass higher education system.

As Kitzhaber remarked a generation ago, "In many universities that are unable to impose entrance requirements the freshman English course has frankly been viewed by administrative officials as a means of weeding out academic undesirables who cannot be prevented from enrolling" (Themes 14). Though that view has perhaps receded in the last two decades as the competition for enrollments has increased, composition requirements, and the placement mechanisms that go with them, are still an important means of selecting and tracking students. Thus, English departments have a unique role in the system, a role which often demands that they make judgments about students' fitness for higher education on the basis of that most personal and important attribute-language.

At the level of public policy, then, Romantic assumptions about composition have a particularly significant effect. If composition is an individual response to inner promptings, a mysterious process, then some will be prompted and some will not. Those who are not may be excluded. Some times that exclusion is direct: a student is not admitted, or admitted only to certain programs, usually technical or paraprofessional. At other times the exclusion is more subtle: a student is excluded from an education that empowers her to take a leadership role in society because an institution assumes that many (or most) of its students cannot write well enough to receive such an education, or that they cannot be taught (or taught "cost effectively") to write. It therefore reduces composition requirements or substitutes "writing-intensive" courses (where writing is taught with widely varying degrees of intensity). Similarly, Romantic assumptions about students' capacity to write have for three-quarters of a century led American universities to compromise their general education courses by reducing them to the mere presentation and "appreciation" of material without offering students the involvement and challenge of writing, a trend encouraged by liberal culture's tendency "to stress enjoyment, understanding, appreciation and taste at the expense of intellectual rigor and critical incisiveness," as Rudolph puts it (240).

Thus, on many fronts-within English departments, within the composition teaching profession, within the university itself-abolitionist arguments have had a profound influence, so profound that it is at times difficult to see clearly the alternatives to Romantic attitudes. For the most part, those alternatives grow out of what Kitzhaber called "the mainstream of the rhetorical tradition." As Berlin has recently demonstrated, Romantic views of composition-that students improve their writing primarily by subjective means, through inspiration, or therapy, or exposure to liberal culture-have been consistently challenged by other views ("transactional" in Berlin's terminology, "social" in Faigley's, "classical" in Young's) which see writing within a social context that transcends the individual. Those who hold these alternative views-always a minority-have consistently defended composition courses as an integral part of the university and of liberal education, though not necessarily of liberal culture, provided those courses teach rhetorical principles. "This kind of intellectual training," Kitzhaber wrote in 1963, "is essential in

any system of liberal education and is rigorous enough to merit inclusion without apology in a college or university curriculum" (*italics mine*). He concedes that rhetorical training "should have been begun in the lower schools," but insists that "it could not by any means have been disposed of there" (3).

In this view composition courses serve to include students in the academic community, as do other elementary courses, not to exclude them during a probationary or purgatorial period until they are worthy of membership. Freshman composition (or rhetoric) is taught as a liberal art in a broader (and earlier) sense of the term, as part of the trivium, the means of discovering and sharing knowledge in all human endeavors—not merely as liberal culture, the literary province of a social elite. Rhetoric is a discipline with its own traditions, theories, and principles which students learn and practice, not a set of skills or personal revelations. In a freshman composition course devoted to rhetoric, most students' personalities and "skills" will develop, just as in other courses. But the course is valuable in its own right, not for its "service" to other courses in the curriculum. However, this decidedly un-Romantic view of composition has never prevailed in the modern American university, despite almost a century of efforts by reformers, for Romantic assumptions about writing are deeply ingrained in academia, and they serve powerful interests, both within and outside English departments.

Ironically, it was the abolitionists who most fully recognized the implications of their assumptions about writing. They understood that the traditional freshman writing course threatened the identity of the English department and compromised its integrity as a bastion of liberal culture. They understood the gatekeeping function of composition requirements and refused to accept it. Most importantly, they pointed out the hypocrisy of admitting massive numbers of students to the higher education system who could not expect to receive there the kind of liberal education that the institution had traditionally promised.

Their solution was simple: admit fewer students or don't pretend to teach students to write in a fifteen- or thirty-week course. Neither the English department nor the American university could accept this solution. But neither have English departments or the university fully accepted the alternative: to create an educational system that assumes writing can be taught as a liberal art to students of all kinds, and that provides the resources to do so.

I believe such change is possible, but whatever stand one takes on these issues, it is clear that the assumptions of literary criticism have political as well as pedagogical implications. Romantic assumptions not only influence how writing is taught, but also when and where, to whom and by whom it is taught. As long as a significant portion of those teaching and administering composition courses view writing in Romantic terms, those courses will be vulnerable to the attacks of the abolitionists' successors. And if the teaching of writing is to take a full place in the English department and in the university, the profession must acknowledge the fundamental ideological conflicts which the abolitionists raised, and face their consequences at last.

## Notes

1 For a sympathetic account of abolition attempts, see Greenbaum. For a representative selection of abolitionists (in addition to those discussed below) see Binkeley, DeVoto, "English," Eurich, Hoover, Kampf, Kehl, Lange, Osgood, Russell, and Steinhoff.

2 In 1923 Scott published his seminal essay, "Composition as a Mode of Behavior," to refute Campbell, who was becoming more and more active in his efforts to unseat the rhetoric department. Campbell's correspondence from the period reveals his resentment of the department's program and prestige (Stewart 128). Under Scott, the rhetoric program granted more graduate degrees than the English department (Berlin, *Rhetoric* 55).

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