

University of Massachusetts Amherst

From the Selected Works of David Fleming

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**Review of The Two Cultures of English:
Literature, Composition, and the Moment of
Rhetoric by Jason Maxwell**

David Fleming, *University of Massachusetts Amherst*

Jason Maxwell, *The Two Cultures of English: Literature, Composition, and the Moment of Rhetoric* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019), 256 pp.

Reviewed by **David Fleming**, University of Massachusetts Amherst

The twenty-first century has not, so far, been kind to college English departments. There has been a steady decline in the proportion of students majoring in English and a falling-off in faculty hiring. In the popular imagination, English (along with the humanities generally) seems always on the defensive. In a way, this is all just a continuation of trends that began in the 1970s, a decade of especially steep decline for English. A key factor in *that* drop was the opening up of other academic fields to women; but the period also saw a shift in students' attitudes toward higher education, away from the liberal arts, and the beginnings of a new austerity in governmental support of higher education, which negatively affected the humanities. If, during the 1980s, new approaches to language and literature revitalized English, contributing to a rebound in enrollment, the good news didn't last. Since the early 1990s, the story of English has been one of uninterrupted decline, a trend that only accelerated with the Great Recession. The surprise of the past few years has been that the decline persisted even after the economy recovered. Nationally, over the last quarter century, half of English's share of bachelor degrees has been lost.

The main culprit in all this, of course, is economics: rising college costs, increased student debt, changes in the job market, all of which are pushing students towards more "career-ready" fields. The perception that English is not a good choice in this economy is, it turns out, false; but the idea has taken hold. What may be harder to deal with is another set of changes, also going back to the 1990s: the culture-wide decline in *reading*. It's not clear that the field has faced any of this squarely: The latest report on the major from the Association of Departments of English seems paralyzed by the future. Develop tracks, it suggests. Help students think about careers. Otherwise, carry on!

Meanwhile, opportunities for English abound. With students now double- and triple-majoring, there are ways that English could sneak back in as a secondary field of study. At the same time, English remains *the* preeminent global language and, along with math, the core subject of K-12 schooling in the US. Meanwhile, deep skills in oral and written communication, critical and creative thinking, ethical reasoning and multicultural awareness are still highly valued in the job market. And whatever is going on with reading, *writing* is on the rise. In short, the situation is not hopeless. But in English departments themselves, it sometimes seems that faculty are still operating according to a postwar model of the academic, in which one should be left alone to pursue one's research and teaching, any "service" owed to others a duty only to make

sure such autonomy is honored. As for cross-talk about the discipline's aims, the field coverage model that Gerald Graff described 30 years ago makes that unlikely, even unnecessary. Each professor should just do her thing: the whole will take care of itself. Of course, that "whole" long ago fractured, even just in terms of *literary* study. Meanwhile, entire new fields have emerged that aren't about literary study at all; and they are often, truth be told, the parts of English showing the most growth.

In such a context comes Jason Maxwell's *The Two Cultures of English: Literature, Composition, and the Moment of Rhetoric*. Maxwell is a recent English PhD from Penn State, and he is especially taken with the "explosive growth" of "Rhetoric and Composition" and what that means for English (2). The central claim of his book, and what makes it potentially interesting for anyone in the field, is that we should stop thinking of English as "a collection of discrete camps" and see it rather as "a globalized network comprising ever-shifting territories and flows," in which "hybrid" formations become primary and older "disciplinary divides," secondary (12). Maxwell helps us do this by (re)introducing *theory*—transdisciplinary discourses about rhetoric, history, difference, etc.—into discussions of English, allowing subfields to fluctuate, sometimes realigning in new ways, sometimes carving even deeper fault lines among us.

At first, I thought: isn't "theory talk" what we *used* to do, back in the 1980s and '90s? Indeed, there is something backward-glancing about the book. Most of Maxwell's key texts—by Kenneth Burke, Paul de Man, Michel Foucault, Fredric Jameson, James Berlin, Susan Miller, John Guillory, et. al—are from before 2000. There's nothing about topics that currently obsess the field, like race and gender, and, except for climate change in chapter 5, there's not even an acknowledgment of the era-defining events of the past quarter century: the rise of the Internet, the War on Terror, the Great Recession, Trump. And Maxwell misses much else. To take just his title, two objections will occur to any impartial observer. First, where is creative writing in this picture? It is, by many measures, the fastest-growing part of the field today. Most of the departments I have been associated with are now, in fact, *tricultural*. And second, as Maxwell must know, there are many English departments today, and those among the "best," that remain stubbornly *monocultural*, still exclusively focused on literary study. Maxwell's view of English, after all, is a heartland view, one that I share; but if one takes the top 20 English departments, as ranked by, say, niche.com, one strains to find *any* program with a *single* tenure-track "comp-rhet" faculty member.

Still, I found the book well-written and insightful. Each chapter pursues a single theoretical issue or problem, showing how it plays out in two texts or theorists, one associated more with literary studies, the other with composition-rhetoric. By focusing on *theory*, however, the discussion transcends professional affiliation, oscillating back

and forth between different positions in and on “English.” In this way, new alliances—and new divisions—emerge. Take, for example, “rhetoric” in the work of Burke and de Man. Instead of rehearsing the old divide between rhetoric as trope and rhetoric as persuasion, Maxwell shows how de Man and Burke both approached rhetoric through the Nietzschean concept of the *agon*, the unending conversation, allowing them to think of their projects as similarly inconclusive, each new position only opening space for its counterposition. Here’s where Maxwell reveals his ability to find common ground between conflicting factions without imagining that ground to be frictionless: he also shows how de Man’s *agon* impels discussion inward, toward the text, *its* resolution constantly deferred, whereas Burke’s *agon* moves outward, leaving the very concept of literature behind.

Similarly, Burke and Jameson can be linked by their shared embedding of literary texts in social context. If, for Burke, “symbolic action” is the quintessentially human response to collectivity and system, for Jameson, the approach neglects *history*, which, from a Marxist point of view, is an autonomous force of its own. Only by foregrounding history can we see, with Jameson, that the differentiation, creativity, and individuality that Burke champions had become, by the late 1970s, the “central axioms” of capitalism itself (79). For Maxwell, this link/gap between Burke/Jameson shows how the “social” both draws together and divides composition/literature, one side hopeful about “liberal pluralism,” the other “skeptical” of any anthropomorphic approach to language (90).

Despite helping us rethink our old tensions, however, Maxwell’s chapters often leave composition on the “naïve” end of a continuum in which literary studies always occupies the sophisticated end. In his treatment of Foucault, the New Historicists, and James Berlin, “difference” appears differently depending on whether one takes an “archival” or “cartographic” approach to power. The former is focused on marginal positions that call out for “respect and recognition” (112); the latter sees difference as a “distributed form of relations that cannot be directly tied back to a central authority” (104). The chapter ends with composition oscillating between an obsession with its own marginal position and the “managerial impulse” that has allowed it to connect with publics beyond English, even as it contributes to the hierarchalization of the university itself (114, 124). Similarly, in comparing the work of compositionist Susan Miller and literary scholar John Guillory in the early 1990s, Maxwell wonders how Miller could insist on “the degradation of composition studies at its very moment of ascendancy within the university” (138). As composition studies has succeeded in making writing a “progressive force” and reading, a “conservative” one (140), we are left without an aesthetic that can resist both “old notions of ‘literature’” and new territorializations around the “practical” (149). Thus, an approach to *reading* that “slow[s] down the

production process” could become a new unifying concept for English itself; but, given the book’s animating purpose, shouldn’t that unifying concept be *reading + writing* (152)?

Ultimately, the whole discipline comes in for abuse. Maxwell considers Latour’s “post-critical” method a promising alternative both to literary study’s tired project of “paranoid” unmasking and to composition’s tired project of (neo)liberal humanism. But, as climate change has shown, all of us, including Latour, are trapped in the scholarly as such; our subfields are alike self-regarding. As Steven Connor has put it, the humanities today “are not so much absorbed in their apparent objects as absorbed in the nature of their absorption in them” (qtd. in 190). Ironically, here’s where I found Maxwell’s “big picture” view of English inspiring, though I’m not sure he would put it the way I am about to (137). Our only hope, finally, is to stay together, recognizing that doing so does not require consensus on *anything* except the value of contact itself. After all, to genuinely share a department or discipline, we only need to agree that our disagreements matter, that they are productive. But to *be* productive, those disagreements need to be expressed, something unlikely in the “cold silence” of our hallways (196). In that silence, English will only continue to decline.