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AGONISTIC DISCOURSES: EXPLORING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN
LITERARY THEORY AND COMPOSITION IN THE CONTEMPORARY
UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

*Agonistic Discourses: Exploring the Relationship Between Literary Theory and Composition in the Contemporary University* contributes to an ongoing effort to historicize Rhetoric and Composition as an academic discourse. From the groundbreaking work of James Berlin and Robert J. Connors to the more recent investigations of Jessica Enoch, David Gold, and Donna Strickland, scholars of Rhetoric and Composition have long been interested in English as a discipline and the status of composition studies within it. Building on this important work, my project reassesses the enormous growth of Rhetoric and Composition over the last several decades by pairing it with another subfield within English that developed at roughly the same time—literary theory. While the parallel evolution of literary theory might initially seem unrelated to Rhetoric and Composition—a reasonable assumption given their often antagonistic relationship—these discourses prove to be strikingly complementary if we understand them as symptomatic of broad changes in American political and economic life. More specifically, transformations in capitalist production over the last thirty years have placed workers and even entire industries in a state of perpetual fluctuation. Both Rhetoric and Composition and literary theory seem particularly well suited for preparing students to thrive in this new environment since they reject an enculturation model of education.

Elaborating upon the connections between Rhetoric and Composition and literary theory has significant implications for thinking about English Studies’ place in the contemporary university insofar as it provides a way of conceptualizing a practically oriented pedagogy that avoids becoming narrowly instrumental.
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Introduction:
Professing No Longer?

My title, *Professing No Longer*, should, I hope, bring to mind Gerald Graff’s landmark 1987 disciplinary history *Professing Literature*. In that work, Graff traces the various schools and movements that have made up the discipline of English, starting in the middle of the nineteenth century and working his way up to the beginnings of the “theory wars” in the early 1980s. While considered by most as an indispensable account of English studies in the American university, *Professing Literature*, now almost thirty years old, can no longer claim the same contemporaneity it did upon initial publication. The discipline has evolved in a number of ways that warrant updating and amending Graff’s important work. At some level, this would appear like a relatively straightforward task insofar as one could pick up where Graff left off and document the rise of New Historicism, the debates surrounding the literary canon in the late 1980s and the ensuing culture wars, and the emergence of the various “studies” in the last two decades or so that concern the body, affect, animals, disability, and other topics. One could analyze how these developments either conform to or complicate the broad arguments that structure Graff’s book.

My dissertation adopts a different approach in that it starts with our contemporary moment and works backward to the point when the most distinctive features of today first began to emerge. I understand this to be a fundamentally Foucauldian approach to history. Indeed, in the final moments of the introduction to *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault calls his analysis a “history of the present.” Rather than an account primarily concerned with accurately recreating a specific moment in time in exhaustive detail, Foucault’s “effective history”—a term he coins in his essay “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History”—begins in the present and only looks to the past in
order to diagnose the forces that constitute this present. In that respect, my project actually
begins with a period before Graff’s book ends to look at the emergence of two distinct but
related discourses that I think are essential to understanding English studies today: literary theory
on the one hand and Rhetoric and Composition studies on the other. While these discourses
receive varying degrees of treatment in *Professing Literature*, their current statuses within
English studies are quite surprising from the vantage point of the mid-1980s when Graff
completed his book.

A simple glance at any recent Job Information List of the Modern Language Association,
where positions in Rhetoric and Composition far outnumber any other area group, should be
enough to suggest tracing the emergence of this field (in what follows, I sometimes use the term
“composition studies” as another name for this subdiscipline). In the second page of *Professing
Literature*, Graff acknowledges that his account “deal[s] only in passing with the teaching of
composition” even though “without that enterprise the teaching of literature could never have
achieved its central status” (2). My own work is not so much concerned with the specific practice
of teaching first-year writing in the university—that’s been going on for quite some time—as it
is with the emergence of a research agenda around this teaching practice, particularly one that
distinguishes itself from the rest of the department. The emergence of this research agenda is
striking considering how teachers of composition have tended to adhere to the “pedagogical
imperative” and, à la Joseph Harris, embraced composition as “a teaching subject.” Much of
Rhetoric and Composition’s identity comes from championing, unlike its counterparts in literary
studies, teaching over research. At the same time, the publish-or-perish model has only
intensified since Graff’s *Professing Literature*, and composition’s desire to be taken seriously as
a discourse, an equal among its peers in the department, necessitates that it engage in this
activity. As a result, Rhetoric and Composition has always been something of a schizophrenic discourse, reflected in the difficulty one has separating its research agenda from its teaching practices. The research is very often about teaching—either improving teaching practices or documenting the history of these teaching practices or making impassioned arguments that other kinds of work not formally recognized as research should be considered as equally valuable (I feel compelled to add that we can also understand the discourse’s attachment to rhetoric as a way of providing a more solidified subject matter for composition studies). Regardless, the emergence of Rhetoric and Composition serves as an interesting test case for thinking about the status of disciplinary knowledge in the contemporary university, where the student-centered approach to education confronts a demand for increasingly specialized research.

While literary theory was certainly an acknowledged entity by the time of Graff’s book, his own predictions about the discourse’s future provide an interesting counterpart to its actual status today. Graff concludes *Professing Literature* by looking at the relationship between “tradition” and “theory” and makes some compelling claims about theory’s incorporation into literary studies. He warns against the prospect of theory simply becoming just another specialized subfield within English studies rather than a catalyst for bringing “the different ideologies and methods of the literature department and the university into fruitful relation and opposition” (250). My project makes it an open question whether Graff’s fears have or have not been confirmed. Graff’s worry that literary theory would become just another specialty in literary studies and thereby be cordoned off from the rest of the discipline doesn’t seem to have come true—there certainly aren’t many schools posting ads each September looking for “theory” specialists. Indeed, for all the talks about the demise of theory or being “post-theory,” figures like Foucault, Derrida, and Deleuze are actually cited *more* today than in the ostensible heyday
of High Theory in the late 1980s. Since the emergence of literary theory into English Studies, the theoretical stakes of any given critical engagement need to be made explicit, even if they are anti-theoretical in nature. However, despite this rather impressive incorporation of theoretical figures into the fabric of the discipline, it’s less clear if “theory” has fully undermined the coverage model that Graff targeted in the closing pages of Professing Literature. To what degree can the emergence of Rhetoric and Composition be understood as a failure of theory to force the various stakeholders in the discipline to confront fundamental issues, both economic and conceptual, and instead “take cover in coverage”?

My title Professing No Longer also hinges on two distinct but related understandings of the word “profess”: on the one hand, to profess can mean communicating a stable body of knowledge; on the other hand, to profess has a profoundly religious dimension, in terms of declaring one’s faith. These two meanings certainly apply to the work that has traditionally been done in English departments insofar as we accept Bill Readings’ argument in The University in Ruins that literary study was established according to the protocols of a national culture. According to Readings’ argument, a nation reproduces its fundamental values through a stable body of privileged texts—that is, the canon—at a privileged site of dissemination—that is, the university. Readings argues that this model, which he calls “the university of culture,” has steadily been losing authority in recent decades. As the centrality of the nation state wanes in the face of a growing transnational global economy, a “university of excellence” has superseded this “university of culture.” It’s at this point that I think we can bring composition and theory together insofar as they both tend to abandon the quasi-religious tenor that surrounds the literary text. Both theory and composition focus on practices that need to be developed and refined rather than bodies of knowledge that are consumed and reproduced. In other words, neither theory nor
composition is fundamentally oriented around *professing* anything in particular. Of course, the split between practice-based arts and bodies of knowledge is anything but firm, since practice-based conceptual practices can be transformed into reified bodies of knowledge rather easily. As the publication of *The Norton Anthology of Theory* demonstrates, many of the figures who interrogated the concepts of authorship and mastery have themselves become consecrated. In composition studies, meanwhile, the process movement, which Maxine Hairston once described as the foundational principle for the field, can just as easily become another product with its own collection of familiar touchstones and texts (and hence the need for a “post-process” movement that reorients the field around practices rather than established knowledge). Here comes the new canon, same as the old canon. Conversely, I imagine many would bristle at the notion that literary studies has not departed in substantial ways from the model of the canon that established the field. As my project discusses, many of the alternatives to the earlier university of culture model that were posited outside of the canon were simultaneously produced *within* it. For instance, the New Historicism, as practiced by a figure like Stephen Greenblatt at least, serves as an odd amalgamation of the university of culture and the university of excellence. As Greenblatt admits, his analyses toggle between a commitment to studying literary texts for their own sake, using the text’s historical context as a way to do so, and a commitment to studying interesting cultural artifacts, examining literary texts as mere means to that end.

The push toward active practices over static bodies of knowledge leads to another way of reading the title *Professing No Longer*—as a gesture toward the “crisis in the humanities.” Here, the title has two potential readings. First, it indicates the threat posed to humanistic teaching and research in the increasingly corporate university such that the long term prospects of the discipline are murky. It may not be too long before we are all professing no longer—in other
words, out of a job. Again, the pairing of theory and composition in this scenario is quite useful.

It is not surprising that composition has assumed a more prominent role in this brave new world insofar as “general” writing skills have, ostensibly, more direct marketability than knowledge of literary texts. As Marc Bosquet has recently explained, “at its most basic, this shift means that members of the educated classes are today far less likely to hail each other at cocktail parties, tennis matches, and job interviews by using such forms of call and response as dropping a book title…in order to elicit such appropriate responses as ‘Ah, Melville,’ ‘Call me Ishmael,’ or ‘Oh, I never finished that!’” (118). In this environment, theory would appear to be an even graver sin than literature insofar as its head-in-the-clouds abstruse speculation is the farthest thing from hard economic realities. And yet one of the overarching points running through my project is the idea that abstract theorizing may be the most important “practical” skill in the new economy. Indeed, my dissertation urges us to consider the possibility of thinking composition studies and theoretical discourse together as complimentary rather than diametrical opposites. In order to do so, however, we must first untangle the long and complicated relationship between composition studies and literary theory. In Rhetorics, Poetics, and Cultures, James Berlin argued that a natural affinity existed between scholars working in composition and those working in theory and cultural studies, and he petitioned for the discipline to reorient itself around these two related specializations. Prominent composition scholar Maxine Hairston, meanwhile, once proposed that all discussions of postmodernism be banned from all NCTE publications, seeing theoretical work as an obstacle to the real work of educating students.

The title Professing No Longer might also be read in terms of a different but related dimension of the “crisis of the humanities.” If we think about professing as the domain of a full-fledged professor, then my title also alludes to the proletarianization of the labor force in English
Studies away from secure tenure-track positions and toward cheap, short-term, and unprotected adjunct positions.¹ While the university’s reliance on these low-wage instructors has become so widespread that it’s impossible to ignore, it’s far from a new phenomenon—in fact, it’s a problem that composition studies has been addressing for decades since the majority of its practitioners have been members of this exploited group, a group that the late composition scholar Susan Miller once called “the sad women in the basement.” And, as Donna Strickland has suggested in her recent *The Managerial Unconscious in the History of Composition Studies*, the emergence of tenure-track positions in Rhetoric and Composition can be attributed more to the need for managers of larger and larger pools of adjunct labor than a veritable interest in the subject matter.

These are all issues that could not be adequately treated in a single book, and so the way that I have narrowed my project into something resembling a manageable scope is to largely focus on how important pieces of criticism in both composition and theory might be read as reflections on the conditions of their own production. Accordingly, my work conducts close readings of figures like Paul de Man, Kenneth Burke, Fredric Jameson, Michel Foucault, Stephen Greenblatt, James Berlin, Susan Miller, and John Guillory and situates them both in terms of shifts in the American cultural and economic landscape as well as changes within the contemporary university. I hope that these analyses provide a cognitive map of the incredibly complex landscape that is contemporary English Studies.

Chapter 1, “On the Use and Abuse of Rhetoric in Composition and Theory,” examines the varied deployments of the concept of “rhetoric” in these two discourses that have long had antagonistic attitudes toward one another. I analyze the work of Paul de Man and Kenneth Burke

¹ For more on the tenured professor as an endangered species, see Donoghue’s aptly titled *The Last Professors: The Corporate University and the Fate of the Humanities.*
as a way of exploring how “rhetoric” has been used as a vehicle for justifying and facilitating the expansion of critical discourse. As my title intimates, Nietzsche serves as the figure that links together two separate versions of rhetoric—one rooted in tropes, the other in persuasion—and, by extension, literary studies with Rhetoric and Composition. De Man adopts Nietzsche’s work on rhetorical language as a way of maximizing the ambiguities found in the literary text and thereby ensuring that critical interpretations of canonical texts will remain interminable. Burke, meanwhile, reading against the grain, casts Nietzsche as a thinker of radical democracy, one who underwrites a practice that continually incorporates new voices and perspectives into an “endless conversation.” The chapter is a demonstration of the possibilities of intra-disciplinary work that rejects the idea that rhetoric (or any other concept, for that matter) is the domain of a single sector of English Studies rather than a common good shared by all. The specific articulation of “agonism” that I provide here could not be seen as the property of any existing subdisciplinary speciality but instead a creation that transversally links separate domains.

At another level, this particular notion of rhetoric that I advance—a notion of agonism that prompts the endless expansion of discourse—is also meant to provide an account of the current state of the discipline. The initial boundaries that have long governed the segregation of literary studies from Rhetoric and Composition have slowly broken down. It is precisely because these two discourses are both governed by an impulse to expand their parameters and incorporate new objects so as to spur continued research and criticism that they are approaching a point where no obvious conceptual or methodological principle clearly demarcates them. Literary studies is no longer tethered to the principle of “literature” that initially founded the discourse. Similarly, Rhetoric and Composition is quickly finding that the field’s initial focus on student writing to be a straightjacket that inhibits future criticism and which must be escaped. Although
they began as distinct entities housed within a single department, their expansive tendencies have led them to the shared territory of a generalized “writing studies.” In this respect, Chapter 1 not only offers a broad account of how the discipline has arrived at its present condition but also embodies the kind of work that could be done if the existing distinctions (which are becoming increasingly untenable) are ultimately abandoned.

If both a theorized version of literary studies and Rhetoric and Composition have been trending toward the general conceptual category of “writing” (or, I think it could be argued, “rhetoric”) to contain the ever-expanding nature of their work, this is not to say that the way these terms have been configured are the same. In other words, both broad fields might now define themselves as the “study of writing,” but the specific itineraries each has traveled to arrive at this endpoint has ensured that they will define “writing” in different and often diametrically opposed ways. As a result, the relationship between contemporary literary studies and Rhetoric and Composition can be both a nearly imperceptible gap and an unbridgeable gulf. The kind of intra-disciplinary work that I imagine in the previous chapter will only be possible if the discipline takes into account these discrepancies. To that effect, Chapter 2, “Between Standardization and Serialization: Kenneth Burke, Fredric Jameson, and Radical Criticism in the Post-Fordist Era,” explores the differences between these discourses through a careful examination of a debate between the two titular figures in the journal *Critical Inquiry* in 1978. Burke serves as a pivotal figure for understanding these dynamics insofar as his work has been taken up by both literary studies and Rhetoric and Composition. Surprisingly, however, his fate in these fields could not be more different—while he has mostly been forgotten within literary studies, he has become an enormously important figure in Rhetoric and Composition. As his engagement with Jameson illustrates, the two discourses might be productively split in terms of
their understandings of difference and pluralism. While Rhetoric and Composition has largely celebrated these terms as tools to combat a homogenizing hierarchical form of power, literary theory has understood them as simultaneously necessary and dangerous. In more concrete terms, Rhetoric and Composition understands society’s greatest threat to be a totalitarian logic that seeks to transform the different into the same; literary theory, meanwhile, sees the greatest threat to be a lack of cohesion that prevents social collectivities from responding to dispersal and chaos (which ultimately have the same kinds of effects as totalitarian structures).

Although the schematic outlined in this second chapter is a useful way of diagnosing the broad differences between “literary theory” and “rhetorical theory,” it would be a mistake to think that these differences have not fluctuated or exceeded the fields I have assigned them (in fact, the model of social change advanced by literary theory anticipates its own appropriation and rearticulation). In other words, although literary theory became an indispensable feature of literary studies, absorbed into the daily work of the discourse, this absorption transformed much of “literary theory” into what I earlier characterize as “rhetorical theory.” The work of major figures in the French tradition of continental philosophy was enlisted as theoretical support for multiculturalism and identity politics during the 1980s and 1990s. Chapter 3, “Mapping the Archival Turn in English Studies,” documents this shift by tracing the reception of Michel Foucault’s work in the American academy. Although his work on contemporary biopolitics places him firmly within the orbit of “literary theory,” his work was transformed into a version of “rhetorical theory” by figures within both literary studies and Rhetoric and Composition, thereby complicating the divisions between these two fields (within the third chapter, “literary theory” is characterized as a “cartographic politics” while “rhetorical theory” is characterized as an “archival politics,” for reasons that will become clear in the chapter).
This chapter also explores how these competing versions of politics—the cartographic or literary against the archival or rhetorical—circulated within the contemporary university during this period. I argue that a lack of attention to the sorts of complications anticipated by a cartographic politics of literary theory prevent many within Rhetoric and Composition from properly understanding their position within the university. Because of its overwhelming commitment to an archival politics, it fails to see that its low standing has less to do with its relationship to literary studies and more to do with neoliberal economic imperatives propelling administrative policy. The danger it has long faced but rarely recognizes is the degree to which its embrace of difference does not guarantee its protection from a central university administration that at least partially subscribes to these principles of difference. Unexpectedly, difference has become a tool to create new hierarchies within the university rather than an uncorrupted principle outside of these hierarchies.

Chapter 4, “Towards an Aesthetics Without Literature,” continues to explore the issues raised in the previous chapter by staging a dialogue between two touchstone texts in English Studies: Rhetoric and Composition scholar Susan Miller’s 1991 *Textual Carnivals* and literary critic John Guillory’s 1993 *Cultural Capital*. Although both texts constitute full-fledged attempts to understand the changes occurring within the discipline of English as it approaches the end of the twentieth century, they each understand the relative value or status of literary studies and Rhetoric and Composition in dramatically different ways. Whereas Miller conceives of Rhetoric and Composition as little more than a punching bag for literary studies to preserve and strengthen its position within the university, Guillory sees composition as the successor to literary studies, which has long been on a slow but steady path to complete obsolescence (which Guillory argues it has nearly completed). Ultimately, Guillory’s understanding of the university
as a specific site within society (rather than a small scale replica of that society) prevents him from making the same errors that plague Miller’s account.

Beyond navigating the largely incompatible accounts of English Studies forwarded in Miller and Guillory’s texts, the fourth chapter uses these texts as building blocks for constructing another potential bridge between literary studies and Rhetoric and Composition. Whereas Chapter 1 understood “writing” and “rhetoric” as god terms that could unite the entire discipline, Chapter 4 suggests that “aesthetics” could serve as similar purpose if it is able to shed its long-standing attachment to the problematic concept of “literature” that merely serves as a marker for distinguishing the upper class from the lower class. Indeed, while Miller’s *Textual Carnivals* rejects aesthetics entirely, seeing it as inseparable from “literature” (which has been used to reinforce social inequalities), Guillory’s *Cultural Capital* aims to liberate aesthetic engagement—that is, the experience and analysis of the relationship between form and content that inheres in any cultural phenomenon—from this pernicious relationship. I argue that this reformulation of aesthetics preserves the strengths of contemporary literary studies without being saddled with much of the discipline’s historical baggage that has increasingly become a liability in today’s university. Similarly, this new approach to aesthetics, which has much in common with a particular version of rhetoric, allows the discipline of English to avoid the pitfalls associated with a form of literalism and immediacy that currently underwrites much of Rhetoric and Composition. Without this version of aesthetics, the discipline is doomed to become a mere service entity on campus once “literature” has finally been marginalized.

In the fifth and final chapter, “Teaching the Crisis: *The Wire*, Business Writing, and Institutionalization of Literature,” I examine how this form of aesthetics might function in the contemporary corporate university—not only as curricular reform but as a tool for mobilizing
relationships between students and faculty that could challenge the increasingly centralized forms of control that are responsible for the adjunct labor crisis as well as spiraling student debt. I detail my experience using the television show *The Wire* to a class of business students in a mandatory upper-level composition course. David Simon’s HBO program is well suited for helping us think about an “aesthetics without literature” insofar as its medium (television) and its formal and narratological complexity (reminiscent of the nineteenth century realist novel) simultaneously place it both inside and outside of what we would traditionally think of as “literature.” More importantly, *The Wire* illuminates the usefulness of engaging with literary texts when they are no longer read as mere monuments in a tradition but are instead treated as complex assemblages helping us diagnose and respond to a variety of conceptual questions. Indeed, my class used *The Wire* as a guidebook of sorts for thinking through the dynamics governing modern institutions; discussing the show helped us unearth various strategies for successfully navigating this environment. In the process of outlining these institutional forces, we were inevitably led to reflect on how similar dynamics were shaping our particular classroom experience and my students’ life in the university more broadly. The aesthetic education provided by *The Wire* allowed us to see how seemingly unrelated situations and groups are deeply connected, and the ultimate upshot of our analysis was to show how the increasingly drastic situation of the modern college student is intimately connected to the similarly dire circumstances of their instructors, particularly graduate students and adjuncts. English Studies can help foster connections between students and faculty that are a necessary first step toward reshaping the contemporary university.

Unlike Graff’s *Professing Literature*, *Professing No Longer* eschews a straightforwardly linear approach in favor of a constant oscillation between past and present within each chapter.
Although a loose chronology exists in these chapters (de Man and the New Rhetoric of the 1960s and early 1970s is followed by Burke and Jameson at the end of the 1970s; Foucault and New Historicism in the 1980s are followed by Miller and Guillory in the early 1990s), all of the chapters include moments or figures from other points on the continuum from 1945 to the present. For instance, Chapter 1 not only discusses Paul de Man and Kenneth Burke but also addresses the New Historicism of the 1980s as well as recent composition scholarship like Sid Dobrin’s 2011 *Post-Composition*; Chapter 2 not only examines the Burke-Jameson debate but also briefly examines recent “animal studies” scholarship; Chapter 3 does not limit itself to Foucault’s immediate reception in the American academy in the 1980s but also explores recent archival historiography in Rhetoric and Composition. Thus, while I construct a certain narrative in the following chapters, that is an effect of my argument rather than a feature attributable to this period in English Studies. As a piece of “effective history,” *Professing No Longer* keeps its eye firmly on the present moment and the possible lines of flight necessary to produce a new future for the discipline.
Chapter 1:

On the Use and Abuse of Rhetoric in Composition and Theory

In his recent “Roots, Races, and the Return to Philology,” Geoffrey Galt Harpham traces the long and contorted history of philology in modern scholarship. Harpham notes that critics as different as Edward Said and Paul de Man each called for a “return to philology” in the final years of their respective careers, and Harpham intimates that this demand “seems to be an urge experienced by those confronting their own mortality” (44). What strikes Harpham as more peculiar, however, is the fact that Said and de Man advanced wildly different conceptions of philology. In fact, both figures envisioned a return to philology as an antidote to what the other critic prescribed. Whereas Said enlisted philology as a means of resuscitating “intimacy, resistance, emancipation, and historical knowledge” (45), de Man defined the term as “a harsh and explicit corrective to precisely such humanistic fantasies” (45). As Harpham explains, “[i]t is as if each had appropriated the term philology for his own purposes, without regard to its meaning” (45). Yet as the remainder of Harpham’s analysis reveals, the capaciousness of philology, its ability to spearhead disparate and even dramatically antagonistic trends, should not be limited to Said and de Man. For instance, while many hoped that philology would restrain critics from indulging in irresponsible critical explorations that would destabilize the strictly enforced disciplinary boundaries (Said and de Man, despite their sharp differences, both belonged to this camp), this disciplinary transcendence had also been championed by others as “the defining characteristic and entire point of philology itself” (52). Harpham’s analysis would seem to lend credence to the notion that philology was so expansive in its definition that it could mean just about anything to anyone. As he asserts near the conclusion of the piece, “[i]t is
difficult to know how to think about philology, because it is difficult to know exactly what philology is” (77).

While Harpham’s analysis offers a much needed assessment of how English studies articulates its own history and possible departures from that history, his use of de Man hints at another term that has equal importance in terms of understanding the recent history of the discipline. Indeed, while Harpham cites de Man’s “The Resistance to Theory” to document the deconstructionist’s commitment to philology, the privileged term in this essay is not “philology” but “rhetoric.” Indeed, in de Man’s corpus, rhetoric becomes a pivotal term that underwrites his entire critical project (he describes his interpretive practice as “rhetorical reading” and not “philological reading”). It is my contention that “rhetoric” has come to occupy an equally nebulous status within English studies, one that helps us better assess the conflicted nature of the discipline over the last fifty years.

While far from the only figure participating in contemporary discourse on rhetoric, de Man serves as an important figure precisely because he highlights the peculiar ends that “rhetoric” has been enlisted to achieve in English Studies since the 1960s. De Man’s insistence on rhetoric as an indispensable term in his critical toolbox might strike us as odd given the fact that he engages so little with the figures that are typically associated with the rhetorical tradition. Such oddness is emphasized by the fact that a number of literary critics were engaging with this rhetorical tradition at roughly the same time. These critics who were invested in the rhetorical tradition—we might, for the sake of convenience, call them “the New Rhetoricians”—saw their work as an antidote to precisely those features that de Man was advancing. In this respect, the split between de Man and these rhetoricians precedes the one between Said and de Man that is outlined by Harpham. Although no one could reasonably deny that serious differences separate
de Man from Said, their antagonism can easily be glossed over by their shared connection to the discourse of “literary theory.” The split between de Man and the New Rhetoricians, however, embodies a more official split within the discipline that can be understood simply by examining publication venues and hiring lines—that is, between “literary theory” (which in many respects has come to stand in for the entirety of literary studies) and “Rhetoric and Composition.” Given the tense antagonism between these two camps, it should strike us as odd that both would turn toward the term rhetoric to underwrite their respective operations.

Indeed, “rhetoric” has become a floating signifier of the highest order, so capacious that people working in the same discipline are often unfamiliar with one another’s working definitions of the term. Take, for instance, the experience that John Schilb recounts in the beginning of his *Between the Lines: Relating Composition Theory and Literary Theory*. Attending an international summer institute in Chicago in the mid-1980s, Schilb is shocked to learn that the institute’s director, famed feminist deconstructionist Barbara Johnson (a former student of de Man’s), defines rhetoric as “language that says one thing and means another” (qtd. in Schilb 4). As a composition scholar trained in the rhetorical tradition, Schilb cannot fathom how Johnson’s definition could avoid any mention of persuasion. “No one in composition would define *rhetoric* in this way!” Schilb exclaims. Even more alarming is Johnson’s complete surprise when Schilb confronts her with the classical definition of rhetoric provided by Aristotle; she seems completely unfamiliar with the notion that rhetoric involves observing the available means of persuasion in a given situation. Schilb is flabbergasted: “How could a theorist of rhetoric be hazy…about a definition [that composition specialists] know well?” (5). As the rest of Schilb’s *Between the Lines* argues, the fact that practitioners in two different subfields of
English studies are completely bewildered by the other’s definition of rhetoric is symptomatic of the deep insularity of these two camps.

I would suggest that the line that separates the two subfields is not as impermeable as Schilb’s analysis suggests. Or, put somewhat differently, the way in which they grasp the term rhetoric might be understood beyond a simple opposition between “tropes” on the one hand and “persuasion” on the other. While organizing English Studies’ relationship to rhetoric along a tropes/persuasion axis is undeniably productive, it certainly does not offer the entire picture. In Schilb’s work, the trope/persuasion pair produces a number of corresponding binaries, including reading/writing, political quietism/activism, research/teaching that certainly restrict our understanding of the field. After all, de Man, Johnson’s teacher at Yale, was clearly aware of rhetoric in terms of persuasion (see Chapter 6 of Allegories of Reading), while plenty of New Rhetoricians, especially Kenneth Burke, focus on figural language’s role in persuasion. What if we instead examined literary theory and Rhetoric and Composition’s relationship to rhetoric not through their engagement with the tropes or persuasion but instead through another term? Such an approach might help us bypass the deadlock between active and passive that has too long structured discussions of the literature/composition split. Indeed, in this chapter, I will be less concerned with what these respective fields say explicitly about “rhetoric” and more with how ideas from the rhetorical tradition influence the way in which they organize their practice of scholarly criticism. As Barbara Johnson writes in A World of Difference (crediting Schilb in the acknowledgements), “[w]hether one defines rhetoric as ‘language that says one thing and means another (as I do in Chapter 16)…or as ‘the faculty of observing in any case the available means of persuasion’ (as Aristotle and most teachers of composition do)…it is clear that the study of
rhetoric has everything to do with human politics” (5-6). Modifying Johnson’s assertion slightly, I will argue that rhetoric has everything to do with the politics of criticism in the discipline.

The key term for understanding the role of rhetoric in English Studies actually comes from within the rhetorical tradition. I argue that the notion of *agon*—strife or competition between two participants—helps us better understand some of the subtle linkages and divergences among various fields within the discipline. Rooted in a conceptualization of the *agon* derived from Nietzsche, the term “rhetoric” has been used to authorize the proliferation of critical discursive acts. For de Man and deconstruction more generally, “rhetoric” serves as a way of signaling the mysterious depths of the literary artifact that inaugurate an endless confrontation between reader and text. For Burke and the New Rhetoricians, “rhetoric” acts as a means of ushering in a more expansive discussion that steadily accumulates new participants and objects. The agonistic principles that have underwritten the continual expansion of scholarship in both literary studies and Rhetoric and Composition has led to a steadily approaching and unavoidable confrontation between these two fields that will likely determine the future of the discipline.

I.

Nietzsche’s engagement with rhetoric begins with a series of lectures at the University of Basel during the 1872-1873 academic year—lectures only two students attended. Portions of the lectures were translated into French (by Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy) in the 1970s and into English in the 1980s. Consisting of sixteen sections, this work provides a relatively straightforward account of the history of rhetoric and its most important practitioners and theorists. Delivered in a flat, textbook-like manner, Nietzsche’s lectures lack his later witty
and biting irony. As Sander L. Gilman, Carole Blair, and David J. Parent note in their introduction to the English translation, the “lectures, when they discuss the history and substance of rhetoric, are derivative” (xi) with Nietzsche rehearsing arguments from Richard Volkmann’s *Die Rhetorik der Griechen und Römer in systematischer Übersicht dargestellt* and parroting historians of rhetoric Gustav Gerber and Friedrich Blass. A simple recapitulation of common knowledge, Nietzsche’s lectures ostensibly offer no unique insights about rhetoric.

A flagrant exception to this assessment can be found in the third section of the lectures entitled “The Relation of the Rhetorical to Language.” Nietzsche seizes a marginal feature of rhetorical theory and transforms it into a foundational principle through which language can be grasped in its entirety. After a brief account of how ancient writing strikes modern ears as unnatural, Nietzsche states the case in a way that directly shaped de Man’s articulations in *Allegories of Reading*:

> [t]here is obviously no unrhetorical ‘naturalness’ of language to which one could appeal; language itself is the result of purely rhetorical arts. The power to discover and to make operative that which works and impresses, with respect to each thing, a power which Aristotle calls rhetoric, is, at the same time, the essence of language; the latter is based just as rhetoric is upon that which is true, upon the essence of things. Language does not desire to instruct, but to convey to others a subjective impulse and its acceptance. (21)

In fact, as Nietzsche points out, it “makes no sense to speak of a ‘proper meaning’ which is carried over to something else only in special cases” (25). His assertions not only resonate with the famous essay “On Truth and Lying in an Extra-Moral Sense” (composed the following summer), where he argues that the journey from nerve stimulus to image to sound to concept
amounts to a series of metaphorical substitutions that problematize the very notion of a “thing in itself”; they also anticipate the ruminations on perspectivism in all his major philosophical statements of the 1880s.

Nietzsche’s confident intervention during the third lecture should initiate a broader revision of the entire course. While much of the material Nietzsche communicated is admittedly derivative, the editors of the English translation note that “the selection, arrangement, and placement of the subject matter are of his choosing” (xvii). Particularly striking is Nietzsche’s emphasis on Ciceronian stylistics, a clear choice to avoid the more predictable path through Plato and Aristotle’s work on rhetoric. That Nietzsche felt comfortable bypassing such familiar landmarks in these lecture sessions challenges the assumption that his only original contribution to the history of rhetoric consisted of an analysis of figural language. Even if his lectures on rhetoric are read as merely a burdensome professional obligation that he fulfilled with little enthusiasm, plenty of other material confirms an investment in rhetoric extending beyond his analysis of tropes. Not only does the lengthy essay “A History of Greek Eloquence” display his nearly encyclopedic grasp of rhetorical practice in ancient Greece, it also gestures toward questions of strife and competition that ultimately became integral to his broader philosophical project. Indeed, many of Nietzsche’s primary texts on the Greek culture of competition were contemporaneous with his explorations of tropological language. The interconnections between trope and competition are clearly articulated in Nietzsche’s reformulation of the concept of agonism.

Nietzsche discusses the agon in “Homer’s Contest,” a brief essay from 1871. Intended as a preface for a book that was never completed (much like his lecture courses in rhetoric the following year failed to culminate in any official or completed text), the piece traces the startling
differences between ancient Greek and nineteenth-century German valuations of contestation and struggle. Lamenting his contemporaries’ distaste for competition, Nietzsche asserts “nothing separates the Greek world more from ours” than differing views on envy (55). The ancient Greeks conceived of envy “not as a blemish” but instead “as the effect of a beneficent deity” (55). Rather than a regrettable byproduct of human culture that should be minimized at all costs, competition was actively cultivated through an “agonistic education” (58) that would produce citizens capable of preserving the health and vibrancy of Greek culture.

Nietzsche warns of the dangers that result when this agonistic sphere becomes unbalanced by unequal competitors. He cites the original meaning of ostracism, which refers to the banishment of figures whose skills far exceed all others. “Why should not someone be the best?” Nietzsche asks rhetorically, offering a firm answer: “Because with that the contest would fail, and the eternal life-basis of the Hellenic State would be endangered” (57). He provides the example of Miltiades, an individual who wielded so much power and skill that he vanquished all rivals who threatened him but whose unchallenged supremacy ultimately ruined both himself and the entire Greek state. To prevent such misfortune, the Greeks advocated perpetual competition that would prevent a single figure from achieving too much glory and thereby dismantling the competitive sphere. Fearing the dangers of autocracy, they desired “a preventive against the genius—a second genius” (58). In her recent study of Nietzsche’s treatment of agonism, Christa Davis Acampora notes that the philosopher makes a distinction between a positive, productive agonism and a negative, destructive antagonism. The former seeks to perpetuate the competition itself, accords respect to one’s opponent, and possesses a desire to maintain the existence of this competitor since their relationship is mutually beneficial. The latter aims to annihilate the opponent and put an end to competition itself.
Reversing typical priorities, Nietzsche privileges competitive action itself over victorious outcomes, introducing a metalepsis between cause and effect that links his arguments about agonism to his ruminations on tropes. No longer can competition be conceived as a mere means to an end, and Nietzsche writes that if one assumes “the Greek was unable to bear glory and fortune, one should say more exactly that he was unable to bear fame without further struggle” (“Homer’s Contest” 60). Victory means little on its own without the opportunity to compete again. Rather than a vanishing mediator, the act of struggling within the contest actually constitutes the “glory and fortune” insofar as it develops capacities for individual growth and self-overcoming. The spoils one might gain from the competition should not overshadow the practices that were cultivated in order to secure these rewards. The goal of competition—victory—has now become merely a means through which the goal of a more fully realized competitive spirit—previously just the means for achieving victory—is accomplished. In order to cultivate a competitive spirit, however, one must maintain the desire to defeat one’s opponent and secure victory since this objective mobilizes the entire operation. Fighting for victory and fighting for the sake of fighting engage in a sort of duel themselves that must remain unending. Nietzsche adopts the agonistic spirit animating competitive relationships and internalizes it in his later aphoristic writing. Rather than formulating a single position and defending it against potential detractors, Nietzsche’s writing instead incorporates opposing positions into its very texture so that a single statement or argument never emerges as anything more than a temporary, provisional victor. Strains of thought emerge and conflict with one another, reconfiguring themselves after these encounters in unanticipated reversals and convergences. Nietzsche’s texts might be likened to a competition where a winner is never crowned because the game never ends.
Nietzsche stresses that the productive form of agonism was rooted into the very fabric of Greek culture, such that every Athenian citizen saw it as his duty “to cultivate his Ego in contest, so far that it should be of the highest service to Athens” (58). Crucially, these practices are not limited merely to the most obvious pedagogical settings. Just as “the youths to be educated were brought up struggling against one another, so their educators were in turn in emulation amongst themselves” (59). While Nietzsche mentions jealousies blooming between rival musicians, sophists, and dramatic artists, we might easily see this agonistic spirit animating Nietzsche’s own critical project and those inspired by his work in the twentieth century. In fact, Nietzsche’s decision to explore rhetoric and offer a decisive reformulation and transformation of its fundamental coordinates may stem from some of these agonistic principles, evident when we situate Nietzsche’s historical moment. By the end of the nineteenth century, the field of rhetoric appeared to be completely exhausted. In his 1936 work *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*, I.A. Richards announced that rhetoric “may perhaps be said to end with Archbishop Whately” (5), whose famous *Elements of Rhetoric* appeared in 1846. Nietzsche’s decision to resuscitate rhetoric at this point may be largely due to its low standing, an effort to return to the “ring of competition” among academic discipline an apparently vanquished foe.

II.

Although the term “rhetoric” features prominently in his corpus, Paul de Man rarely engages with the traditional rhetorical canon. Isocrates, Cicero, and Quintilian fail to generate any commentary, the sophists remain untouched, and Aristotle receives nothing more than a cursory glance. De Man seems content to confine himself to a notion of rhetoric inaugurated during the Romantic period and extended by Friedrich Nietzsche that focuses solely on tropes
and dispenses with questions concerning persuasion and eloquence. Whereas most contemporary rhetoricians have invested their energies in analyzing political discourse, de Man’s work exhibits little interest in the public and its problems. Read in this register, de Man’s use of the word “rhetoric” to describe his interpretive approach is just a tease, promising a turn toward the politicization of the literary sphere only to double down on the aesthetic object and its precious reflective interiors. The “rhetorical” remains largely indistinguishable from the “literary,” signifying the figural or metaphorical dimension of language that frustrates the search for univocal meaning and the frictionless communication of subjective experience. De Man’s relentless focus on the nuances of individual literary works has left him vulnerable to charges of a narrow textualism with potentially disastrous political consequences. In *Criticism and Social Change*, Frank Lentricchia chastised de Man for ignoring the important social dimensions of literature, arguing that this omission confirmed a dangerous political quietism. The discovery in 1989 of de Man’s anti-Semitic wartime writings only intensified this dismissive reading of de Man, with the fiercest critics asserting that his work cleared a direct path to National Socialism and the Final Solution.

Much evidence exists to counteract this narrative, including de Man’s turn to questions of ideology in his late writings. In an interview only months before his death in 1983, de Man asserts that politics and ideology were always “uppermost” in his mind but that they could only be approached through careful linguistic examination (103). His unfinished manuscript *Aesthetics, Rhetoric, Ideology* (published posthumously in 1996 as *Aesthetic Ideology*) offers a glimpse of an ambitious project that would elucidate the political implications of his earlier textual analyses. But even if these late explorations are discounted, de Man’s early work possesses a substantial political undercurrent most evident in his interest in the various
allegiances and rivalries that exist within literary criticism. His detailed readings of texts are always accompanied by an erudite awareness of the history of competing critical camps that have long warred over issues of interpretation. The 1971 collection *Blindness and Insight*, which consolidates his explorations of a variety of literary critics, suggests that his interest in politics targeted a more immediate and local venue than the broader public sphere or mass democracy. De Man’s work likens the discourse of literary criticism to a public forum where pressing matters are assessed and deliberated, thereby making his analyses of the structures and shifts that govern this community an unacknowledged form of rhetorical analysis.

In an interview with Robert Moynihan, de Man acknowledges Nietzsche as the inspiration behind his turn toward rhetoric. Explaining that he had not always had recourse to rhetorical terminology, de Man asserts that the main revelation for me was Nietzsche, who I had been trying to read for many years without getting too far, precisely because the moment where Nietzsche reflects on language as a historical structure is a moment which one didn’t know or didn’t hear about. One was so concerned with problems of good and evil, problems of an ethical nature, or historical attitudes, much of which I couldn’t get into. But Nietzsche is highly aware of rhetorical theory, knows those terms and uses them. It gives you a point of entry that is exceedingly fruitful. (147)

Crucially, de Man points out that Nietzsche possesses an extensive knowledge of the history of rhetoric and uses them to incredible effect. De Man’s comment here hints at the degree to which he himself remains highly aware of the rhetorical tradition, for De Man’s own use of Nietzsche suggests an equally extensive knowledge of both a wide array of rhetorical principles found in Nietzsche’s work both explicitly and implicitly. While de Man may indeed be bored by many of
the thematic concerns that have troubled commentators of Nietzsche for decades, this should not suggest that his engagement with Nietzsche should be limited strictly to those writings meditating on the nature of language—the lectures on rhetoric and “On Truth and Lying in an Extramoral Sense.” In fact, de Man engages with Nietzsche’s thought in a number of sophisticated ways that inform his practice as a literary critic.

Of course, his most obvious engagement with Nietzsche can be seen in the explicitly rhetorical vocabulary he deploys throughout most of his work in the 1970s. Nietzsche would anchor much of what would become de Man’s signature book, Allegories of Reading, with three of the six sections in the first part of the book entitled “Rhetoric” dedicated to a close reading of the German’s work, covering a number of texts including The Birth of Tragedy, “On Truth and Lying,” The Will to Power, and The Gay Science. In the middle chapter of this trilogy entitled “Rhetoric of Tropes (Nietzsche),” de Man outlines the most significant features of Nietzsche’s thoughts on language that first appeared in the third lecture on rhetoric. For Nietzsche, the figural dimension of language is not a peripheral feature but instead its essence; de Man cites the following line to cement his case: “No such thing as an unrhetorical, ‘natural’ language exists that could be used as a point of reference: language is itself the result of purely rhetorical tricks and devices. …Language is rhetoric” (105). As de Man emphasizes, Nietzsche’s comments constitute a profound intervention into the theory of language, one that “marks a full reversal of established priorities” (106). In fact, Nietzsche’s critique of language is merely a proxy for his broader project of undermining metaphysics more generally. De Man assures his reader that “[w]e can legitimately assert therefore that the key to Nietzsche’s critique of metaphysics…lies in the rhetorical model of the trope or…the language most explicitly grounded in rhetoric” (109). As de Man’s analysis unfolds,
determining his differences from Nietzsche becomes increasingly difficult; he becomes so tightly sutured to the metalanguage of the German philosopher that separating the two seems impossible, like the impossibility of separating the dancer from the dance that de Man explores in the opening chapter of *Allegories of Reading*.

In his famous 1982 essay “The Resistance to Theory,” de Man even mobilizes Nietzsche’s formulation of rhetoric as a synecdoche for theory in its entirety. Responding to a request from the Committee on Research Activities of the Modern Language Association for a succinct overview of recent trends in the field of “literary theory,” de Man defines the term as “the introduction of linguistic terminology in the metalanguage about literature” (8) that “upsets rooted ideologies by revealing the mechanics of their workings” (11). He conceptualizes theory in terms of the classic trivium that includes grammar, rhetoric, and logic. A symbiotic relationship between grammar and logic, de Man holds, had long underwritten any belief in a transparent and self-assured knowledge of the world. However, focusing on the rhetorical dimension of language highlights a residue of indetermination that grammar cannot solve. Language always defies the easy assurances promised by a grammatical definition. “Rhetoric,” de Man writes, “by its actively negative relationship to grammar and to logic, certainly undoes the claims of the *trivium* (and by extension, of language) to be an epistemologically stable construct” (17). The “resistance” to theory that de Man addresses is a resistance to the rhetorical dimension of language.

But Nietzsche plays an even more crucial role than simply deconstructing metaphysics, serving as a vehicle for a critique or meditation on this initial insight. If Nietzsche can be counted as the principle inspiration behind de Man’s “rhetorical reading,” he simultaneously constitutes the figure that de Man returns to repeatedly over the course of the final decade of his career.
Nietzsche remains a remarkably fascinating figure that de Man cannot help but return to precisely because it forces him to think more deeply about the consequences of the deconstructive operation. Put slightly differently, de Man’s analyses of Nietzsche can be understood as meditations on his own work, the closest that de Man would come to deconstructing one of his own texts (recall Carol Jacob’s reminder that de Man famously stated that his own work had no blind spots despite the fact that his work emphasized that every insight necessarily produced its own blindness). Crucially, de Man learns from Nietzsche that the deconstructive operation is one that is not completely antagonistic with metaphysics. A rather shortsighted reading of de Man’s work would conclude that language’s referential, metaphysical properties and its deconstructive, rhetorical ones are diametrically opposed: deconstruction eliminates the phantasmagoric metaphysical ideals that illusorily allow the text to cohere in a transcendent unity. De Man’s work actually proposes a more nuanced dynamic where the confrontation between these two forces does not end in the elimination of one but instead engenders an endless restaging of the conflict. Instead of a goal or value to be cultivated through deliberate action, the agonistic forces that reside in language always already exist and only become more apparent in those moments when resisted.

In “Semiology and Rhetoric,” de Man’s fairly straightforward deconstruction of a literary text does not complete his analysis but merely produces a provisional conclusion that is then subjected to its own fierce interrogation that will continue ad infinitum. De Man begins his analysis with the recognizable move of deconstructing an ostensibly stable and coherent set of statements in a passage from Marcel Proust. He shows how a series of tropes, including metaphor and metonymy, preclude the unified meaning the text initially promises. De Man calls this procedure the “grammatization of rhetoric” since he has provided a fixed group of rhetorical
concepts—a grammar—that complete this subversive function. However, an important tension emerges: if rhetoric is supposed to undermine the universal claims of grammar, de Man’s analysis repeats such universalizing gestures by privileging the rhetorical tropes as a conclusive explanation. Metaphysics reemerges with renewed strength in the moment that it has apparently been vanquished. The negative knowledge that de Man’s analysis produces nevertheless constitutes a form of knowledge that was earlier deemed problematic. Continuing the interpretive process, de Man’s analysis reveals the agonistic relationship between metaphysics and its deconstruction, suggesting that these competing tendencies within language cannot be suspended.

The agonistic relationship between metaphysics and deconstruction reemerges in the final moments of “The Resistance to Theory.” Although the early portions of the piece demonstrate how rhetoric undermines the stabilities promised by logic and grammar, de Man ends by emphasizing how a logical impulse reemerges within rhetorical reading. Deconstructive criticism, while claiming to foreground the “rhetorical” dimension of any text—its endless interpretability, its profound depths that prompt infinite speculation and analysis—simultaneously contains conceptual safeguards that neutralize the threat posed by this rhetorical dimension. De Man asserts that rhetorical readings are “irrefutable” and “totalizing” since they are “the most elastic theoretical and dialectical model to end all models” (Resistance 19). Even though his rhetorical readings come to a dramatically different position than “naïve” thematic readings—namely, they provide a kind of negative knowledge—these conclusions nevertheless embody the totalizing tendencies that the deconstructive reading initially set out to eliminate. He writes that this approach is simultaneously “theory and not theory” since their capacity to be “teachable, generalizable and highly responsive to systematization” necessitates that they “still
avoid and resist the reading they advocate. Nothing can overcome the resistance to theory since theory is itself resistance” (19). In a startling twist, de Man implies that his own work constitutes the purest instantiation of the resistance named in the essay’s title. He ends with an uncertainty: “literary theory is not in danger of going under; it cannot help but flourish, and the more it is resisted, the more it flourishes, since the language it speaks is the language of self-resistance. What remains impossible to decide is whether this flourishing is a triumph or a fall” (19-20).

Given the agonistic impulses undergirding his analysis, we might wonder whether this language of triumphs and falls, of victory and defeat, properly foregrounds de Man’s interest in the site of the struggle that produces such winners and losers. The ultimate triumph is precisely the undecidability of whether theory’s flourishing amounts to a triumph or a fall.

At this point, it might be appropriate to respond to a potential criticism of my analysis: the concept of agonism never appears as a significant term anywhere in de Man’s work. Beyond the more straightforward concern of whether de Man actually read Nietzsche’s essay “Homer’s Contest”—considering de Man’s level of erudition, it would be surprising if he hadn’t read it—there exists the crucial question of whether we might reasonably impose a foreign concept on de Man’s corpus to understand his writing. Doing so enacts violence upon his texts and produces the very kind of reading that de Man rejected. “Deconstruction is not something we can decide to do or not do at will” he insists, arguing that it is instead “co-extensive with any use of language” (125). However, the modifications de Man made between preliminary drafts and the final version of Allegories of Reading reveal explicitly agonistic language later eliminated from the published texts.

The editorial changes occur in “Rhetoric of Persuasion (Nietzsche),” the sixth chapter of Allegories of Reading, one of the few moments in his writing where de Man talks about rhetoric
in terms of persuasion. An indication of his highly unusual approach, he mentions Aristotle in the opening moments of the chapter, but instead of gesturing toward the *Rhetoric* as one might expect based on the chapter title, he cites the philosopher’s principle of non-contradiction. This principle is discussed as a way of approaching the central concern of the chapter: the relationship between constative and performative language and each form’s relationship to truth and reality. The first portion of the essay covers familiar ground, problematizing the idea that language is constative, able to describe a state of affairs and thereby secure clear knowledge of the world. De Man outlines how Nietzsche troubles these claims to arrive at the conclusion that all language must be understood as performative. But de Man then questions the ostensible supremacy of the performative over the constative, since other writings of Nietzsche undermine the concept of “action” that underwrites performative language. The difference between the constative and the performative proves to be “undecidable” (130) and de Man maintains that this “aporia between performative and constative language is merely a version of the aporia between trope and persuasion” (131) that constitutes rhetoric.

Undecidability, however, is only one way to characterize the relationship between rhetoric as persuasion and rhetoric as trope. Couldn’t it just as easily be represented as agonistic rather than undecidable? Although there is a great deal of overlap between agonism and undecidability, agonism highlights the process that makes a final decision impossible rather than the impossibility itself. According to this alternate formulation, rhetoric as persuasion and rhetoric as trope enter a duel for supremacy that never concludes decisively; their confrontation multiplies the ways we understand the connections and divergences between these two terms. In *Textual Allegories*, a recently published draft of what would eventually become *Allegories of Reading*, constative and performative language are treated as agonists. In an appendix to the draft
entitled “Nietzsche I: Rhetoric + Metaphysics,” certain phrases in the final pages (which later became the conclusion to the sixth chapter of Allegories of Reading) are highly suggestive of an athletic competition or physical confrontation. The version from “Nietzsche I: Rhetoric + Metaphysics” reads:

What seemed to lead to an established priority of doxa, opinion and persuasion, over truth never quite reaches its target: it under- or, in this case, over-shoots it and reveals, by mis-hitting it, another target which one assumed to have been long since eliminated. The episteme is hardly restored intact in its former glory; it has been badly battered, but one has not entirely managed to eliminate it either. (189)

The published version in Allegories of Reading reads:

What seems to lead to an established priority of ‘setzen’ over ‘erkennen,’ of language as action over language as truth, never quite reaches its mark. It under- or overshoots it and, in so doing, it reveals that the target which one long since assumed to have been eliminated has merely been displaced. The episteme has hardly been restored intact to its former glory, but it has not been definitively eliminated either. (130)

Beyond some of the more straightforward cosmetic adjustments (the change in tense, for instance), the finalized text removes some telling features. The substitution of “action” for “doxa, opinion and persuasion” shifts the emphasis from a realm of force and contestation toward one of mere movement. This shift causes the word “target” to lose its more violent connotations and become simply a synonym for goal or objective. The deletion of “mis-hitting” in the final version only compounds the feeling that de Man has forcibly removed elements from the text that suggest a combative relationship between trope and persuasion. The elimination of the
description of constantive language as having “been badly battered” in its encounter with the performative confirms a decisive pattern within the passage. These discrepancies suggest that de Man couldn’t decide—or, perhaps more appropriately, was at war with himself over—whether to characterize the tension between constantive and performative language in terms of undecidability or agonism. While the agonistic language was ultimately badly battered itself, removed for the published version Allegories of Reading, the recent release of the archival material reveals that it was not definitely eliminated either.

As de Man’s editorial changes here suggest, agonism not only served as a thematic element in his work but also operated at the stylistic level. I would like to suggest that Nietzsche offers a more important contribution to de Man’s work than simply lending terms from the rhetorical tradition (or, more generously, offering a particular spin on this rhetorical tradition). Whereas the language of tropes and figures are unavoidable surface phenomena in de Man’s prose—dare we say the “thematic” content of de Man’s work?—the agonistic principles cultivated and explored by Nietzsche find themselves filtered into de Man’s writing in more subtle yet no less important ways. Agonism, as opposed to tropism, plays just as an important role in de Man’s method or style as it does in the specific principles that underwrite his understanding of how language functions. Specifically, the concept of agonism plays a central role in how de Man positions himself with respect to other critics and how he envisions deconstruction’s place within the history of literary and rhetorical criticism.

Agonistic vocabulary certainly captures the combative nature of literary criticism at the time de Man composed Allegories of Reading in the 1970s. He noted that a “quarrelsome tone” (21) had begun to permeate literary criticism in his essay “Return to Philology,” and he had either contributed to this atmosphere or parodied its aggressive pretensions several years earlier
when he boldly declared that rhetorical reading should be “the task of literary criticism in the coming years” (*Allegories* 17). Josué Harari’s *Textual Strategies*, a well-known anthology of literary theory published in the same year as *Allegories of Reading* that included de Man’s “Semiology and Rhetoric,” intensifies this agonistic language even further. Comparing the collection to “a ring of criticism” where contemporary theorists engage in “various critical struggles,” Harari admits that he has yet to “determine how the rounds are to be scored” for this competition but nevertheless feels confident that “in this game, everyone is eventually a loser” (68-69). Harari’s belief that a decisive victory can never be achieved hints at the complicated rules governing the game of criticism.

As an integral part of this game, de Man recognizes that criticism is an agonistic structure that his own writing cannot help but perpetuate. Winners cannot be determined insofar as the teams in the contest continually bleed into one another, a fact that de Man alludes to in his discussions of the discipline. De Man simultaneously embraces and disavows a range of discourses—philology, rhetoric, New Criticism—through which he configures his own deconstructive project. If his work seeks to correct the fundamental errors of these other forms of criticism, he nevertheless readily describes his work as an extension of these movements. Against those critics who regard his work as a threat to humanist literary criticism, he repeatedly characterizes deconstruction in terms of traditional schools of thought. For all the fury surrounding the New Critics and the deconstructionists, de Man confesses that he can “live…very easily” with his work being classified as “just more New Criticism” (*Resistance* 117). When responding to charges by Walter Jackson Bate that he has contributed to undermining the humanities, he attaches himself to New Criticism, specifically the work of Reuben Brower, when pinpointing crucial influences on his methodology. De Man’s
endorsement of Brower appears in an essay entitled “The Return to Philology”—not, as the essay’s content might suggest, “The Return to New Criticism”—a point that further complicates the connections among various movements in the history of literary criticism. De Man not only characterizes his scholarship as philological in nature but also suggests a certain degree of contiguity between New Criticism and philology, which should surprise anyone who recalls Gerald Graff’s account in *Professing Literature* of how New Criticism competed with and ultimately replaced the philological enterprise that dominated the American academy during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. And philology itself, inseparable from the beginnings of the American research university based on the German model, can be said to have marginalized the rhetorical education that was the norm in American colleges in the early and middle portions of the nineteenth century. If de Man is unwilling to draw clear demarcations between critical friend and foe, illustrating how a range of discourses implicitly support one another in spite of themselves, what might this ambivalence reveal about de Man’s understanding of literary history more generally?

To answer this question, we must once again return to Nietzsche since de Man uses him as a vehicle for articulating his own ideas about the historical evolution of critical discourse. Nietzsche certainly possessed an agonistic relationship with philology, a discipline he often ridiculed but remained unwilling to abandon altogether. As a young scholar at the University of Basel, he frequently combatted stifling scholarly protocols. Securing tenure at the astonishingly early age of twenty-four, Nietzsche was knocked off this lofty perch when the conservative community of philologists rejected the speculative quality that marked his first major work, 1872’s *The Birth of Tragedy*. In response, he penned the blistering “We Philologists” in 1874, condemning philologists as a haughty and superficial specimen with a barrage of not so subtle
insults. “Ah, it is a sad story, the story of philology!” Nietzsche mockingly announces before he derides “[t]he disgusting erudition, the lazy, inactive passivity, the timid submission” that plagues these scholars (140). Regarding philological investigation as directionless “ant-like work” that is “simply nonsense, and quite superfluous” (115), Nietzsche characterizes its practitioners as “intellectually crippled” individuals who have “found a suitable hobby in all this hairsplitting” (140). He proclaims that “[n]inety-nine philologists out of a hundred should not be philologists at all” (110). Nietzsche tellingly does not condemn all one hundred, however, and the first-person plural found in the title suggests that he counts himself among those select few who might steer philology in a worthwhile direction (in 1881’s *Daybreak*, Nietzsche would be more explicit about philology’s potential, conceptualizing it as a “venerable art” of “slow reading” that is “more necessary than ever today” (5)). At the same time, Nietzsche refuses to immunize himself completely from the criticisms he launches at the philologists. Throughout the piece, Nietzsche targets the majority of philologists for pursuing their work out of either sheer inertia or simple careerism. After reiterating this claim in the seventieth aphorism in the essay, Nietzsche concludes by grouping himself within these timid scholars: “I know them—I myself am one of them” (146).

A similar ambivalence seems to mark Nietzsche’s engagement with rhetoric as well. At first glance, Nietzsche might appear completely dismissive of the rhetorical tradition and his largely derivative lectures on the subject would be symptomatic of such disregard. As de Man points out, any philologist of the time would have possessed the requisite knowledge to teach an introductory course on rhetoric, so Nietzsche’s 1872 lectures should not be seen as “zwingend proof of an overriding interest” (“Nietzsche” 191, n.13). When de Man’s colleague J. Hillis Miller commented on Nietzsche’s rhetoric lectures in a 1993 article, he suggested that their dry,
straightforward tenor could be read as an ironic treatment of the humanist underpinnings of the rhetorical tradition. The third lecture in the series, where Nietzsche advances his iconoclastic notion of rhetoric as constitutive of language as such, serves as the point where such irony comes into sharp focus. For Miller, the lectures are “the ironically solemn repetition of a colossal, centuries-long mistake, a mistake based on a false idea of language and epistemology that dominated both Greek and Roman ideas about rhetoric” (324). Only during the third lecture “does Nietzsche allow his own opinions to break through the ironic deadpan miming of what Aristotle, Quintillian, and the rest had to say” (324). The entire metaphysical edifice of the rhetorical tradition crumbles when Professor Nietzsche briefly intervenes with his own commentary on the textbook material.

While Miller offers a compelling reading of the lectures, de Man suggests that Nietzsche had a more complicated relationship to the rhetorical tradition than outright dismissiveness.\(^1\) If Nietzsche disparages this tradition in explicit statements, he does not hesitate to employ every rhetorical technique available for his highly stylized compositions. The ostensible contradiction only underscores the agonistic tension between Nietzsche’s philosophy and this competing canon. In the very moment when he seeks to dismantle traditional rhetoric and its focus on persuasion, Nietzsche cannot help but reinvigorate it through his very denunciation of it, thereby returning it to the “ring of competition” among academic discourses. From de Man’s perspective, Nietzsche’s interest in rhetoric stems in part from its relegation to a dead past, since he is suspicious that the past can ever remain dead. Whatever animosity he initially possesses toward the rhetorical tradition, Nietzsche also acknowledges his inescapable indebtedness to this work.

\(^1\) In all fairness, Miller’s work elsewhere advances a more complicated relationship between metaphysics and its deconstruction. See, for instance, “Ariachne’s Broken Woof.”
De Man explores these issues in the 1970 essay “Literary History and Literary Modernity,” tackling the question of critical practice and its relationship to past tradition through a careful reading of Nietzsche’s “On the Use and Abuse of History for Life.” The analysis begins by outlining how Nietzsche establishes a clear antagonism between “history” and “modernity.” “History” refers to the lamentable condition of humanity that prevents it from forgetting the past. Adopting a crucial distinction between nature and culture that he inherits from Rousseau, Nietzsche argues that humans differ from animals insofar as they remain shackled to memories that inhibit action in the present. The historical man hopelessly relies on the past to understand his immediate surroundings, and in doing so, ensures that he suffocates from the dead weight of his ancestry. To characterize “modernity,” Nietzsche uses the word “life,” which he conceives of as an active faculty of forgetting that casts off historical deadwood in order to create a better future. De Man stresses that Nietzsche aligns himself clearly with the life-giving spirit of modernism against the stultifying demands of the historical record; Nietzsche regards an active mode of forgetting as an essential ingredient for any action in the present, noting that “[m]odernity exists in the form of a desire to wipe out whatever came earlier” so as to reach “a true present, a point of origin that marks a new departure” (148). “[M]oments of genuine humanity” are achieved only when “all interiority vanishes” (147). Only by cultivating this capacity to discount the past and grasp the present without the debilitating perspectives of previous generations can true “life” be achieved.

De Man insists, however, that Nietzsche subtly undermines his breathless affiliation with modernity within the essay by proposing a dynamic between modernity and history that cannot be reduced to a simple “antithesis or opposition” (151). The moderns of the present cannot dispense with the past because it is inseparable from them. Modernity privileges the present over
the past but ultimately learns that “in severing itself from the past, it has at the same time severed itself from the present” (149). The present is so inexorably tied to the past that it always risks destroying itself when it attacks the past. In an effort to clean house and start anew, the present pulls the carpet out from under itself: “[t]he more radical the rejection of anything that came before, the greater the dependence on the past” (161). Although this relationship between modernity and history is described as a “self-destroying union that threatens the survival of both” (151), his examination suggests that these destructive tendencies also possess a regenerative quality. History and modernity may continually threaten the stability of one another, but they also remain crucial to one another’s survival; like any agonistic relationship, history and modernity simultaneously rejuvenate and destroy one another. History, threatened by the innovation that modernism promises, nevertheless needs these forces for its own perpetuation. Modernity, refusing the traditions erected by literature and history, simultaneously contributes to these traditions simply by adding to the heap of written material that it sought to overcome. Nietzsche, de Man explains, realizes that even his own essay on modernity will ultimately become “nothing but another historical document” (151).

De Man’s analysis of “On the Use and Abuse of History for Life” not only provides an alternate way of interpreting Nietzsche’s relationship with the rhetorical tradition but also offers a key for understanding de Man’s use of the term “rhetoric” in the years following “Literary History and Literary Modernity.” Within de Man’s later writing, “rhetoric” functions as a way of highlighting deconstruction’s indebtedness to past tradition even in the moment when it seems to have departed from it completely. As de Man periodically alludes to throughout his essay but never addresses directly, the dynamics between modernity and history have a particular significance to contemporary “theoretical speculations about literature” (143). De Man seems to
have read Nietzsche’s essay allegorically, replacing the general modern man who attempts to overcome the detritus of history with the more specific formulation of the deconstructive critic dispensing the erroneous readings of the critical commentary that he has inherited. “Literary History and Literary Modernity” was composed during the transitional phase of de Man’s career when his early interest in phenomenological and psychological concerns was giving way to the rhetorical terminology with which he is now indelibly linked.² The use of “rhetoric” thus constitutes a decisive break from his past work. On a much broader scale, de Man connected “rhetoric” to a bold new interpretive paradigm that promised to expose the shortsightedness of previous critical movements. The term would have a particularly strong charge during this time, when the reigning critical orthodoxy, New Criticism, was allergic to thinking about literature as anything but an isolated object existing outside everyday social discourse—that is, as rhetoric. Within these texts, “rhetoric” is thus marked as decidedly modernist, as if de Man were severing ties with his own past work as well as the larger critical community in order to embark on a daring new adventure in criticism. Yet at the same time, the unfashionable and antiquated connotations surrounding the word “rhetoric” simultaneously dashes these modernist aspirations, underscoring how the specter of the past haunts de Man’s discourse despite his best efforts to overcome it.

Close inspection reveals that de Man’s turn to rhetoric weaves together a number of discourses and figures that the present had all but forgotten. Not only was rhetoric a fairly marginal discourse when de Man published his work, but the specific version of rhetoric that he advanced—one centered on tropes rather than persuasion—was neglected even by those few

² The first prominent uses of the term “rhetoric” in de Man’s corpus were 1969’s “The Rhetoric of Temporality” and 1971’s “The Rhetoric of Blindness: Jacques Derrida’s Reading of Rousseau,” the latter bearing an epigraph by Nietzsche.
scholars who were arguing for a “revival of rhetoric.” Furthermore, Nietzsche was a marginal figure within philosophical discourse during this time. As has been well-documented, Nietzsche had long been dismissed by the philosophical establishment in France before he was resurrected during the 1960s (de Man approvingly cites some of this work, including that by Gilles Deleuze, Phillippe Lacoue-Labarthe, and Sarah Kofman). His reemergence offered a fresh perspective for a young generation of French thinkers weaned on Hegel, Heidegger, and Husserl. But even most of these scholars did not see Nietzsche’s minor lecture course on rhetoric as a pivotal point for his entire corpus. De Man seizes upon this seemingly “eccentric and minor part of Nietzsche’s enterprise” (Allegories 103) as a way to examine a number of central questions concerning the relationship between philosophy and literature. De Man was not only resuscitating a marginalized figure or a marginalized discourse that had been relegated to the dustbin of history, but a doubly displaced entity—a marginalized figure’s engagement with a marginalized discourse.

Ultimately, de Man’s use of “rhetoric” helps emphasize the inexhaustible nature of the critical enterprise. Texts will not be conquered by perceptive readers; instead they prompt endless speculation about them. Perhaps this is why de Man advances the bizarre claim that every reading is always a misreading—a position he clarifies, unsurprisingly, when discussing Nietzsche. In a conference on the philosopher, whose proceedings were published in Symposium in 1974, de Man asserts that “[p]erhaps we have not yet begun to read him properly” (49). He chastises those who cling to a “false literalism” when reading the philosopher, arguing that “we risk to produce the wrong kind of misreading” if we seek to apply Nietzsche’s work practically

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3 See the October 1963 issue of College Composition and Communication, where this “revival of rhetoric” in America begins.
4 For more on Nietzsche in the French tradition, see Descombes and Schrift.
too quickly. But how can there be such a thing as a “right” kind of misreading? De Man clearly believes such a thing exists, complimenting the participants in the conference for generating “very productive misreadings” (50). After engaging with Walter Kaufmann about whether a plurality of complementary interpretations is possible, de Man rejects the idea, saying that the production of any interpretation necessarily must rule out all others in its attempt to be “unique” (51). The conversation ends with de Man clarifying the distinction: “[b]y a good misreading, I mean a text that produces another text which can itself be shown to be an interesting misreading, a text which engenders additional texts. If you have a poor text, you cannot make up a very rewarding construction. But with Nietzsche, the possibilities are endless” (51; my emphasis). For de Man, the best criticism is that which solicits the most additional commentary on the literary work.

“Rhetoric” functions, then, in two distinct yet interrelated ways in de Man’s work. First, it refers to the specific dimension of language found in literary texts that defies any final, decisive interpretation. The figural status of language ensures that the agonism between critic and text will never be exhausted but instead perpetually renewed with each successive interpretation. Second, it refers to the way in which the present always remains indebted to the past. This alternative use of rhetoric helps reinforce the first—the ceaseless dynamic between critic and text—by broadening the scope in which we see criticism functioning. Any attempt to truly grasp the text in its essence, to cast off the previous misinterpretations, will ultimately become part of this failed tradition. By aligning himself with marginalized discourses and figures, including Nietzsche, rhetoric, and philology, de Man foreshadows the inevitable failure of his own project. But this failure is simultaneously a triumph insofar as it perpetuates critical discourse as a whole.
III.

While de Man offers a rich interpretation of Nietzsche’s meditations on agonism, incorporating it into his account of the relationship between metaphysics and deconstruction, he is not the only prominent figure in English studies to draw upon this thinker. Although his engagement with Nietzsche is much more subdued in terms of explicit references, Kenneth Burke drew a great deal from the German philosopher and this influence had a significant impact on the field of English studies in the late twentieth century and beyond. There is no evidence to suggest that Burke ever read Nietzsche’s lectures on rhetoric. However, his engagement with other work by Nietzsche suggests that he took insights about the fundamental nature of language and adapted them to many of his own concerns about rhetoric and social practice. As Burke says in *A Rhetoric of Motives*, rhetorical acts work not only on direct acts but more general beliefs. Thus, while the references to Nietzsche are few and far between in Burke’s efforts to sketch his own understanding of rhetoric—Burke mentions him, briefly, only four times in all of *A Rhetoric of Motives*—we should regard this relative absence as a greater presence. Burke had already absorbed Nietzsche into his bloodstream, so to speak, and the influence could be felt through his entire disposition. But this transfer from Nietzsche to Burke, much like the one from Nietzsche to de Man, must be understood not as a frictionless translation but itself a metaphor—that is, as a “leap from one sphere to another” that should not be understood as a simple reference to “the original.” Burke’s working through Nietzsche produced what Gilles Deleuze might call “a monstrous offspring”—a philosophical formulation that Nietzsche might be horrified to see but could nevertheless not completely disavow as his own. Like de Man, Burke uses Nietzsche to theorize a critical practice rooted in the agon, but he links it to a radical democratic practice that
Nietzsche would hesitate to endorse. Or, perhaps more appropriately, Burke conducts his own form of agonism with Nietzsche himself.

Although numerous commentators have ignored or downplayed Nietzsche’s influence on Burke, doing so only underscores their limited understanding of both figures. There are indeed many different “Burkes,” but the Nietzschean Burke must certainly rank as one of the most central. Burke’s apprenticeship with Nietzsche began as early as the late 1920s. Like de Man, Burke found fertile ground in Nietzsche’s meditations on language and its fundamentally metaphorical qualities. As previously outlined, Nietzsche sees metaphor as the primary dimension of language, insofar as language amounts to “a complete overleaping of spheres—from one sphere to the center of a totally different, new one.” In a similar vein, Burke emphasizes the unavoidable metaphorical properties of language, particularly in scientific language that flatly rejects such characterizations. Interrogating the truth claims of the scientific community in *Permanence and Change*, Burke asks the following question: “as the documents of science pile up, are we not coming to see that whole works of scientific research, even entire schools, are hardly more than the patient repetition, in all its ramifications, of a fertile metaphor?” (95). Burke is thus connected to de Man in advancing the Nietzschean position that there is no “natural language” upon which metaphor could be understood as a derivative or decorative element. The irreducible metaphorical quality of language eliminates the possibility of an absolute, transcendent position that could see the world as it actually exists and grasp an object “in itself.”

For Burke, this inescapably limited and partial nature of language demands that we revise our understanding and evaluation of rhetoric. Indeed, when he offers his most straightforward

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5 For an example of a critic who does take Nietzsche’s influence on Burke seriously, see Hawhee’s “Burke and Nietzsche.”
definition of the term, it bears an uncanny resemblance to the one initially given by Nietzsche in his lecture course in 1872-1873. In *A Rhetoric of Motives*, which he considers nothing less than a “philosophy of rhetoric” (xv), Burke argues against the belief in language as a transparent medium between a subject and the world, instead asserting that the persuasive dimension of language is incompatible with a scientific, descriptive one. This persuasive feature of language is not “sheer decadent decoration” (66) but instead “of the essence of language” (252). Italicizing his claim for emphasis, Burke maintains that rhetoric “is rooted in an essential function of language itself...as a symbolic means of inducing cooperation in beings that by nature respond to symbols” (43). Like his philosophical forefather, Burke seizes an ostensibly marginal dimension of language and transforms it into the groundwork through which to understand language more generally. And like de Man who would follow several decades later, Burke uses this rhetoric-centric vision to challenge the principles of scientific rationalism that typically guide our understanding of language and the world more broadly.

Like de Man, Burke also forges subtle connections between these insights and Nietzsche’s work on agonism. Much of *A Rhetoric of Motives* finds Burke framing rhetoric in agonistic terms, part of a broader effort to rescue it from its usual associations with antagonism. The book begins with a lengthy treatment of rhetoric’s relationship to violence, with Burke declaring in the opening moments of the introduction that an “imagery of killing is but one of many terminologies by which writers can represent the process of change” (xiii). Burke insists that conceptualizing rhetoric solely in terms of violence must be rejected, asserting “we can treat ‘war’ as a ‘special case of peace’—not as a primary motive in itself, not as essentially real, but purely a derivative condition, a perversion” (20). At the same time, however, Burke maintains that “invective, eristic, polemic, and logomachy” (20) are undeniable elements in rhetoric. But
how can Burke downgrade war to a perversion of peace while at the same time maintaining the combative elements of rhetoric as essential? Rather than read these twin statements as evidence of sheer contradiction, we should recognize their fundamentally agonistic tenor. Positing a clear distinction between mere strife and outright violence, Burke reverts to the distinction between productive and destructive agonism outlined in Nietsche’s “Homer’s Contest.” While strife and conflict remain unavoidable, we should be careful not to conflate them with outright bloodshed and death. Violence is strife that has been improperly channeled, a corruption of an initially productive impulse. Burke maintains that war should be understood “not simply as strife come to a head” but instead “a disease, or perversion of communion” (22). This “communion” does not avoid conflict in pursuit of a final stasis but instead regards conflict as necessary and generative so long as it does not descend into pointless antagonism.

Extending this agonistic impulse, Burke emphasizes that his primary term for understanding rhetoric, “identification,” treats unity and division as complementary rather than fierce antagonistic. After explaining that *A Rhetoric of Motives* deals primarily with “the ways in which individuals are at odds with one another, or become identified with groups more or less at odds with one another,” Burke pauses to explain this emphasis given that his primary term is “identification,” which would ostensibly minimize or altogether eliminate division. From his perspective, identification forces one “to confront the implications of division” because “identification is compensatory to division” (22). To suggest that a pure unity without division could be achieved amounts to sheer utopianism; unity and division require one another for their respective coherence. Only because a fundamental division among people exists can a rhetorical act seek unification. For Burke, rhetoric occupies this always indistinct region between identification and division, serving as “a mediatory ground” between opponents “that makes
communication possible, thus providing the first condition necessary for their interchange of blows” (25). Burke’s conception of rhetoric as a unity through division (or a division through unity) clearly draws on the paradoxical relationship between agonistic opponents, where strife holds the participants together in a productive tension that avoids conclusive victory. During his analysis, Burke writes that the line between cooperation and exploitation remains forever vague since it is difficult to determine “just where ‘cooperation’ ends and one partner’s ‘exploitation’ of the other begins” (25). It would seem that Burke also affirms the converse, emphasizing that exploitation (or competition) involves an equally unclear degree of cooperation. In this respect, agonism is inseparable from how Burke conceives of rhetoric as both a feature of language and as a social practice.

Once identified, this agonistic spirit proves impossible to escape in *A Rhetoric of Motives*. For instance, Burke argues that competition, rather than bitterly dividing the community, actually unifies its members by cultivating habits of imitation and conformity. He declares that competition “makes for consubstantiality” in that it encourages men to either “crudely imitate one another’s actions as revealed on the surface, or subtly imitate the underlying principles of such actions” (131). Competition does not break down the social bonds but actually preserves and even strengthens them by reproducing valuable social beliefs through subtle mechanisms. Elsewhere in *A Rhetoric of Motives*, Burke revises the longstanding opposition between image and idea, maintaining that “images are so related to ideas that an idea can be treated as the principle behind the systematic development of an image” (88). For Burke, “the antithetical relation between image and idea is replaced by a partial stress upon the bond of kinship between them” (90). Meanwhile, Burke rejects a “flat antithesis” between body and spirit
in favor of a more dynamic relationship that emphasizes the spiritual awakening “is made
*through* body, nature, image” (189).

Throughout *A Rhetoric of Motives*, Burke does not simply describe agonistic principles
and argue for their centrality to a proper understanding of rhetorical theory and practice. He
simultaneously embodies this agonistic spirit through a carefully measured treatment of his
critical predecessors. Although boldly pursuing a thorough reconceptualization of rhetoric, he
does not reject earlier work on the subject so much as preserve these original contributions as
recurring points of contrast or complication to his own work. In doing so, he acknowledges his
debt to a critical tradition that cannot be surpassed and which remains essential to any
innovations Burke might achieve. The most prominent example can be found in his treatment of
Aristotle, an undeniable touchstone in the rhetorical tradition who first yoked rhetoric to
persuasion. While *A Rhetoric of Motives* aims to replace “persuasion” with “identification” as the
skeleton key to rhetoric, he emphasizes in the book’s introduction that “[o]ur treatment, in terms
of identification, is decidedly not meant as a substitute for the sound traditional approach.
Rather, as we try to show, it is but an accessory to the standard lore” (xiv). Burke’s deference to
Aristotle, even as he attempts to land a decisive blow to the philosopher’s key term, only
reinforces his keen awareness of the agonistic dynamic underwriting critical practice.

Accordingly, in the closing moments of the book’s first section, Burke defies readers who expect
“identification” to replace “persuasion.” For Burke, such a clear-cut victory is impossible, since
an inexorable connection exists between the two concepts. In what initially seems like a radical
departure, the analysis ultimately returns to familiar ground, with Burke noting “[w]e have thus,
deviously, come to the point at which Aristotle begins his treatise on rhetoric” (46; my
emphasis). As his use of the word “deviously” should suggest, Burke recognizes that any attempt
to completely reject past origins will only find itself returning to them through unexpected, circuitous routes. In showing that attempts to flee the tradition are futile and that change requires the preservation of this historical combatant, Burke possesses a keen awareness of the dynamics that de Man would later explore in Nietzsche’s musings on history.

However, unlike de Man, who would invest little time considering the explicit political consequences of Nietzsche’s meditations on language, Burke explored how these insights could be sutured to democracy, an unusual decision given Nietzsche’s allergy to this form of government. Throughout Nietzsche’s corpus, we can see a general distaste for democracy and its emphasis on equality and the masses. For instance, in Section 203 of *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche writes that the democratic movement should be understood “not only as a degenerating form of political organization, but as equivalent to a degenerating, a waning type of man, as involving his mediocrising and depreciation” (307). From Nietzsche’s perspective, the urge for democracy is an “inheritance of the Christian movement” insofar as it mobilizes life-denying forces and subtly inflicts the herd’s resentment on innovative individuals. While the unambiguous tone of Nietzsche’s declarations might discourage efforts, a number of recent critics have attempted to reread the philosopher’s work in a way that unearths a democratic undercurrent (or could in some way be amenable to democratic processes). In *Politics Out of History*, Wendy Brown suggests that apologists of liberal democracy should take Nietzsche’s critiques seriously insofar as they prevent democracy’s creative and rejuvenating impulses from degenerating into a confining institutional proceduralism that overrides the ever-changing demands of life: “democracy requires antidemocratic critique in order to remain democratic…the democratic state may require democratic resistance rather than fealty if it is not to become the death of democracy” (137). Meanwhile, Lawrence J. Hatab has argued that “Nietzsche indeed is
anti-egalitarian but...egalitarianism may not be the *sine qua non* of democratic politics, and...many elements of democratic practice and performance are more Nietzschean than he suspected” (“Prospects” 133). The efforts to illustrate Nietzsche’s compatibility with democratic practice date back much earlier, however, if we recognize Burke’s efforts beginning in the 1930s.

Of course, Burke was not the first person to link agonism with democratic practice, largely because these connections have always existed. As Jeffrey Walker has demonstrated in *Rhetoric and Poetics in Antiquity*, agonistic practices were regarded as essential to the health of the body politic. For citizens of Ancient Greece, it was beneficial “to go downtown to the marketplace, or to some banquet or festivity, and hear some interesting disputation, or to have some poet’s psychagogic eloquence carry one’s mind into unusual positions and provoke one into thought” (163). However, Burke explored agonism at the level of language itself, incorporating Nietzsche’s concept “perspective by incongruity” for this purpose. As the concept suggests, Burke finds Nietzsche’s emphasis on one’s perspective in creating knowledge to be critical—our perspectives are always already interpretations of phenomenon geared towards specific goals. More importantly, these various perspectives used to interpret the world undoubtedly conflict with one another as they are deployed in shifting contexts. When vocabulary from one domain is introduced into another, a certain degree of conceptual dissonance emerges. While his engagement with Nietzsche would, at first glance, appear relegated to his early years, culminating in the 1935 text *Permanence and Change*, Burke clearly carried over many of these insights when developing his thoughts on a “New Rhetoric” and its relationship to democratic politics.
Against Nietzsche, Burke illustrates how the cognitive dissonance produced through “perspective by incongruity” translates into democratic practice. He argues that one should “[b]ring several rhetoricians together, let their speeches contribute to the maturing of one another by the give and take of question and answer” to produce “the dialectic of a Platonic dialogue” (53). For Burke, “the dialogue seeks to attain a higher order of truth, as the speakers, in competing with one another, cooperate towards an end transcending their individual positions” (53). Rather than see this dissonance as a problem that must be resolved by clearly determining “winning” and “losing” perspectives, Burke instead regards the conflict as a productive one. In highlighting their respective strengths and weaknesses, disparate perspectives play a crucial role in a more fully realized understanding of the world. He elaborates on this point later in the text, offering a picture of how competing conceptual schemas interact: “Any such ‘unmasking’ of an ideology’s limitations is itself made from a limited point of view. But each such limited perspective can throw light upon the relation between the universal principles of an ideology and the special interests which they are consciously or unconsciously made to serve” (198).

For Burke, this deliberative process does not have a final correct answer. At one level, this is obvious since rhetoric concerns practices where truth and falsity are not central. Burke explains that rhetoric “is essentially a realism of the act: moral, persuasive—and acts are not ‘true’ and ‘false’ in the sense that the propositions of ‘scientific realism’ are” (44). There can be no final synthesis to the debate precisely because of the practical dimension of their language, which responds to a range of ever-shifting political problems. One reason that this final synthesis is impossible is that practical solutions to political problems themselves produce new political problems, the least of which includes an inability to adapt to new contexts and their corresponding problems. Ironically, the effectiveness of a certain conceptual strategy reinforces
blindnesses that create more problems than they initially solved; success produces a form of inflexibility that guarantees future failure. In *A Rhetoric of Motives*, Burke characterizes these successful strategies as forms of “occupational psychosis,” where certain perceptions or concepts harden and prevent a full appreciation of the highly complex texture of reality. For Burke, language is structured hierarchically such that these kinds of blindnesses are inevitable. Such tensions are present in Burke’s analysis of Marxism, which operates according to a process of ideological mystification. While Marxism aims to reveal the blind spots of competing conceptual systems, it claims that it itself has no blind spots and has a final representation of reality. Burke clearly rejects these claims, emphasizing that other perspectives must be put into dialogue with Marxism so as to reveal its conceptual weaknesses.

Accordingly, the democratic practice Burke envisions is one without end, devoid of any final utopian goals, precisely because the deliberative, agonistic process produces new values, new goals, and new positions. It is a self-generating, self-reproducing system that rewrites its fundamental coordinates with each successive move. Rather than a final synthesis and a termination of the dialogue amongst competitors, the trajectory is reversed: conclusions are always provisional, stopping points along a journey that never concludes. Recalling the Roman Saturnalia festival “where master and servant changed places,” Burke argues that democracy serves “as a kind of permanent but minute Saturnalia, with constant reversal in the relation between up and down” (224). The only way to avoid the dangers of occupational psychosis and the hardening of provisional schemas into reified objects is through the proliferation of conversation, incorporating newer voices into the fold. Indeed, the result of these clashing perspectives is simply the creation of even more perspectives: “[w]e invent new terms, or apply our old vocabulary in new ways” (36).
In *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, Burke offers a vivid metaphor for understanding the democratic process. Here, he speaks of the “‘unending conversation’ that is going on at the point in history when we are born” (110). For Burke, the democratic process can be likened to the rambunctious chatter of a social event, where the participants simultaneously shape and are shaped by the material, material that slowly drifts from one topic to another ad infinitum:

Imagine that you enter a parlor. You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion, a discussion too heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. In fact, the discussion had already begun long before any of them got there, so that no one present is qualified to retrace for you all the steps that had gone before. You listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar. Someone answers; you answer him; another comes to your defense; another aligns himself against you, to either the embarrassment or gratification of your opponent, depending upon the quality of your ally’s assistance. However, the discussion is interminable. The hour grows late, you must depart. And you do depart, with the discussion still vigorously in progress.

(110-111)

Crucial to this metaphor is the way in which the conversation transcends any of the individual speakers. No one precedes the conversation and no one manages to see it to anyfitting conclusion. Nevertheless, each person contributes to the overall tenor of the conversation (once they’ve determined its basic parameters) and steer it in a direction that it had not been previously chartered.
Burke regarded this form as a compelling model for critical practice, evident in his remarkable ability to incorporate democratic agonism into the stylistic elements of his writing. Reading *The Rhetoric of Motives* can often prove to be incredibly laborious, since it is a text that does not clearly signal any forward momentum or logical progression. Burke introduces ostensibly disconnected themes and texts, interrupts himself with lengthy digressions, and refuses to offer any final word of wisdom. While it would be easy to account for these stylistic attributes and organizational decisions as a symptom of an unsystematic intellect that darts haphazardly from one topic to the other, we might also interpret as a sophisticated enactment of the book’s content. The cacophony of voices presented in *The Rhetoric of Motives*, which often has a bewildering effect on the reader, should be seen as intentional. This can also be seen in a number of small stylistic choices in the work. For instance, the use of “we” throughout, even if nothing more than an often-used convention of critical writing, contributes to the feeling of a collective engagement. More importantly, Burke’s use of “friends” to supply anecdotes also lends this collaborative tone. In several spots in *The Rhetoric of Motives*, Burke introduces an anecdote with “A friend said” (259; 261) or “A teacher once told us” (287). Whether these anonymous characters are fictional or not is largely irrelevant—as rhetorical devices, they add other voices into the conversation, forcing Burke momentarily to the side of the stage while foregrounding that his work is indebted to others. The culmination of this collaborative style occurs in the book’s final pages. Here, detailing William James’s *The Varieties of Religious Experiences*, Burke elects to create a collage of voices consisting of short quotes from different people describing religious fervor. At nearly two pages in length, the individual statements prove largely inconsequential to the effect created by stacking quotation upon quotation, as if Burke wanted his reader to skim the surface of the page so as to hear something else altogether: the
wondrous effects produced by a collection of voices in an endless conversation. (329) This is ultimately the dream he has for criticism.

IV.

For both thinkers, the turn to “rhetoric” becomes part of an effort to broaden the scope of criticism. In the case of de Man, it is meant to reinforce the infinite depth of the literary object that warrants endless interpretation on the part of the critic. We’ve already seen this to a certain extent in de Man’s analysis of Nietzsche, where he characterizes a “good misreading” as a “text that produces another text” (51; italics in original). From de Man’s perspective, his interpretive efforts are successful in their failure insofar as they allow criticism to live another day. Nietzsche becomes such a privileged figure in de Man precisely because the “possibilities are endless” when it comes to analyzing his work. Indeed, in “Rhetoric and Semiology,” after offering a thorough reading of Proust in his soon-to-be patented deconstructive key, de Man boldly declares that readings such as these, while requiring modification based on the literary author under examination, will “in fact be the task of literary criticism in the coming years” (17). In doing so, de Man charts new territory waiting to be explored by subsequent critics; his most important contribution, it seems, would be providing a map by which others can conquer new territory in a critical expansion.

Burke’s understanding of rhetoric is also meant as a catalyst for expanding discourse and creating dialogue amongst groups that had not previously interacted. Throughout A Rhetoric of Motives, Burke widens his definition of rhetoric so as to incorporate new participants in this dialogue. Burke insists that rhetoric consists of both the “use of persuasive resources” and “the study of them” (36). He argues that the notion of “audience” within rhetorical criticism must not
only include traditional external audiences but also the self of the speaker (38). He declares that rhetoric works not only on the direct and immediate acts of individuals but also their more general attitudes (50). He incorporates issues of meaning and interpretation into rhetoric: “[w]herever there is persuasion, there is rhetoric. And wherever there is ‘meaning,’ there is ‘persuasion’” (172). This series of substitutions, which states that anywhere there is meaning there is rhetoric, ensures that rhetoric’s purview is much broader and more significant than a marginal field warranting little respect. Indeed, Burke makes a point to mention Quintilian and Cicero, who both stress the fundamentally generalist dimension of rhetoric (51). This generalist attitude not only exceeds a confining disciplinary straightjacket but also mobilizes a set of practices and assumptions that launch a discourse into perpetual motion.

In both de Man and Burke’s desire to expand the borders of the critical conversation, we see an impulse that characterizes discursive formations more generally. In _The Archaeology of Knowledge_, Michel Foucault analyzes the nature of discursive formations, attending to the way that they function by not fully grasping their object but by maintaining a gap that allows the work of criticism to remain in motion. For someone like Foucault, the prospect of conclusive definitions ever being secured is impossible based on the very terms that structure the process. In the introduction to _The Birth of the Clinic_, Foucault notes that “the possibility of commentary…dooms us to an endless task that nothing can limit: there is always a certain amount of signified remaining that must be allowed to speak, while the signifier is always offered to us in an abundance that questions us, in spite of ourselves, as to what it ‘means’” (xviii). A more familiar assessment can be found in his essay “What is an Author?” where he characterizes an “authored” text as one that facilitates endless discourse about it. Against someone like Barthes, Foucault asserts that the “death” of the author isn’t the birth of the reader;
instead, both author and reader are birthed in the same moment, since they are two sides of the same coin.

I would like to supplement Foucault’s account by outlining another tendency within discursive formations. If he rightly contends that discourse is structured in a way that commentary on its chosen object can perpetuate itself indefinitely, it should be pointed out that the value of this commentary tends to erode over time unless it modified in some way. Critics are still talking about Shakespeare’s plays and Wordworth’s poetry today, but they’re talking about them in ways that differ from previous eras since old approaches became, for lack of a better word, “exhausted.” I propose that we understand this dynamic within the discourse of literary criticism according to a crucial concept found in Marx’s political economy: the tendency of the rate of profit to fall over time. This concept, which Marx referred to as “the most important law of political economy,” accounts for capitalism’s inevitable expansion. Because capital’s capacity to extract surplus labor value within a circumscribed area diminishes over time, it must seek out new territories and create new markets in order to maintain stable profit rates. I argue that a similar process is governing criticism in English Studies—that is, the “surplus value” of work on a particular text or topic tends to diminish over time, prompting criticism to seek out new objects of study and modes of inquiry. In order to perpetuate itself as a discourse, English Studies must revitalize exhausted texts by connecting them to other discourses or by seeking out new texts altogether.

Before I provide a few concrete examples to clarify, allow me to explain how “surplus value” functions in criticism (acknowledging that critical discourse both is and is not an economy in the traditional sense). It seems to me that the supposed goal of literary criticism is to innovate or produce difference. While this can be achieved in a number of ways, ideally, every
critical intervention will be judged by how it makes the object, and by extension, the entire field, appear in a slightly different light. Such a valuation system certainly pans out in terms of rewards in the field—the critics that help us think completely differently about Romanticism in general are generally regarded as more “valuable” than the ones who merely bring to light a neglected poet working during that time (of course, if that neglected poet helps critics reconsider the entire field of Romanticism in an interesting way, then you have a whole different story). To put it in terms familiar to our undergraduate students, value is based on the “so what?” question. What I’m arguing is that achieving a satisfying answer to the “so what?” question becomes an increasingly difficult prospect within certain demarcated fields of study, and this difficulty underwrites the desire to transcend the boundaries of these fields by establishing new areas of study and modes of investigation. From now on, I’ll refer to the value that this work produces its “innovative differential.”

Let’s take New Criticism as our prime example largely because it constitutes the starting point of criticism as we understand it today. The general thrust of the New Critics was to actually look at the literary text, something previous historical scholarship had largely ignored. What could we learn, the New Critics asked, by examining the literary text directly? At first, such a move was enormously productive, generating all sorts of insights about the literary work—the “innovative differential” was fairly substantial during the early stages of the process, since each new reading highlighted elements of the text that had been previously overlooked. As commentary on a given text begins to saturate, however, these overlooked sections of the text begin to disappear, and each subsequent reading finds itself in the precarious position of having to account for all the previous scholarship. Not only is it difficult to do innovative work in this context, but the innovations themselves will become less meaningful with each iteration. I
imagine most of us have had the experience of diligently reading through an extensive bibliography of secondary material on a text only to suffocate under the weight of this scholarship, wondering what we might say about the work that had not already been addressed (or, the equally depressing experience of producing a new reading of a text only to discover that this intervention was published by someone else seven years ago). Undoubtedly, whatever intervention we make into this conversation, it undoubtedly feels deflating in the grand scheme of things. The difference between the 2nd reading of Moby Dick and the 3rd is undeniable, giving us a substantial “innovative differential.” The difference between the 647th and the 648th reading of Moby Dick, however, finds this differential approaching zero. In this respect, in order to perpetuate itself, criticism must transcend the boundaries it initially established for itself.

Literary theory, specifically deconstruction, played a fundamental role in redefining the boundaries of the discipline by introducing an entirely new way of reading texts. Deploying a version of language that guarantees endless commentary—rather than haggling over the correct interpretation of *The Scarlet Letter*, it shows in innumerable ways how a correct, totalizing interpretation of the novel is impossible—deconstruction made an entirely different mode of commentary on literary objects possible. Whatever your thoughts on literary theory, it’s impossible to deny that it was, pardon the expression, “good for business.” Literary theory revived the sagging enterprise of criticism by asking questions that the New Critical enterprise had overlooked. The entire canon could be approached from a fresh perspective, making a whole new set of readings possible. But this innovative approach, which initially produced a number of analyses with a high “innovative differential,” would eventually succumb to the same fate of the previous era. De Man himself seems to recognize the limitations of the interpretive practices he has initiated, seeing that they ossify into the mechanical processes they originally sought to
overcome. As discussed earlier in this chapter, de Man notes in the concluding passages of “The Resistance to Theory” that deconstructive criticism, while foregrounding the rhetorical dimensions of any text that ensures endless interpretation and analysis, simultaneously produces a form of negative knowledge that devalues the critical enterprise. Undecidability becomes utterly predictable and spurs the desire for a new approach to revitalize the critical process once again.

Indeed, while both de Man and Burke seek to mobilize a criticism that can perpetuate itself indefinitely, Burke advances a form with more flexibility than de Man’s insofar as it is not anchored to the concept of literature. When Burke begins to broaden the scope of literary criticism, he realizes that this operation will cease unless the “literariness” that defines it are called into question. In The Philosophy of Literary Form, he outlines a mode of analysis that broadens the scope of the investigation at each stage, incorporating more texts and perspectives with every move. As A Rhetoric of Motives makes explicit, it is precisely the notion of “literary” that proved to be the fundamental problem with continued expansion. Burke claims that disciplinary specialization ultimately inhibits the growth of a vibrant criticism. Attempts to sequester oneself in a single disciplinary location prove exceptionally detrimental when one studies rhetoric, which Burke stresses “has no systematic location” (41). Burke admits that the “importance of autonomous principles” have certain beneficial consequences, and he regards “patient textual analysis” as a welcome remedy to the excesses of historicism, which simply reduces the text to its background (28). Yet Burke remains suspicious of the conservative principles attached to these practices. Indeed, Burke believes that rhetoric has fallen into disrepute precisely because of disciplinary boundaries, which have configured rhetoric as an idiosyncratic mode of discourse (public political speech) rather than language as such. He
explains “at a time when the term ‘rhetoric’ had fallen into greatest neglect and disrepute, writers in the ‘social sciences’ were, under many guises, making good contributions to the New Rhetoric” (40). The best rhetorical criticism does so under a different name: “recall noting the word [rhetoric] but once in Cassirer’s Myth of the State, and then it is used only in a random way; yet the book is really about nothing more nor less than a most characteristic concern of rhetoric: the manipulation of men’s beliefs for political ends” (41). From his perspective, disciplinary specialization has prevented insights from related fields from having a substantial impact. Burke regards rhetoric as a sort of clearinghouse for the disciplines, where the work in one field can modify and be modified by the work in related areas. In this respect, rhetoric as a concept helps facilitate agonistic relationships among practitioners in a number of disciplines insofar as it offers them a common ground on which to exchange critical blows.

It is this moving across disciplines that ultimately points toward the fundamental difference between de Man and Burke—a process of connection rather than interpretation. The entire discipline becomes a free-floating operation without a canon to anchor it. We might think about this in terms of a “gold standard.” Of course, the most obvious way to read this term would be through Matthew Arnold, who conceives of literature in terms of the “best that’s been thought and written.” But we might also think about it in economic terms, where the gold standard helps stabilize economic transactions and minimize financial speculation. If criticism has discarded the “gold standard” of the canon it has done so in order to facilitate the critical work that the canon initially made possible (just like the foundationless, ever-fluctuating market that replaces a “gold standard” economy merely intensifies the logic that made the “gold standard” possible in the first place). Criticism has developed in a similar manner, using the notion of the canon as a “gold standard” to underwrite a flurry of critical interpretive activity that was guaranteed as legitimate
(recall Foucault’s conceptualization of the author as a function that operates within a discourse). Unfortunately, if the canon mobilizes this activity, it also prevents its long-term growth prospects. The canon allows for the proliferation of discourse at the same time that it guarantees this process will slowly grind to a halt, with the “innovative differential” trending closer to zero. Only by departing from a privileged set of texts and the specific interpretive practices attached to these texts can criticism maintain its forward momentum. Critics seeking a strict return to the canon could be likened to former Congressman Ron Paul, who has argued that the United States economy should return to the “gold standard.”

Put in a slightly different way, much like financial capitalism produces additional money through money itself (in Marx’s terminology, M—M’ rather than C—M), criticism has gradually weaned itself off of the literary object to perpetuate itself. Rather than sacred objects around which critics circulate endlessly, texts become tokens passed among critics who are invested in exploring more nebulous conceptual questions (hence, the rise of various studies concerning concepts like race, gender, media, animals, affect, the body, etc). When fidelity to the text dissipates, the relations among critics become that much more important, with texts becoming instruments by which critics position themselves in alliance or opposition to other critics. Such a shift is indicative of another change in the disposition of criticism: the difference between a hermeneutic criticism and a creative or constructive criticism. Granting that these two categories can never be cleanly distinguished, we can see that an emphasis on the latter has much more promising prospects than the previous one, insofar as the text can be used in any number of ways rather than interpreted endlessly without a final interpretation emerging. The innovative differential is always much higher insofar as the ways in which the text can be taken up is not determined in advance by a predisposition to the object. Interpretive questions of “rigor” are
replaced by pragmatic questions of “interest” largely because the latter formulation eliminates many of the limits imposed upon criticism.

De Man’s work nevertheless serves as an important reminder that even though criticism may no longer be oriented around the single foundation of the canon, it nevertheless erects new foundations. These new foundations serve as internal limits that criticism approaches and ultimately destroys, repeating the process anew. In other words, Burke and de Man alert us to two important moments in criticism’s growth and development. While Burke’s work suggests that a foundationless model will guarantee the long-term expansion of the critical enterprise, de Man’s work supplements his formulation by pointing out that this expansion always involves the creation of localized, provisional limits. Indeed, if Burke offers a model of rhetoric that isn’t tethered to a canon of texts (despite its heavy indebtedness to Aristotle), the field of Rhetoric and Composition that has been inspired by his work nevertheless deployed new canons through which to produce criticism, the most obvious being the “rhetorical canon.” This rhetorical canon does little to distinguish itself formally from the literary canon, since it authorizes the same sorts of critical practices that will succumb to the same fate as their counterparts in literary criticism. But these provisional foundations do not necessarily have to be located in concrete texts; they can also assume more abstract forms. While the “rhetorical studies” wing of Rhetoric and Composition most closely resembles literary criticism’s attachment to a set of texts, the vast majority of the rest of the field is still governed by an internal limit which simultaneously makes criticism possible and inhibits its long-term growth. As has been clear to an increasing number of Rhetoric and Composition specialists in recent years, this nearly unconscious internal limit has been the “pedagogical imperative.” That the pedagogical imperative has ultimately inhibited the discourse can be seen in Sid Dobrin’s 2011 *Postcomposition*, where he asserts that Rhetoric and
Composition must redefine itself as “writing studies” if it wants to remain vibrant. From his perspective, composition studies has been hobbled by its myopic focus on college writing, particularly the first-year course. Dobrin is particularly worried about the focus on “student improvement” that preoccupies the vast majority of scholarship in the field. He asserts that “the work of theorizing writing is—and must be—bigger than the idea of students” (15). For composition studies to remain a compelling area of inquiry in the coming years, it must shed its previous attachments to these issues and begin to study “writing” in general in all the various guises it has assumed throughout history and contemporary life. Dobrin’s text registers an exhaustion with the current territory that composition studies has staked out for itself, and only an outward expansion to uncharted ground will prevent the field from collapsing under its own weight. Ultimately, his recommendation for Rhetoric and Composition to become “writing studies” demonstrates how even broad, open-ended forms of inquiry without touchstone texts ultimately coalesce around a number of questions and assumptions that ultimately leave the discourse with little left to say on the topic unless it reconfigures itself in more expansive terms.

Interestingly enough, the inevitable expansion of literary studies has also pushed it in the direction of becoming a wide-ranging “writing studies.” The rise of the New Historicism in the 1980s and 1990s marks the beginning of this movement. New Historicism can be seen as a response to deconstruction’s exhaustion as a critical method, which, while departing with the New Criticism that preceded it, nevertheless maintained a strict attention to closely reading isolated texts. New Historicism sought to reinsert the isolated literary work back into the broader network of texts in which it was originally produced. Obviously, this maneuver initiated a further expansion of critical work. As Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt explain in *Practicing New Historicism*, their turn toward noncanonical literature and nonliterary texts were a way of
revitalizing canonical authors. Their use of historical anecdotes was intended to better illuminate the great texts of the tradition: “in the earliest essays of new historicism…the anecdote worked if it illuminated a major literary work” (47). But this strategy produced an emerging countercurrent. In some cases, anecdotes and other minor historical documents could steal the show and become the primary focus of analysis, relegating the canonical work to a mere supporting actor. Rather than being evaluated according to how well it illuminated a canonical text, the critical work could instead be “measured by its success in captivating readers. If the attention—one’s own and that demanded of one’s readers—seemed justified, then it was a successful intervention” (46-47). New Historicism is thus pulled in opposite directions, with Gallagher and Greenblatt noting that “[t]he turn to the historical anecdote in literary study promise[s] both an escape from conventional canonicity and a revival of the canon, both a transgression against the domestic and a safe return to it” (47). On one hand, the literary text remains the primary object of interest—that is, other texts (both noncanonical and nonliterary) are sought out and colonized simply to further illuminate this literary work. On the other hand, the literary text loses its primacy and merely becomes a launching point from which one departs to ask questions about culture and written material more generally.

If the internal shifts within a discourse like New Historicism hint that contemporary literary studies is heading toward what we might call the “post-literary,” then its differences with the discourse of “writing studies” proposed by Dobrin becomes a central question. Indeed, if composition studies is eager to shift away from only studying student writers and toward writing more generally, than the most obvious boundaries separating theory, literature, and composition cease to exist. It could be said, then, that the various fields that constitute the discipline of English are loosely united around the concepts of “writing” and “rhetoric.” Indeed, what exactly
separates a mode of critical inquiry like Dobrin’s “post-composition,” which studies writing and the various contexts in which it is produced and consumed, from the version of New Historicism that has little attachment to the concept of “literature”? Wouldn’t the ecological and networked models that Dobrin advances in *Postcomposition* have much to say to New Historicism’s notion that texts circulate within a general economy of written material? What about the “distant reading” practices of literary critic Franco Moretti, who has little investment in the concept of “literature” as it is traditionally understood? How would his computer-generated data analysis *not* be considered under the general umbrella of “writing” studies? Meanwhile, would anything disqualify “post-composition” from studying fictional or imaginative works? Thanks to the expansion of any critical discourse, attempts to produce new decisive distinctions between literary and composition studies would only temporarily halt their inevitable convergence.

Today, literature and composition studies might be likened to two neighboring cities that have gradually expanded to the point that the border separating one from the other has become increasingly difficult to pinpoint. If composition studies began as a small outpost far outside the center of the city of literary studies, it has expanded quickly enough that it may eventually dwarf the original settlement. Complicating matters, both are seeking to claim the fertile territory of “writing” that exists between them and that may be necessary for long-term survival. Of course, each municipality has cultivated its own set of customs and practices over the course of several decades, and additional growth will require negotiating the sometimes sharp differences between these two cultures. Will one side manage to wrest control of this territory, leaving the other side vulnerable? Will a symbiotic or parasitic relationship emerge? What hybrid cultural formations might be produced from such negotiations? In order to predict how this uncertain future might (or should) unfold, we must first retrace the previous interactions between the two cities,
beginning with a contentious foreigner who has spent considerable time in both locales—French theory.
By the early 1980s, the stage was set for Kenneth Burke to assume a prominent role within the canon of literary theory. During this period, many critics eagerly called for more socially oriented forms of inquiry to replace (or at least supplement) the formalistic approaches that had long dominated literary study. In his influential 1983 work *Criticism and Social Change*, Frank Lentricchia argued that Burke’s examination of a literary work’s practical effects served as a useful antidote to the narrow focus found in New Criticism and deconstruction. Positioning Kenneth Burke against Paul de Man, Lentricchia’s book embodied an emerging demand for literary criticism to engage more directly with broader social questions while remaining theoretically savvy. “Not all social power is literary power,” Lentricchia explains, “but all literary power is social power. . . . The literary act is a social act” (19). For Lentricchia, Kenneth Burke offered a compelling model for critics wanting to pursue this mode of inquiry.

Although literary theory did in fact begin to explore literature’s relationship with its social context, Kenneth Burke’s work did not become a touchstone within this movement. The 1980s witnessed the emergence of many new approaches, all of which critiqued the strict formalisms of the preceding era. However, rather than looking to Burke for crucial insights, theoretical

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1 Although deconstruction’s arrival in the 1970s had ostensibly undermined the fundamental values of New Criticism, scholars have subsequently noted that these two camps shared more in common than its practitioners were willing to admit. As Vincent B. Leitch explains, “deconstruction was dubbed the ‘New New Criticism’ . . . because it too came to occupy center stage, its leaders also were located at Yale, and its preferred critical approach was similarly text centered” (270).
discourse largely dismissed him in favor of thinkers like Michel Foucault and Fredric Jameson. Despite periodic calls by Lentricchia and others to give Burke the attention he deserves, his marginalization within literary theory has persisted, most evident with the complete elimination of his entry from the recently revised edition of *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* published in 2010.\(^2\)

Whatever readers Burke failed to gain within literary theory, he more than won within rhetorical scholarship, particularly in Rhetoric and Composition, a subfield of English studies that has been steadily developing its own research agenda and publishing venues for the last several decades.\(^3\) Even the most cursory glance at some of the most prominent journals of rhetorical scholarship—*Quarterly Journal of Speech, Rhetoric Society Quarterly, Rhetoric Review, JAC, Philosophy and Rhetoric*—quickly confirms Burke’s unparalleled prominence in this field. Additionally, the number of book-length publications analyzing Burke’s work outright (Debra Hawhee’s *Moving Bodies: Kenneth Burke at the Edges of Language*), deploying his insights to explore other topics (Gregory Clark’s *Rhetorical Landscapes in America: Variations on a Theme from Kenneth Burke*), or combining these two approaches (Bryan Crable’s *Ralph Ellison and Kenneth Burke: At the Roots of the Racial Divide*) has increased dramatically in recent years, featured prominently by publishers like Southern Illinois and South Carolina. How can we account for this startling dissymmetry? How is it that Burke could experience two wildly

\(^2\) One of the editors of *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, John McGowan, himself an ardent supporter of Burke, laments this trend. However, when assigning Burke in his graduate literature seminars, the results are invariably negative: “[m]y students' inability to make heads or tails of Burke did not surprise me. But their indifference did. They find him neither intriguing nor charming. . . . My students haven't the slightest inclination to indulge Burke or, apparently, my taste for him” (241).

\(^3\) While Burke gained even more of a foothold in communication-style rhetoric, this article focuses on Burke’s relationship to Rhetoric and Composition due to its disciplinary proximity to literary studies.
different fates within the same discipline?

Indeed, Kenneth Burke serves as an important figure for understanding the complicated relationships that have developed over the last four decades among the various subdisciplines comprising English studies. Typically housed within a single academic unit—“the English Department at X University”—these various subdisciplines maintain irreconcilable and sometimes hostile differences even as they share a number of texts, approaches, and concepts.4 Certainly, the relationship between literary theory and rhetorical theory has been one of the most complicated, with Burke serving as the figure that simultaneously unites and separates the two camps. On one hand, rhetorical criticism and theory has often sought to link Burke to the other big names in theoretical discourse (Derrida, Foucault, de Man), demonstrating how he poses the same methodological questions and belongs to the same philosophical heritage (Nietzsche, Freud, Marx, Hegel).5 On the other hand, rhetorical criticism has also aimed to distance itself from literary theory, suggesting that Burke’s protean yet digestible prose constitutes a dramatic improvement over the obfuscating provocations of Parisian intellectuals, as if Burke shielded American rhetorical scholarship from a dependence on foreign theory, a home-grown alternative to continental imports. In one swift stroke, Burke both belongs to the discourse of literary theory and transcends its most obvious limitations. While this ambivalent deployment of Burke certainly alerts us to the undeniable tensions that exist between rhetorical and literary theory, it can often obscure the precise contours of these tensions, reducing them to unhelpful stereotypes.

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4 It should be said that none of the subdisciplines are airtight. One need not look too far to find a literary critic who endorses Burke—I’ve already mentioned one—or a rhetorical theorist who could do without him. But these are the exceptions to the rule, and it remains to be seen exactly why today articles on Burke are commonplace in a venue like Rhetoric Society Quarterly but not Diacritics.

5 Since the late 1970s, many critics have positioned Burke as a theorist predating the “linguistic turn” in the humanities. For book-length studies connecting Burke to Continental thought, see Brock, Chesebro, Crusius, and Wess.
What exactly distinguishes rhetorical theory and criticism, which champions the work of Kenneth Burke, from literary theory, which has relegated him to an easily deleted footnote in the theory canon? More importantly, what might this tell us about the status of English studies today?

I propose that these questions can be usefully explored by examining a well-known debate between Burke and Marxist literary critic Fredric Jameson in the journal *Critical Inquiry* in 1978. While ostensibly focused on the merits of Burke’s work, their exchange actually illuminates important differences between literary theory on one hand and rhetorical theory on the other. The Burke-Jameson debate illustrates how the emergence of various subdisciplines can be traced back to differing responses to liberal pluralism. While I would argue that pluralism constitutes the starting point for the entirety of English studies today, the discipline fractures when it comes to assessing the effects or political efficacy of this pluralism. In fact, the Burke-Jameson debate shows that literary and rhetorical theory diverge most decisively on this issue, and it is on precisely this issue that the discipline is now divided.

Throughout his lengthy career, Burke remained the consummate pluralist, assembling a range of concepts that both illustrate and enact the principles of difference, flexibility, and innovation that underwrite this doctrine. For Burke, pluralism is an indispensable political tool, the only thing that can adequately address the numerous challenges posed by modernity. While literary theory has its own pluralist tendencies—Derridean *différance*, Foucaultian history, Deleuzian multiplicity—it has also stressed, perhaps with less fanfare, that pluralism alone will not save us: far from a simple blueprint for a better world, it actually contributes to the troubles of the contemporary social landscape. And, as Jameson’s analysis of Burke implies, liberal pluralism has become increasingly indistinguishable from the imperatives of late, post-industrial
capitalism. In other words, rhetorical theory’s attachment to pluralism might be better understood as an unacknowledged promotion of the very neoliberal principles it claims to be defying. As the Burke-Jameson debate will reveal, much of English studies, particularly rhetorical theory and criticism, remains tethered to a set of historical conditions that is no longer dominant.

I.

To fully appreciate the differences between Burke and Jameson, one must understand the venue that hosted the exchange. Long before sponsoring Burke’s debate with Jameson, Critical Inquiry had already assembled many of the major practitioners of both literary and rhetorical theory. While the role of Critical Inquiry in incorporating French theory into the American academy is already well documented, it has remained largely unknown that the journal was the brainchild of the Chicago School of literary criticism, which advocated for a pluralistic approach to interpretation. During the first decade of the publication’s existence, the editors of Critical Inquiry clearly counted Kenneth Burke among their most prominent philosophical proponents. Not only did Burke serve as a member of the editorial board, but he also contributed a number of articles to the journal during this time. Furthermore, Critical Inquiry highlighted Burke’s underappreciated contributions to American criticism; for the first article of the debut issue, Wayne Booth—who would soon become one of the most important figures in rhetorical theory—offered a thinly veiled encomium celebrating Burke’s career achievements and placing him firmly within the tradition of pluralism. In his response to Booth (which appeared in the same issue), Burke never objects to being characterized as a pluralist.⁶ Indeed, early in his essay, Burke fondly recalls that his ideas concerning the relationship between language and poetry

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⁶ Considering that Burke offers eight pages of corrections to Booth’s assessment of his work, this absence cannot be overemphasized.
“were largely sharpened by the vigorous and friendly hagglings I had with ‘that Chicago crowd’”
(“Dancing” 24). Jameson’s engagement with Burke, then, amounted to a direct confrontation between literary theory and pluralism that had been germinating since the inception of Critical Inquiry.

Jameson’s essay, “The Symbolic Inference; or, Kenneth Burke and Ideological Analysis” appeared in the Spring 1978 issue, and Burke responded to it in the Winter 1978 issue with his essay “Methodological Repression and/or Strategies of Containment.” Jameson provided a further rejoinder to Burke in this same issue, a brief piece entitled “Ideology and Symbolic Action.” Defying any attempt at straightforward summarization, their exchange could nevertheless easily be understood as an academic comedy of errors, with both sides struggling to marshal a range of ambiguous philosophical terms that evaded their complete command. To worsen matters, the mischaracterizations that resulted from this slippery terminology only intensified the undeniable antagonism between the participants. In other words, the heated nature of their exchange obscures both the surprising affinities and more inconspicuous differences between Burke and Jameson. Only by bracketing its more theatrical qualities can we appreciate the important stakes of this encounter.

Jameson’s initial analysis of Burke might best be conceived of as an anticipation and refutation of Frank Lentricchia’s book several years later. Jameson opens the piece by contrasting philosophical criticism from the first half of the twentieth century with more recent “literary theory,” noting that the latter emphasizes “the primacy of language” (507). Jameson quickly points out that Kenneth Burke’s work in the 1930s and 1940s constitutes a notable exception to this schematic, since his “pioneering work on the tropes mark him as the precursor of literary theory in this new, linguistics-oriented sense” (507). Praising Burke for anticipating
many of the limitations of overly formalistic theoretical methods, Jameson suggests that Burke’s conception of “the symbolic as act or *praxis* may equally be said to constitute a critique of the more mindless forms of the fetishism of language” (508). Although Burke may share important similarities with more recent theoretical models, his sustained emphasis on language as a social practice prevents him from making the same mistakes that characterize much literary theory. As Jameson writes, Burke’s writing has the ostensible goal of “restoring to the literary text its value as activity and its meaning as a gesture and a response to a determinate situation” (509).

Generally speaking, then, Jameson agrees with Lentricchia about Burke’s potential as a great theorist of literature as a form of social action (a position Jameson also endorses). The remainder of the essay assesses whether Burke’s work fulfills these expectations.

In his typically circuitous fashion, Jameson announces that Burke does not successfully document how literature constitutes symbolic action. Although his work seems to promise an escape from formalism, Burke ultimately succumbs to these very same limitations, repeating them in a much more subtle form. More specifically, Burke tends to reduce a literary work’s social activity to its engagement with other literary works; he sees authors participating in an unending conversation with other authors about the vagaries of the human condition. Jameson asserts that Burke, by limiting literature’s engagement with the social to “literary history” broadly construed, has excluded considerations of a “vaster social or historical or political horizon” (515). As a result, “his conception of literature as symbolic act, which began as a powerful incitement to the study of a text’s mode of activity in the general cultural and social world beyond it” actually supports “those who want to limit our work to texts whose autonomy has been carefully secured in advance” (518). Focusing solely on philosophical and aesthetic
debates within the literary world, Burke is condemned to overlook the social and political forces that shape the production and circulation of these works.

Instead of refuting Jameson’s central argument, Burke’s essay responds to a number of seemingly tangential issues in the original piece. Burke criticizes Jameson for failing to read his work closely and spends a large portion of his response simply listing the various ways in which he has used the word “ideology” over the course of several decades (Jameson had mentioned Burke’s “strange reluctance” (521) to use this word). As Burke sees it, Jameson’s critique lacks credibility because it remains ignorant of a large portion of his writing, most evident in Jameson’s failure to even attempt a recapitulation of Burke’s arguments: “since he is differentiating his position from mine…the proper expository procedure would require that he explicitly ‘report’ my statement of my position . . . and then proceed to demolish it as he sees fit. Surely Jameson is not asking his readers to take the sheer Quietus as a ‘model’ for his way of ‘rereading’ or ‘rewriting’ a text” (403). Throughout the essay, Burke reiterates this reservation about Jameson’s methodology.

Jameson spends the bulk of his subsequent response to Burke clarifying that his use of the word “ideology” differs substantially from Burke’s. Jameson explains that Burke conceives of ideology in terms of “our old friend ‘false consciousness,’” so unavoidable a part of the baggage of thirties Marxism” (418). When Burke labels an object or practice “ideological,” it constitutes “a purely negative judgment” which “leave[s] nothing of its object intact” (419). But Jameson rejects this formulation, asserting that matters of truth or falsehood are irrelevant to understanding ideology. Given that all ideas and concepts possess a practical function, helping to organize society in one way rather than another, they are all equally “true.” In other words, as forms of activity, ideological concepts produce real effects in the world that cannot simply be
dismissed as delusional. Jameson puts the matter bluntly: “Are ‘courtly morality’ or the bourgeois concept of ‘nature’ true or false?” (420). For Jameson, ideology is synonymous with praxis, bypassing the epistemological concerns that seem to preoccupy Burke. In claiming that Burke has a “strange reluctance” to think in terms of “ideology,” Jameson is merely reiterating Burke’s failure to address the true social function of a literary work—in other words, the main thesis advanced in his original essay.

Interestingly enough, despite his passionate resistance to Jameson’s characterization of him in “The Symbolic Inference,” Burke seems to admit the validity of Jameson’s central critique. In an offhand comment in his response to Jameson, he writes that “my method of analysis is designed to strike a balance between the New Critics’ stress upon the particular work in itself and Jameson’s ‘ideological’ stress upon ‘the ultimate horizon of every cultural artifact’” (411). Here, Burke fully admits to not being “ideological” in Jameson’s sense due to his desire to preserve many of the formalist tendencies found in the work of the New Critics. In this respect, the entire debate can be understood as a colossal misunderstanding, a severe complication of terms that has two figures agreeing about the differences in their methodology but failing to recognize this fact because of the terminology that their respective methodologies deploy.

However, the heatedness of their debate suggests that there were important tensions between the two figures that their scuffle over the word “ideology” only served to obscure. Jameson’s critique implies that Burke’s work, in failing to be a form of proper ideological analysis, could not have a positive social impact—instead of being wrong it was ineffective, perhaps even detrimental. Burke obviously took offense to this implied accusation and suggested that Jameson’s work was equally irrelevant as a tool for engaging with the social world. Put

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7 Burke was often characterized as a renegade New Critic. If he was too much of a formalist for Jameson, he was too engaged with the social for the New Critics.
otherwise, this debate implicitly explored each thinker’s work to the social world in which it functioned. If Burke and Jameson’s respective writings are symbolic actions (Burke’s term) or ideological (Jameson’s term), then how exactly are they functioning within society and history more broadly? What role might criticism play in advanced capitalist society? Naturally, this question can’t be answered without a relatively clear idea about the nature of advanced capitalist society itself, and much of Burke and Jameson’s disagreement pivoted on the current state of capitalism. Accordingly, to better understand the debate between Burke and Jameson in *Critical Inquiry*, we must not only examine each thinker’s broader body of work but also the seemingly trivial moments in their exchange that intimate how each understands the specific historical moment in which their work operates.

II.

During his *Critical Inquiry* response essay, Burke warns that his concept “perspective by incongruity” is one that “can become trivial, mere irresponsible smartness slapped out by city-slickers” (409). Obviously, Burke’s quip is directed at Jameson. Burke finds Jameson’s entire philosophy troubling, emblematic of a misguided movement within literary theory to question the existence of reality itself. Dismissing Jameson as just another fancy deconstructionist, Burke charges him with playing ridiculous language games that reveal his “mere irresponsible smartness.” Burke’s labeling of Jameson as a “city slicker,” meanwhile, remains a more puzzling characterization. As the following analysis will reveal, this comment hints at the necessary connections that Burke sees existing between such abstruse philosophical musings and the institutions that comprise the modern city.

Indeed, throughout his writing, Burke maintained a healthy suspicion toward
industrialization and the bureaucracies that facilitated its growth. Rather than grappling with the messy and ever-shifting details of the world, bureaucracies devise complex vocabularies to shield themselves from this conceptual turbulence and perpetuate their existence. In calling him a city slicker, Burke suggests that Jameson’s jargon-riddled work does nothing but reinforce the meaningless beliefs of his discipline. Engaged in a solipsistic enterprise disconnected from reality, Jameson ignores any evidence that fails to conform to his preexisting vocabulary. Seeking to expose Jameson’s flaws, Burke documents his extensive use of “ideology” as a way of demonstrating Jameson’s blindness to any evidence that challenged his tidy theoretical proofs. For Burke, Jameson’s failure to venture outside this conceptual comfort zone could not separated from his attachment to the institution of Marxism.

The titular concept of Burke’s essay “Terministic Screens” provides a useful starting point for analyzing his underlying critique of Jameson. Here, rejecting positivism, Burke asserts that language does not accurately reflect the world but instead constitutes a deliberate selection and arrangement of details for a specific end or purpose: “any nomenclature necessarily directs the attention into some channels rather than others” (Language as Symbolic Action 45). A neutral perspective is fundamentally impossible since the sheer emphasis on some features of a phenomenon will require neglecting others. As he articulates in Permanence and Change, it is useful to “observe in the medium of communication simultaneously both the defects of its qualities and the qualities of its defects” (49). Burke’s notion of “terministic screen” underscores that any given concept or strategy does not transcend the world but instead offers a limited perspective on it.

Given Burke’s belief that individuals must recognize any given perspective as a perspective, he unsurprisingly attributes many of the modern world’s problems to an inability to
grasp this fact adequately. Burke targets the dangerous confluence of business and scientific practices, claiming that both share a narrow outlook on the world dominated by overly simplistic cause and effect relations. Not only do these groups have questionable goals, but they also fail to recognize the subjective nature of their own practices. Naively assuming that their vocabulary constitutes an accurate reflection of the world, scientists and businessmen remain oblivious to other perspectives that could be useful in certain circumstances. Readily acknowledging that scientific advances and the industrial revolution have had some desirable effects, Burke nevertheless maintains that the sustained use of the principles that have generated these effects can have disastrous consequences if used indiscriminately. Indeed, overemphasizing any one set of principles will definitely prove damaging in the long-term. In *Attitudes Toward History*, he explains that big business’s stubborn attachment to “efficiency” effectively “violates ‘ecological balance,’ stressing some one ingredient rather than maintaining all ingredients by the subtler requirements of ‘symbiosis’” (250). Burke suggests that Jameson is guilty of a similar error, noting that Jameson has an “over investment in the term ‘ideology’” (401; my emphasis). For Burke, Jameson’s error is symptomatic of a more serious fault in his thinking.

Wanting to avoid the traps that plague the businessman and scientist, Burke develops a technique he calls “perspective by incongruity,” which “puts together terms usually thought of as mutually exclusive” (409). Inspired by the writings of Nietzsche and Bergson, this procedure scrambles the vocabularies of competing conceptual systems, thereby calling into question any claims of comprehensive knowledge. As Burke explains in *Permanence and Change*, the combination of contradictory concepts will not offer “the whole of reality” but will at least “give us something more indicative than is obtainable by the assumption that our conceptualizations of events in nature are real” (94). In other words, Burke’s “perspective by incongruity” calls
attention to the fact that concepts are pragmatic and constructed devices rather than natural entities in the world merely waiting to be discovered by mankind. By placing words or metaphors from one interpretive schema into a completely different framework, Burke thinks that many of the dangers embodied in modern scientific attitudes can be avoided.

Burke’s antagonism toward institutions stems from these organizations actively working against enacting this process of “perspective by incongruity.” In a section of *Attitudes Toward History* entitled “Bureaucratization of the Imaginative,” he echoes his analysis in “Terministic Screens,” explaining that actualizing one possibility necessarily restricts actualizing other possibilities. Characterizing the foreclosure of alternative forms of thought in terms of a bureaucracy, Burke suggests that we “[c]all the possibilities ‘imaginative.’ And call the carrying-out of one possibility the bureaucratization of the imaginative” (225). In order to maintain internal consistency and order, any large-scale organization must standardize its vocabulary, effectively limiting the evolution of ideas and perspectives. Institutions, which rely on fixed quantities and qualities for their continued existence, are diametrically opposed to the strategy of “perspective by incongruity.” The problem resides not so much with the specific principles advanced by a given institution but with the structural limitations of institutions themselves.

Burke’s suspicion of institutions extends beyond the usual suspects of government and business agencies to include philosophical systems as well, most notably Freudian and Marxist frameworks. By clinging to a rigid set of concepts and vocabulary, these grand interpretive schemes produce the same effects as traditional bureaucracies, rendering themselves incapable of dealing with the complexities that escape their limited perspectives. Burke finds Marxism particularly guilty of this bureaucratizing tendency, since it not only claims to possess a broad and totalizing knowledge of society but also seeks to employ this knowledge in order to mobilize
a disciplined and potentially dogmatic political party. Despite affirming many of Marx’s insights into the nature of capitalist exploitation, Burke refrained from joining the Communist Party during the 1930s out of fear that this organization would probably repeat many of the same errors it sought to correct (George and Selzer 2-3).

Naturally, then, Burke regarded Jameson’s unqualified confidence in Marxism as incredibly dangerous. Only bolstering Burke’s suspicions, Jameson peppers his writing with declarations of Marxism’s theoretical supremacy. In perhaps his definitive work, 1981’s *The Political Unconscious*, he boldly announces in the book’s opening pages that “only Marxism offers a philosophically coherent and ideologically compelling resolution to the dilemma” of interpreting history and that “[o]nly Marxism can give us an adequate account of the essential mystery of the cultural past” (19). These and other similarly confident claims explain why Burke decided in his *Critical Inquiry* essay to paint Jameson as an overly dogmatic figure. From his perspective, Jameson’s insistence on the correctness of his Marxist interpretive scheme actualizes all of the bureaucratizing and totalitarian tendencies seen in the businessman and scientist. Indeed, Burke charges Jameson with failing to acknowledge the constructed nature of his own discourse, evident when Burke asserts in his response essay that his methodology freely grants the charge [of being anthropomorphic]. But when one man-made nomenclature accuses another man-made nomenclature of being anthropomorphic, if the accusation is intended to imply that the accusant nomenclature is *not* anthropomorphic, at that point my brand of Logology likens such ideological behavior to the verbal tactics of the politician who would imply his purity by accusing another politician of playing politics. (413)
From Burke’s perspective, Jameson’s bold declarations are implicitly totalitarian, illustrating how Marxist discourse ignores other interpretive possibilities by claiming itself as absolute truth.

In this respect, we should understand this lengthy response to Jameson as Burke’s demonstration of the latter’s overly simplified philosophical positioning. Trapped behind one terministic screen, Jameson brushes aside all evidence that does not conform to his static, lifeless system. Burke clearly found humor in Jameson’s desire to have a positive political effect since his work contributed to political problems rather than solving them. In fact, from Burke’s perspective, Jameson’s bureaucratizing and standardizing tendencies constitute the fundamental problem of modern society. In revealing how poorly Jameson read his work, Burke sought to expose the dangerous, anti-pluralist effects of this Marxist orientation.

III.

Throughout his rebuttal to Jameson, Burke emphasizes that his opponent commits egregious acts of misreading. As he sees it, Jameson conveniently overlooks any evidence that defies the assumptions he possesses about Burke’s thought. Interestingly enough, however, a similar charge could be leveled at Burke. While Jameson’s insistence on the superiority of Marxism certainly seems to confirm anxieties about totalitarian undertones in his work, Burke’s accusations miss much in Jameson’s writing. A close reading of Jameson’s engagement with Marxism illustrates that he actually shares a similar investment with producing a flexible and adaptable methodology.

Like Burke, Jameson maintains a suspicious attitude toward any positivistic account of the world. In his 1971 *Marxism and Form*, he dedicates a substantial amount of time to outlining the differences between his Marxist approach and these other perspectives. In the book’s concluding
chapter, he writes that the dialectic is designed “to project us in spite of ourselves out of our concepts into the world of genuine realities to which those concepts were supposed to apply”; he continues by explaining that “every time [our concepts] begin to freeze over,” the task of “genuine dialectical thinking” is to “spring us outside of our own hardened ideas into a new and more vivid apprehension of reality itself” (372). And when discussing Lacan in another essay from that period, Jameson echoes Burke by reiterating that “[i]n terms of language, we must distinguish between our own narrative of history—whether psychoanalytic or political—and the Real itself, which our narratives can only approximate in asymptotic fashion and which ‘resists symbolization absolutely’” (Ideologies 110). But if both Burke and Jameson reject the simplistic positivism that ensnares so much contemporary thinking, why does the latter nevertheless retain the Marxist label?

For Jameson, Marxism is simply the name for this antisystematic system. In his 1979 essay “Marxism and Historicism,” he argues that “a Marxist hermeneutic can be radically distinguished from all the other types . . . since its ‘master code,’ or transcendental signified, is precisely not given as a representation but rather as an absent cause, as that which can never know full representation” (Ideologies of Theory 452). Distancing himself from the many limitations of vulgar Marxism, Jameson insists that his own framework does not operate according to straightforward concepts like economics or production but functions instead according to the nebulous concept of “history.” For Jameson, history can never be examined directly but can only be observed in its different manifestations over time. His version of Marxism does not seek to offer a stable, unchanging vocabulary for accurately describing society’s operations but instead illustrates the very impossibility of ever achieving such a feat due to continuous historical transformation. As the opening declaration of The Political
Unconscious—“Always historicize!”—indicates, the only constant in Jameson’s approach is the perpetual need to modify his analytical tools for each concrete situation.

Jameson departs from Burke, however, by insisting that one can be flexible and change over time while remaining within a single institution. While Burke posits that institutions present a continual threat to the possibility of true change—their bureaucratic apparatuses necessarily disrupting the natural flow of ideas and the ability to adapt to new demands—Jameson suggests that one enacts change through an institution. For him, institutions constitute spaces of collectivity where concepts are reflexively modified over time. Even a rather abstract institution like Marxism facilitates such a process. In self-identifying as a Marxist, Jameson does not dogmatically uphold every point advanced in Marx’s writing. For him, Marxism consists of a body of general problems and broad guidelines with a flexible vocabulary that can (and must) be adapted over time to suit ever-changing contexts. Even though they belong to the same lineage, Jameson’s Marxism differs noticeably from Lukacs’ Marxism, or Adorno’s Marxism, or Marx’s Marxism. In adapting and refiguring the work of previous thinkers, Jameson actually enacts the process of reflexive modification that his work so highly values.

This tension between Burke and Jameson manifests itself clearly in the pair’s divergent understanding of Marx’s concept of ideology, a term over which the two sparred even before the publication of Jameson’s Critical Inquiry essay. In September of 1977, the English Institute at Harvard University organized a panel called “The Achievement of Kenneth Burke,” featuring papers by John Freccero, Angus Fletcher, and Jameson (who presented an early version of “The Symbolic Inference”). A member of the audience when Jameson delivered his talk, Burke later wrote to his lifelong friend Malcolm Cowley about the event, complaining that Jameson had managed to tangle Marx’s notion of ‘ideology’ (as per the German Ideology,
which he presumably never understood, if he ever read it) in ways that only the Hermeneutics is capable of. I was furious that, although I had brought all sorts of baggage with me, I didn’t have p. 104 of *A Rhetoric of Motives*, and thus couldn’t dispatch the guy as quickly as I could of. Marx’s meaning is as clear as a flash, yet the guy was in a fog… which would have led Marx to damn him as an ideologue. (Burke and Cowley 409)

For Burke, the concept of ideology has a clear and definite meaning that can be attributed to a particular author in a specific text. One either grasps the meaning of “ideology” as described by Marx in *The German Ideology* or one does not. Accordingly, Burke believes that Jameson’s reconfiguration of the term can only signify that he never even bothered to read Marx’s work in the first place. With a meaning “as clear as a flash,” how else could one explain Jameson’s wild misinterpretation?

Burke’s assessment of Jameson underscores these two thinkers’ differing approaches to texts and philosophical traditions. Although both find Marx’s work in *The German Ideology* to be compelling yet incomplete, their competing strategies for addressing these inadequacies reveal important assumptions underwriting their respective methodologies. For Burke, the Marxist perspective is just another terministic screen, offering some useful insights into the world while simultaneously ignoring others. Aware of the inherent limitations of the Marxist system, Burke employs its insights sparingly as he darts from one interpretive method to the next in an effort to avoid dwelling too long in one fixed perspective. Unlike Burke, Jameson elects to transform Marxism from the inside. The Marxist framework should not be regarded as the static monument of a singular thinker but rather a dynamic body of concepts that naturally evolves
over time. In a 1982 interview with the journal *Diacritics*, Jameson asserts that dialectical terminology is “never stable in some older analytical or Cartesian sense: it builds on its own uses in the process of development of the dialectical text, using its initial provisory formulations as a ladder which can either be kicked away or drawn up behind you in later ‘moments’ of the text” (*Conversations* 23-24).

Jameson’s commitment to modifying a discourse from the inside extends beyond traditional Marxist texts to include other thinkers and methodologies. Indeed, he regards other interpretive strategies as “incomplete” rather than “incorrect,” explaining that they are merely “provisory formulations” that further exploration will transform into a properly Marxist analysis. As Jameson argues, any given methodology that rigorously applies its own procedures to their logical conclusion will inevitably arrive at Jameson’s Marxist perspective. In his 1976 essay “Criticism in History,” he addresses the proliferation of interpretive frameworks that were then flooding the academy, arguing that “the Marxist point of view is secretly present in all those methods—if only as the reality that is repressed, or covertly opposed” (*Ideologies of Theory* 125). Rather than an alternative to so many formalisms and sociological approaches, Marxism should “be seen as their completion, and as the only method that can really finish what it is they all in their various ways set out to do” (126). For Jameson, other interpretive regimes only appear adequate because they place arbitrary limits on their own unique reading procedures. As Jameson later points out, “I would like to show that if you prolong any one of these methods even on its own terms, you always reemerge into the historical dimension itself” (126). Most methodologies stop short at precisely the moment when they must reflexively consider their own historical conditions of possibility; in taking that crucial last step, they would effectively become Marxist.

During his debate with Burke in *Critical Inquiry*, Jameson scrutinizes Burke’s method in
exactly this way. Jameson sees Burke’s pentad as subtly reinforcing many of the capitalist
principles that Burke seeks to undermine, noting that he “has anticipated many of the
fundamental objections to such a rhetoric of self and identity at the same time that he may be
counted among its founding fathers” (521). Burke’s dramatism is “not so much the archetype of
praxis as it is the very source of the ideology of representation and, with it, of the optical illusion
of the subject” (522). In spite of these reservations about Burke’s methodology, Jameson insists
that if the underlying structure of the pentad is pushed to its limit, it will become a more rigorous
form of analysis. Ironically enough, the pentad can be deployed to demonstrate Burke’s own
failure to use this paradigm adequately:

it is a measure of the ambiguous power of Burke’s dramatism that we can use it to
study its own strategies of containment, and to flush out those concepts external to
his own system to which he tends to have recourse when it is necessary to arrest
the evolution of his concept of symbolic action in the direction of a full-fledged
analysis of the ideological function of literary and cultural texts. (“Symbolic
Inference” 518)

Taken to its logical conclusion, the pentad will necessarily lead to the ideological analysis that
Jameson believes essential for criticism. Burke simply has not used his philosophical concepts to
their fullest potential. Thus, Burke’s worry that Jameson is not a dynamic, mobile thinker
proves unfounded. Although his approach differs from Burke, Jameson manages to produce a
flexible, ever-changing methodology that avoids the standardizing impulses that had doomed
earlier forms of Marxism.

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8 In fact, Jameson has recently engaged in the practice of reinterpreting Burke, using the Pentad
for his own purposes in a 2009 article for PMLA. See his “War and Representation.”
IV.

If the Burke-Jameson debate includes an unspoken criticism of Jameson’s work as potentially totalitarian, Jameson launches an equally oblique suggestion concerning the utter irrelevance of Burke’s work in the late twentieth-century. While Jameson makes clear that Burke fails to offer a compelling account of symbolic action, much remains left unsaid regarding the reasons for this failure. During the debate, Jameson criticizes Burke for leaning too heavily on the “individual,” saying that this category subtly supports the capitalist practices Burke hopes to overcome. However, because Jameson’s analysis never examines how the individual functions within a market and contributes to its stability, Burke and his supporters can easily read such remarks as further proof of Jameson’s “mere irresponsible smartness.” But Jameson’s critique of Burke’s investment in the individual involves something other than simply pointing out the fictional dimension of the term. Instead, we should understand Jameson’s assessment of Burke as a critique of the very idealization of difference and flexibility that underwrites all of Burke’s thought. While the previous section outlined the similarities between Burke and Jameson on this matter, it remains crucial to recognize that Jameson regards these techniques of difference and innovation as necessary but not sufficient to respond effectively to contemporary capitalism. More specifically, Jameson’s critique unearths the dark underside of Burke’s ostensibly liberating “philosophy of difference” by showing how late-twentieth century capitalism actually thrives on the continual process of differentiation that Burke champions. Occurring roughly midway through the twentieth century, this shift from standardization to differentiation as the primary motor of capitalism strips Burke’s philosophical pluralism of its politically radical edge.

During their debate, Jameson illustrates Burke’s inability to grasp these significant historical shifts through an analysis of the latter’s notion of “ritual.” Here, Jameson writes that
Burke’s “idea of ritual indeed entails as one of its basic preconditions the essential stability of a given social formation, its functional capacity to reproduce itself over time” (519). For Jameson, however, this precondition of “essential stability” does not accurately describe the world of the late twentieth century. As Jameson explains, “it would seem to me misguided, not to say historically naïve, to attribute a Parsonian stability and functionality of the former primitive or tribal type to a social formation whose inner logic is the restless and corrosive dissolution of traditional social relations into the atomized and quantified aggregates of the market system” (519).

Although he confidently dismisses Jameson’s objections, Burke actually reconfirms this critique by continuing to overlook the major historical shift that his opponent mentions. After admitting that Jameson has “a good point” (413) he qualifies his original assertion by saying that he is “mostly concerned with ritualization arising perennially anew, largely out of contemporary bureaucratizations, since I am specifically concerned with the indeterminate shifts between ritual and routine. History can show different transformations of ritual in the modes of symbolic action. But . . . the tendency is not a mere ‘survival’ nor is it likely to be ‘abolished’” (413; emphasis in original). In other words, Burke admits that contemporary practices are not synonymous with the rituals of past societies. Nevertheless, important underlying similarities exist among disparate historical moments. Accordingly, he points to his *Attitudes toward History*, which contains a fifty-page outline of historical development, culminating in the contemporary moment. Within this schematic, he labels the twentieth-century as “Collectivism,” describing it as one dominated by “the conditions of modern technology and accountancy, encompassing such a variety of polities as Fascism, ‘Police States,’ socialism, communism, the ‘Welfare State,’ and the giant industrial corporations which are typical of our own nation at the
present time” (410). Crucially, Burke claims that various political and economic agendas can be grouped together under a single category; a structural homology exists between repressive totalitarian governments and capitalist corporations since both seek to organize society according to a standardizing logic. Burke even approves of the term “business governments” (410) to describe contemporary corporations precisely because he believes their organizational structure accomplishes similar goals—rigid standardization and the elimination of flexibility and difference.

As this analysis illustrates, Burke’s work treats “totalization” as the defining social dilemma of his day, and his emphasis on openness, difference, and flexibility are clearly responses to this dilemma. For him, economics and politics follow a similar logic: both aim to standardize a diverse range of perspectives and practices. For Burke, this truth was evident in the twin evils of Fascism and industrial capitalism. Without question, when Burke wrote the majority of his critical work, this compulsory standardization was nearly identical in both politics and economics. Burke could not be faulted for seeing parallels in German fascism and American capitalism since both operated according to this logic. Acts of difference, innovation, and flexibility are necessarily resistant because of these broader social structures.

Jameson’s critique of Burke centers on this entire schematic being outmoded. In other words, Burke’s conceptual outlook aptly diagnoses the problems of a “standardizing society” and prescribes a useful solution to said problems. Unfortunately, this standardizing society no longer exists—or, at least, it no longer constitutes the dominant cultural formation as it did when Burke composed his most celebrated works. Elsewhere, Jameson writes that “the fundamental difference between our situation and that of the 1930s is the emergence in full-blown and definitive form of that ultimate transformation of late monopoly capitalism variously known as
the société de consommation or as postindustrial society” (Ideologies 444). After the second 
World War, post-industrialism—or what is often called “post-Fordism”—began to emerge as the 
dominant social formation in advanced nations, eclipsing the industrial practices that previously 
supported these societies. Within the context of a post-Fordist society, Burke’s work provides 
few tools for political resistance because it remains so firmly entrenched in the dilemmas of the 
preceding industrial era.

Recall that Burke’s ideals of innovation, fragmentation, and flexibility place him squarely 
within what Jameson would call a “modernist aesthetic.” For Jameson, modernism as an 
aesthetic movement can only be adequately understood in relation to Fordism and industrialism 
more generally; that is, modernism (“make it new”) was directly responding to the stifling 
imperatives of the economic realm, which aimed to standardize all industrial production (“make 
it the same”). But this relationship between the economic and the aesthetic, with the modernists 
and their innovative ideals seeking a small space of freedom in an otherwise conformist society, 
was a temporary moment in history, one that no longer holds in the contemporary first world. 
Today, the modernist aesthetic and general economic production coincide. In his essay “The 
Ideology of the Text,” Jameson asserts that modernism “has integrated itself into an economy 
functionally dependent on it for its indispensable fashion changes and for the perpetual 
resupplying of a media culture” (Ideologies 74-75). This historical transformation became the 
centerpiece of his definition of “postmodernism”—largely interchangeable with post-
industrialism and post-Fordism—a historical era where the aesthetic values of innovation and 
speculation coincide with the dominant mode of economic production. Fragmentation, 
difference, and flexibility are not antagonistic toward late capitalism but have actually become its 
central axioms.
The complete refashioning of the relationship between the aesthetic and the economic has stripped Burke’s work of its politically radical core. If the Fordist production model once threatened fragmentation, innovation, and difference with extinction—therefore necessitating the impassioned defense of Burke and other modernists—this threat itself no longer exists, having been replaced by a host of new problems corresponding to this post-Fordist era. In other words, if innovation and openness were once the solution, they are now part of the problem. Burke’s medicine for the ills of modern capitalism is precisely the poison that plagues the postmodern era. As Jameson explains, “what was once an oppositional and antisocial phenomenon in the early years of the century . . . has today become the dominant style of commodity production and an indispensable component in the machinery of the latter’s ever more rapid and demanding reproduction of itself” (Ideologies 445). The rebellious qualities of Burke’s work have now become the cultural dominant. Because late capitalism is thoroughly Burkean, it is shortsighted to suggest that Burke’s work offers a solution to the problems posed by late capitalism.

Yet during his debate with Jameson, Burke forcefully upheld the notion that human beings transcend the limitations of their physical bodies through the creative powers of language. He writes of a “critical distinction” that exists between “human animals and other animals” which makes possible “the realm of technological counter-nature” (414). For Burke, human nature is defined by its inventiveness and its ability to transcend the law-bound structures of the natural world in favor of a realm of its own creation.9 The human’s creative capacity to remake the world illustrates the liberating potential to overcome the stifling procedures of standardizing institutions, which deny these human capacities by taking certain creative human acts—that is, particular concepts used to describe the world—as accepted, unchangeable facts. For Burke,

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9 Burke, in fact, wrote an article that appeared in Critical Inquiry detailing precisely these distinctions. See his “(Nonsymbolic) Motion / (Symbolic) Action.”
recognizing and unleashing the human’s creative expression will overcome the rigid
standardization that threatens society.

Jameson criticizes this pluralistic prescription rather elliptically, referring to it as Burke’s
“anthropomorphism.” For Jameson, this term indicates the special privilege that Burke ascribes
to the individual to change his or her environment through the creative powers of language.
Unfortunately, to assume that language’s capacity to promote flexibility and difference is
inherently liberating misreads the contours of contemporary capitalism. As he writes in the final
moments of his follow-up essay to Burke, the uncontrollable historical forces produced in the
late twentieth century far exceed the “‘anthropomorphic’ possibility of the individual subject”
(422). But how exactly does the pluralism that Burke prizes so highly fail to do the work he
envisions it doing?

In Marxism and Form, Jameson outlines the undesirable consequences that a completely
free collection of individuals can produce. Using Jean-Paul Sartre’s notion of “seriality,” he
illustrates how a “host of collective actions and wills” working independently of one another
ultimately produces an “uncontrollable result” (246). As his analysis demonstrates, this
assemblage of “individually positive actions . . . add up to a negative sum” (247). Unexpected
social formations erupt from the haphazard combinations of individual actions, creating a context
that was willed by no one yet nevertheless constrains all. If the immediate effects of an
individual’s actions can be clearly observed and understood, the longer-term consequences of
such actions remain harder to anticipate and often return on the original actor as an alien and
unalterable force. Like the sorcerer’s apprentice, humans discover that their actions produce
consequences that take on a life of their own, well beyond the original intention of their creators.
As Jameson explains, even when individuals agree and have positive, well-intentioned desires,
the combination of their identical demands can produce the completely opposite effect: “a million freedoms seemed to cancel each other out in total helplessness” (247).

Therefore, as Jameson’s analysis reveals, Burke’s proposed space of innovation, fragmentation, and flexibility overlooks the fact that the combination of multiple acts of individual freedom can paradoxically create a set of conditions that inhibit further acts of freedom. The conclusion of his follow-up essay to Burke gestures to this tension; here, he writes that Burke has forgotten about “the realm of history,” or “the alienated forces of human institutions which return on people as external forces with a dynamism of their own. This is the realm of what Marx called ‘prehistory,’ the space in which class dynamics” function as if they were “a natural law” (422). From Jameson’s perspective, these laws operate regardless of whether or not Burke chooses to acknowledge them.

V.

Dismissing the possibility of individual action resolving the dilemmas presented by serial situations, Jameson does assert that seriality can be countered through a “collective project” (422). In *Marxism and Form*, he writes that “[g]iven the impotence of individuals in the serial situation, the motivation behind the formation of genuine groups is easily understood as a way of regaining autonomy, of reacting against dispersal through a new type of unity and solidarity” (249). Jameson’s sustained insistence on totality should be understood in precisely these terms. Rather than a Stalinist project of domination, his call for totality constitutes a sincere attempt to overcome the dilemmas of the serial situation. For Jameson, the realm of Necessity’s grasp

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10 Jameson quickly dispels any notion that he has any sympathies with Stalinism: “The deplorable mistake of the so-called Eastern, orthodox, or Soviet Marxism was the idea that you
over the realm of Freedom will never be undone simply by allowing the individual to flourish in his own unique space of difference and flexibility. As the serial situation demonstrates, the helplessness that most people feel is partially a product of these very strategies. Only through collective action can the serial situation be addressed. In an interview with *Diacritics*, he writes that

> no real systemic change in this country will be possible without the minimal first step of the achievement of a social democratic movement; and in my opinion even that first step will not be possible without two other preconditions (which are essentially the same thing): namely the creation of a Marxist intelligentsia, and that of a Marxist culture, a Marxist intellectual presence, which is to say, the legitimation of Marxist discourse as that of a ‘realistic’ social and political alternative. (73)

Burke and Jameson therefore seem split on the prospects of collective action, with the former seeing only totalitarian outcomes emerging from it and the latter seeing it as the only realistic response to the serial situation.

Closer inspection of Burke’s work suggests, however, its compatibility with the sort of social democracy that Jameson envisions. In fact, Burke makes a number of positive assessments of democracy, linking its procedures to his own philosophical principles. In his early work *Counter-Statement*, he writes that democracy is a system of “organized distrust” and “a babble of discordant voices, a colossal getting in one’s own way” (114). He then responds to those who criticize democracy for being inefficient by saying “inefficiency is the one thing it has in its favor” (114). The democratic deliberative process enacts many of the principles that his work advances—most notably, perspective by incongruity—as a way of organizing society.

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could have a full philosophical picture of the world called dialectical materialism that could be written down the way the old philosophical treatises were written down” (Conversations 182).
Regardless of its limitations, democracy at least prevents the totalizing impulse that characterizes the efficiency-obsessed capitalist from assuming the reigns too firmly and leading society to fascism.

It would seem, then, that Jameson has misread Burke in a manner similar to how Burke misreads Jameson. Just as Burke erroneously accuses Jameson of harboring fascist tendencies, Jameson erroneously charges Burke with being a proto-neoliberal. In both instances, such condemnations obscure that both critics’ projects are underwritten by many of the same presuppositions and goals. Yet a crucial distinction between Burke and Jameson remains to be explored, one that illuminates the ambiguous status of contemporary democratic practice. We should begin with an unusual tension within Jameson’s work: he advocates for a collective response to the serial situation at the same time that his analysis illustrates that all collective movements are destined to fail. Jameson’s optimistic, hopeful orientation toward the future is tempered by his mournful reflections on the past. Thus, in spite of the support he gives to democratic projects, Jameson can also be counted as one of their fiercest critics (if we understand “critic” to mean a skeptic of the promises that these democratic movements claim to be able to deliver). Although Jameson exaggerates Burke’s investment in the individual subject, he nevertheless unearths a more problematic dimension in Burke’s thought specifically and proponents of liberal democracy more generally: a belief in human agency at the collective level that does not take into account the “political unconscious.”

While the Marxist tenor of his work suggests a full-blooded notion of revolutionary agency, Jameson’s emphasis on the failure of all social movements throughout history calls into question these assumptions. Addressing the dialectic between Freedom and Necessity in The Political Unconscious, he writes that “Necessity is here represented in the form of the inexorable
logic involved in the determinate failure of all the revolutions that have taken place in human history” (102; my emphasis). For him, “the failure or the blockage, the contradictory reversal or functional inversion, of this or that local revolutionary process” should always be “grasped as inevitable” and the effect of “objective limits” (102; my emphasis). His Marxist perspective argues that “[h]istory is what hurts, it is what refuses desire and sets inexorable limits to individual as well as collective praxis, which its ‘ruses’ turn into grisly and ironic reversals of their overt intention” (102). Elsewhere, Jameson defines Marxism precisely in terms of defeat and dissolution, stating that Marxism stresses the failure of all social formations: “inevitable is not the triumphant emergence from capitalism of ‘socialism’…but rather simply the self-destruction of capitalism (as of preceding modes of production) under its own internal contradictions” (Conversations 26). Within the system Jameson has fashioned, the failure to reflect the objective world through language (which connects him with Burke) must be paired with an equally necessary failure for concrete actions to produce the consequences intended by the actors involved (or, more precisely, for those intended consequences to be preserved over time). A failure in epistemology must be accompanied by a failure in political practice.

Jameson undoubtedly counts liberal pluralist democracies among the casualties of inevitable dissolution and his reservations about Burke stem from his attachment to these ideals. Indeed, during their debate, Jameson criticizes Burke for being fully invested in the “Deweyan rhetoric of liberal democracy and pluralism, federalism, the ‘Human Barnyard,’ the ‘competitive use of the cooperative,’ and the celebration of political conflict in terms of what the motto to A Grammar of Motives calls the ‘purification of war’” (520). The decades since the New Deal have revealed that liberal democratic practice has not lived up to the expectations that Burke and others have ascribed to it: “from the nostalgic perspective of the present day…what tends to
strike us today about the Grammar and Rhetoric of Motives is less their critical force than Burke’s implicit faith in the harmonizing claims of liberal democracy and in the capacity of the system to reform itself from within” (520).

While Jameson never directly illustrates how democracy might endanger its own smooth functioning, his discussion of small group practice in Marxism and Form offers the best hint of the shape that analysis would assume. Here, Jameson offers an account of a collective organization that would respond to the serial situation while avoiding rigid organization. He notes that this decentered group makes decisions according to a process of “rotating or revolving thirds,” (253) where a “third” designates a leadership position within the group. As the name “rotating thirds” suggests, leadership positions are never fixed in this highly egalitarian structure. Almost immediately after praising this group for its democratic principles, he suggests that its longevity is doomed from the start. The laudable process of revolving thirds can disintegrate in one of two ways. The first: because decentered organization will prove to be ineffective in dealing with the enormous complexity of the serial situation, the group will inevitably attempt to protect itself by establishing some guise of stability, typically in the form of rules or principles. Unfortunately, this produces a hierarchy that slows down and eventually halts the shared responsibility that initially defined the group. The group prolongs its life by becoming better organized, yet “the demarcation of separate responsibilities, the assignment of tasks of different orders, the division of labor, are ultimately inconsistent with the total democracy and equality of the revolving thirds” (269). The second: if the group somehow manages to address the serial situation effectively, it will nevertheless attempt to maintain its existence so as to prevent or address future serial incidents. But without an imminent threat, the group will only be able to preserve itself through an oath of allegiance, thereby opening up the possibility of political terror.
As Jameson writes, “[b]orn of an attempt to prevent the return of seriality and dispersal, [the group] engages instead in the liquidation of individual freedoms” (255). Regardless of its ability to successfully address the serial situation, the group itself fails to preserve the dynamics of equality and “rotating thirds” that marked its origin.

Jameson’s analysis suggests that democratic practice can’t be posited as a solution to the problems of standardization and bureaucratization precisely because these problems were outcomes implicit at the very beginning of the group’s formation. Upholding democratic practice as an unproblematic ideal is untenable because it fails to recognize the relationship between democracy and a centralized form of power. Democracy doesn’t replace a sovereign mode of power; instead, a centralized sovereignty necessarily emerges out of any form of democratic practice, since “it is part of the natural history of the group that as the rotation of thirds slows down, as institution and organization begin to come into being” and “a single third finds himself in the dominant position in the now petrified group structure” (271). According to Jameson’s analysis, Stalin’s takeover of the Soviet apparatus is not an unfortunate accident. While effectively dispelling the forces of seriality that surrounded the Soviet Union, Stalin subjected the members of this organization to an equally distressing system of political oppression.

The fundamental misgiving of democratic utopianism stems from its failure to recognize the broader flows of historical development. Jameson explains that “history can be seen alternatively as either a perpetual oscillation between moments of genuine group existence and long periods of serial dispersal, or, at any given moment, as a complicated coexistence of groups at various stages of their development and masses of serial individuals surrounding them” (249). Any social formation—chaotic seriality, equal democratic practice, rigid hierarchical organization—will inevitably succumb to internal contradictions, leading to the emergence of
one of the other forms. While it might be tempting to see all social formations trending inevitably toward totalitarianism—this seems to be Burke’s conclusion, with human history ending in a wide-ranging “Collectivism”—Jameson insists that totalitarian regimes will fail when their oppressive structures lead to a revolution producing serial dispersal or a new small-group formation. We therefore have a cyclical process that moves from the helplessness of individuals in isolation crushed by the serial situation to the formation of democratic groups combatting this serial situation to the inevitable transformation of these groups into standardized hierarchies that will eventually dissolve and return individuals to a starting point of freedom (which will soon enough create another serial situation). Democratic practice can only be understood as an ideal when it ignores the broader historical currents from which it has emerged and which ensures its eventual dissolution.

Jameson’s analysis of the “rotating thirds” anticipates Derrida’s late work *Rogues*, where he offers a dramatic illustration of democracy’s autoimmune structure. Here, Derrida points to a recent political incident to illustrate what he sees as an aporia inherent to any democratic process. In the weeks leading up to a 1991 election in Algeria, a group of Islamic fundamentalists had generated enough popular support to gain control of the government. Once in power, these fundamentalists would dismantle the existing democratic practices like free elections and install a dictatorship. The current holders of power, moderate secularists, sought to stop this outcome by suspending the elections. For Derrida, this situation illustrates two ways in which democracy’s autoimmunity manifests itself: On one hand, non-democratic governments can always be elected through the democratic process. One can always vote to have one’s right to vote eliminated. As Derrida explains, “the alternative to democracy can always be represented

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11 It also anticipates the renewed interest in the work of political philosopher Carl Schmitt, which would begin in earnest following the thinker’s death in 1985.
as a democratic alternation” (31). On the other hand, those who recognized the threat posed by the Islamic fundamentalists and attempted to stall or alter the outcome of the election also killed the democratic process from within. From their perspective, the normal democratic practices had to be temporarily suspended in order to preserve these practices in the long term, but in stopping the fundamentalists, they had already dismantled these democratic principles. Regardless of the outcome in this particular situation—the election of the Islamic fundamentalists or their failure at the hands of the more moderate secularists—the democratic process fell victim to a non-democratic force. For Derrida, this force is inextricable from the democratic practice itself, since “[d]emocracy has always been suicidal” (33).12

Central to Derrida’s analysis of democracy is the concept of ipseity. As he explains, “ipseity names a principle of…accredited or recognized supremacy of a power or a force” (Rogues 12). In spite of democracy’s opposition to a sovereign monarch, it shares with this alternative political form a belief in ipseity. Indeed, Derrida argues that democracy is “a force (kratos), a force in the form of a sovereign authority (sovereign, that is, kurios or kuros, having the power to decide…), and thus the power and ipseity of the people (demos)” (13). In other words, it is a capacity “to do as one pleases, to decide, to choose to determine oneself, to have self-determination, to be master, and first of all master of oneself” (22). Democracy might be understood as a sort of distributed or dispersed sovereignty. Derrida’s analysis illustrates how this sovereign self-possession, regardless of whether it assumes a concentrated form like a monarch or distributed form like democracy, is structurally exposed to an outside that will disrupt its constitution. In the case of democracy, the only political form that actively welcomes this exposure to the outside, its willingness to change itself is paradoxically what makes it

12 For an earlier and more oblique analysis of the aporias haunting democratic practice, see Derrida’s “Force of Law.”
possible to become rigid and hierarchical. As Derrida’s concrete examples demonstrate, its very openness makes it vulnerable to closure, and therefore, it fails to preserve its capacity to determine itself as a self-creating, transformative phenomenon. Derrida’s analysis of the inherent autoimmunity of democracy does not suggest this failure can be attributed to some internal weaknesses of the governing or the governed; instead, it points to the unnerving prospect that the very desire to preserve these democratic structures indirectly participates in their unraveling.

In this respect, Jameson’s critique of Burke’s “anthropomorphism” is less an indictment of his attachment to the individual than his investment in the ipseity of any entity, whether individual or collective. Indeed, Jameson’s criticizes Burke’s dramatistic approach for appealing too heavily on “categories of consciousness”: “the Burkean symbolic act is thus always serenely transparent to itself, in lucid blindness to the dark underside of language, to the ruses of history or of desire” (522). While this assessment occurs during a larger discussion of Burke’s conception of the individual, Jameson uses the individual as the clearest example of the problems with ipseity.

In spite of this dire analysis, however, Jameson firmly maintains hope in the prospect of a better future where Freedom could overcome the limitations of Necessity. He understands Marxism as a commitment to this hope, arguing that “no Marxism is possible without a vision of a radically different future” (Conversations 26). In the conclusion to The Political Unconscious, he writes that “one of the most urgent tasks for Marxist theory today” involves the creation of “a whole new logic of collective dynamics, with categories that escape the taint of some mere application of terms drawn from individual experience” (294). Thus, Jameson’s Marxism consists of equal parts pessimism (the failure of all social movements through history) and optimism (the possibility that some future social movement might transcend these past failures),
attempting to hold these incompatible notions in dialectical tension. The ease with which both Burke and Jameson become almost indistinguishable from their opponent, often in their most polemical and antagonistic moments, remains one of the most fascinating hallmarks of their debate.

By introducing Derrida into Burke and Jameson’s exchange, a diverse array of anti-essentialist positions comes into focus. While a traditionalist would likely dismiss them all as so many lost causes, the differences among Burke, Jameson, and Derrida warrant careful consideration. Anti-essentialism may constitute the starting point for these thinkers (and most left-leaning political theorists today), but they depart from this shared ground in unexpected directions. As a way to organize the differences among them, we might chart their respective treatments of ipseity, producing a spectrum from least to most critical assessment of the concept (with an awareness that these thinkers shift on the spectrum depending on what we emphasize or marginalize in their writing). On one end of the spectrum lies Burke, who, while only occasionally indulging in the problematic fantasy of individual world-making, consistently regards collective organizations as powerful agents who largely determine their destiny. His broad historical vision traces society’s increasing ipseity that culminates in the nightmarish totalitarian extremes of the twentieth century. On the other end of the spectrum lies Derrida, who outlines a set of ontological conditions that call into question the capacity of any individual or collective formation to remain in control and self-possessed for any significant duration. Finally, in the middle of the spectrum rests Jameson, the puzzling figure who combines features of both Burke and Derrida.\footnote{In fact, we might better understand Jameson’s positioning between Burke and Derrida if we examine his tripartite mode of analyzing a literary text as a “symbolic act,” an “ideologeme,” and}
Jameson diverges most sharply with him concerning the ultimate effectiveness of these movements, engaging in a critique of ipseity that resembles Derrida’s. At the same time, his commitment to utopian hope, which he sees as inseparable from Marxism, prompts him to regard ipseity as a promise that may be achieved by collectivities at some point in the future that would overcome, or at least minimize, the dilemmas posed by Derrida’s analysis. Based on this analysis, it is Jameson, rather than Burke, who constitutes the pivotal figure joining literary theory with Rhetoric and Composition. Within theoretical discourse, Jameson’s Marxist Utopian impulses place him in an odd position, yet his emphasis on the complete and utter failure of all human revolutions in history clearly justifies his inclusion in this group. Indeed, for these thinkers, the historical record is a symptom of a fundamental condition that no amount of Utopian desire on Jameson’s part could ever hope to counteract.

Indeed, while the tensions between Derrida and his outright detractors have received the most critical attention, the subtle differences that separate him from his more sympathetic interlocutors—in other words, Jameson and others positioned along the anti-essentialist spectrum—speak more directly to the vicissitudes of leftist political theorizing today. Take, for example, an “ideology of form.” As we move between modes, broadening the historical scale each time, the overall force of the text diminishes. See The Political Unconscious 60-88.

On the differences between Jameson and Derrida, see Ghostly Demarcations, which includes Jameson’s “Marx’s Purloined Letter” and Derrida’s “Marx and Sons.” The differences might be summed up as the slight yet substantial interval between Jameson’s “messianism” with Derrida’s “messianicity,” which the latter emphasizes is a “messianicity without messianism” rather than a “weak messianic power”: “[b]etween ‘weak’ and ‘without’, there is a leap—perhaps an infinite leap” (250).

Rather than a complete departure from formalist criticism, the “political turn” in literary studies during the 1980s was a complicated grappling with the insights of deconstruction, distributing critics across the spectrum just elaborated. For many, the limitations of deconstruction became so clear that even Derrida himself abandoned his early career meditations on language and metaphysics for more pressing political questions concerning democracy, justice, cosmopolitanism, and religion. However, as more recent treatments have emphasized, Derrida’s thought remained remarkably consistent throughout his career and the late-era political
instance, the work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, which is in the same spirit as Burke’s (their notion of radical democracy resonates nicely with Burke’s “parlor metaphor” found in *The Philosophy of Literary Form*). The pair enlists Derrida both as a means of challenging the notion of consensus-oriented democracies and of advancing the robust, “agonistic” model of democracy that they champion.\(^{16}\) What their analysis tends to underemphasize is the degree to which the concept of democracy, even their highly amorphous version that escapes the trap of being tied to concrete forms or procedures, remains forever vulnerable to its own internal impulses. Deconstruction not only problematizes the notion that rigid, hierarchical societies can remain stable but also suggests that democracies, which cultivate perpetual contestation and transformation, will suffer a similar fate. Despite their best efforts to internalize a constitutive outside, democracies cannot fully protect the flexible mechanisms that promise perpetual transformation from foreclosure. Attending to the nearly negligible interval between figures like Laclau and Mouffe on one hand and Derrida on the other remains crucial in assessing the prospects of democracy in the contemporary world.

Although it never garnered as much attention as other high profile debates in *Critical Inquiry*—most notably the 1977 exchange between M.H. Abrams and J. Hillis Miller—the confrontation between Kenneth Burke and Fredric Jameson constitutes a critical moment in work should be understood as an extension of his previous investigations. There is no turn from the textual to the political in Derrida insofar as the textual is understood as a type of structure—a structure that challenges the notion of ipseity—instead of a simple reference to literature specifically or even language more broadly. In his later writings, Derrida does not forget the vicissitudes of the text but instead offers a more explicit rendering of the textual quality of law, politics, and history. Derrida’s trajectory stands in sharp contrast with numerous literary critics who also engaged with broader social issues beginning in the 1980s but did so in direct opposition to Derrida and deconstruction, believing that a simple turn toward history or context would magically void the problems that his work raises.

\(^{16}\) See Laclau and Mouffe’s *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* and Mouffe’s *The Democratic Paradox*. For a comparison between Laclau and Derrida, see Hagglund’s *Radical Atheism*.
English studies, one that anticipates important fault lines that would soon structure much of the discipline. While pluralism quickly became an assumed starting point for both literary and rhetorical theory, replacing the essentialisms of the preceding era, the nature of this pluralism and its effects remained much more contentious. Broadly speaking, then, two versions of pluralism have circulated in English studies over the last few decades. Following Burke and other figures of the Chicago School like Wayne Booth, rhetorical theory and criticism have tended to endorse liberal pluralism wholeheartedly, seeing in it a utopian ideal. When engaging with figures from Continental philosophy, rhetorical theory has tended to emphasize those features in their work that align most closely with Burke’s pluralist position. Literary theory, meanwhile, has remained more skeptical about pluralism’s prospects, with Jameson’s analysis of Burke characterizing the broad strokes of that skepticism. At every turn, the canonical figures of literary theory have sought to distance themselves from the “anthropomorphic” tendencies evident in the Chicago pluralists, instead emphasizing that the plurality of which they speak is an impersonal, structural one that continually makes (and unmakes) individual subjects (and not the other way around).

If these two versions of pluralism have circulated in the discipline over the last few decades, English studies has often embraced rhetorical theory’s version of pluralism without fully acknowledging it. While the widespread incorporation of “theory” into the discipline has become a generally acknowledged fact, close inspection should reveal that much of what passes as literary theory is actually some version of rhetorical theory. Take, for instance, the discipline’s recent investment in “animal studies,” a turn at least partially motivated by Jacques Derrida’s late work *The Animal That Therefore I Am*. While the vast majority of the work on animals has

17 Work in the rhetorical theory journal *PRE/TEXT* confirms this point. See, for instance, Bennett and Scott.
assumed a liberal pluralist register, demanding that rights be extended to non-human subjects, Derrida’s text gestures in precisely the opposite direction, questioning whether humans even possess those qualities that make them subjects capable of bearing rights in the first place. In other words, much of the effort to trouble the boundaries between the human and the animal is aligned more closely with Burke’s pluralism than Derrida’s. If the discipline is split between two competing pluralisms, rhetorical theory’s version appears to hold the clear advantage. The next chapter will further explore this tendency and its implications in the contemporary university.

18 For an example of the liberal-plural approach to animal studies, see DeKoven.
More than thirty years after Kenneth Burke’s heated exchange with Fredric Jameson, another significant but understated debate occurred in *Critical Inquiry*. In 2012, Jeffrey J. Williams responded to Evan Kindley’s article “Big Criticism.” While the particulars of their argument concern the funding apparatuses involved in the rise of literary criticism following World War II, a significant methodological point emerges in the final moments of Williams’ critique. Here, he admits that his investment in critiquing Kindley’s piece, beyond a shared commitment to generating a more cultural materialist version of modern literary criticism, stems from the article embodying problematic assumptions that are endemic to contemporary critical work. Williams argues

“[i]f the master word defining the theory era was *text*, the master word of our era is *archive*, and there is a tendency to present intriguing and very local archival material from which one makes a grand speculation. The speculation gains credibility from the accumulation of archival material. It’s impressive when you read notes that reveal their sources as box 6, folder 15, and they seem inarguable. Similar to what Roland Barthes called the reality effect, they perform I believe a history effect. Such procedure broadcasts a realistic account, but it is in fact primarily rhetorical; because the scholar has access to such arcane material, we assume that other statements are based on this bedrock of fact.” (411)

Here, Williams criticizes Kindley for conflating the universal and the particular. Unearthing material from a specific historical site, Kindley draws broad conclusions about post-war literary
criticism that his work cannot reasonably support. The specificity of his research materials does not adequately represent the more complicated realities of the period under investigation. Williams’ critique of Kindley only begins to address the complex issues that surround what we might refer to as the “archive era.” To understand the implications of the shift from “text” to “archive” that Williams insightfully posits, we must first detach these two terms from their concrete referents. After all, archival work existed long before the rise of Big Theory and texts continue to be read and analyzed today even though, as Williams claims, the “era of the text” has ended.

A useful starting point for outlining some of the underlying tensions between text and archive can be found in Kurt Spellmeyer’s 1996 piece “After Theory: From Textuality to Attunement with the World.” Like Williams, Spellmeyer equates the era of literary theory with the concept “textuality.” And while the word “archive” does not figure prominently in his discussion, Spellmeyer complements Williams’ text/archive dichotomy by supplying a broad organizing principle for the latter term. In his opening paragraph, he maintains “theory’s successor’s all share among themselves at least one identifying feature—a commitment to descending from textuality into the particulars of everyday life” (893). As the rest of Spellmeyer’s argument unfolds, the transition from the text to the archive becomes clearer: against an ahistorical, institutionally sanctioned form of criticism that implicitly supports the status quo, a socially conscious criticism emerges to advance a broadly progressive democratic agenda. For Spellmeyer, the practice of writing criticism has unfortunately become a conservative act insofar as it only further separates academics from the society they are meant to serve, pulling them out of the undergraduate classroom at startling rates. Whatever the merits of
Spellmeyer’s position, his piece points to a “social turn” in literary scholarship following the demise of Big Theory in the discipline.

But the shift from text to archive was far from a decisive split. If critics’ turn toward social and political questions, best seen in (but not limited to) a deep investment in archival research, can be seen in many ways as a reaction against literary theory and “the text,” this new paradigm also drew much of its energy (or at least some cultural capital) from these theoretical texts. Much of the discipline’s recourse to these theoretical works is puzzling, however, since these texts do not directly speak in the name of the progressive political movement into which they were assimilated. As François Cusset explains in his history of French theory’s American legacy, “if Derrida or Foucault deconstructed the concept of objectivity, the Americans would draw on those theories not for a reflection on the figural power of language or on discursive constructions, but for a more concrete political conclusion: objectivity is synonymous with ‘subjectivity of the white male.’ What they developed was an entirely unexpected link between literary theory and the political Left” (131). Those who had been skeptical or simply bewildered by the “black box” of French theory could be reassured that it “had a focus after all, and it was none other than unearthing minority identities, and the lot of subjugated groups” (131-132). In other words, the shift from text to archive could be seen as both a birth and death of theory in the American academy. If theory was simultaneously expelled from the academy and embraced all the more tightly, the love it received was through rose-tinted glasses.

If French theory found itself being used as a support for a broad democratic coalition, the writings of many of its key practitioners predicted such an outcome. Indeed, what links diverse figures like Derrida, Deleuze, and Foucault together is a shared understanding of social or political organization rooted in contingent dispersal and appropriation. This is not to say that the
truth of French theory was corrupted and made to be something it was not, but that French theory provides an account of how historical phenomena are seized and deployed for different ends—and, more importantly, these phenomena can’t be separated from the forces that capture and deploy them. Because French theory advances a notion of the socius that functions according to the principle of difference, it can be fairly easily assimilated into a democratic identity politics. While not diametrically opposed, the two systems do possess substantial differences that warrant exploration.

The previous chapter outlined the differences between these two versions of politics using the debate between Kenneth Burke and Fredric Jameson as an example. This chapter extends that analysis by showing these two models at work within the discipline of English over the last several decades. Indeed, the relationship between these two competing models can be productively examined in contemporary English Studies where literary theory, identity politics, democratic practices, and a decentered social organization all collide. First, I trace how many of the insights of French theory were confirmed by the way they were incorporated into English Studies during the “social turn” in criticism. Then, I outline how the democratic identity politics movement that redeployed French theory for its own ends ultimately became subject to these same forces of appropriation and redeployment. More specifically, I examine how the concept of the political in the discourse of Rhetoric and Composition, in many ways shaped by local disciplinary matters (including its relationship to literary studies), had unintended consequences that has worked against its progressive goals. The model of identity politics that the field advances shares much in common with an emerging discourse within the university’s central administration that is invested in making the university more hierarchical.
The shift from “text” to “archive” has been quite decisive throughout literary criticism, so decisive, in fact, that even those paradigmatic figures of textuality have experienced a flurry of archival research around their own work. The ambitious project of translating and publishing thirty-five years’ worth of Derrida’s lecture courses can be seen as a symptom of this shift. The same can be said for many of Paul de Man’s unpublished works and unofficial writings that have recently been unearthed. In 2012’s Theory and the Disappearing Future, Tom Cohen, Claire Colebrook, and J. Hillis Miller take a series of notes by de Man on Walter Benjamin as a starting point for a reevaluation of the Yale critic (the book also includes a transcription of these notes). The same year also saw the publication of The Post-Romantic Predicament, a collection of essays that were part of the critic’s papers that are housed at the library at the University of California at Irvine. Other material from this collection, including the rough draft of Allegories of Reading, spurred Martin McQuillan’s recent collection of essays The Political Archive of Paul de Man. And the recently published The Paul de Man Notebooks emphasize the extent to which this archival impulse has taken a decisive hold of many of the fundamental protocols structuring criticism today.

While the shift from “text” to “archive” can be understood as a reaction to French theory, its abstruse ruminations rejected in favor of more certain historical realities, it might also be said that the shift occurred within the discourse of theory as well as outside of it. If the “era of the text” was underwritten by Jacques Derrida’s infamous statement from Of Grammatology that “[t]here is nothing outside the text” (158), critics targeted this approach for dismissing the social and historical factors determining the literary work. Although Derrida’s assertion is certainly one of the most misunderstood phrases in the theory canon (here, “text” does not refer to specific
written materials but a certain type of ontological structure), these critiques nevertheless adequately capture how his work was deployed within much American literary criticism throughout the late 1970s and 1980s. Those looking for a fully-formed challenge to Derrida didn’t need to look beyond the confines of recent French writing, since Michel Foucault both detailed the limitations of Derrida’s approach and promised a more socially-committed model for literary criticism. In *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, Edward Said articulates the sharp differences between Derrida and Foucault: “Derrida’s criticism moves us *into* the text, Foucault’s *in* and *out*” (183). For Said, Derrida’s shortsighted focus on the nuances of textual artifacts finds a corrective in Foucault, who links these texts to the real world and matters of power and oppression. Even if Foucault’s analyses wander toward the highly theoretical end of the spectrum, his analyses present the comforting reassurance that they can always be tied back to a “real world.” In Foucault’s work, written documents no longer circulate in a free-floating space but are instead seen as objects functioning within (and helping to produce) a social context. The transition from “text” to “archive” constitutes a shift in emphasis toward this broader context in which written material is embedded.

Indeed, this shift from “text” to “archive” constituted the major sticking point between Derrida and Foucault over the course of two decades. The tiff began shortly after the publication of Foucault’s first major work, *The History of Madness*, a survey of the transformations of the titular topic during the “classical age.” Derrida, a former student of Foucault’s, presented an analysis of the book in his essay “Cogito and the History of Madness” at the College Philosophique in 1963. With Foucault in the audience, Derrida leveled a devastating critique of the presuppositions underwriting his mentor’s work, suggesting that Foucault fell victim to the same gestures that he condemned Descartes for committing: “I would be tempted to consider
Foucault’s book a powerful...Cartesian gesture for the twentieth century” (55). Incensed by the treatment, Foucault stormed out of the conference but did not officially respond to Derrida’s comments for nearly a decade when the second edition of the book was released in 1972. In an appendix to this version entitled “My Body, This Paper, This Fire,” Foucault dismissed Derrida’s myopic focus on those few pages in the massive volume that mentioned philosophical figures in Derrida’s wheelhouse. For Foucault, whatever strengths Derrida’s analysis might possess, it is ultimately nothing more than “a historically well-determined little pedagogy” that “inversely gives to the voice of the masters that unlimited sovereignty that allows it indefinitely to re-say the text” (573). Foucault would make much of Derrida’s reliance on the work of prominent Descartes scholar Martial Guéroult, suggesting that this betrayed Derrida’s commitment to an oppressive philosophical tradition. In the publication Paideia in February of that year, Foucault is even more to the point: “Derrida thinks that he can capture the meaning of my book or its ‘project’ from the three pages, the only three pages that are given over to the analysis of a text that is recognised by the philosophical tradition” (575). Foucault challenges Derrida’s inability to think beyond the canon of accepted texts when reconstructing a historical phenomenon. Even if Foucault were to have fumbled his analysis of a canonical figure like Descartes, would that error be enough to discredit the entirety of the project? Shouldn’t other voices make a compelling claim on our attentions?

Of course, each thinker’s relationship to history and marginal figures is a bit more complicated than their spat might initially suggest. While their respective philosophical projects are by no means identical, the significant overlap between them can easily be overshadowed. To say that Derrida had no interest in history beyond canonical figures does a great disservice to his work, and much of his later writing directly considers the status of the marginal or dispossessed
(including an analysis of the archive in *Archive Fever*). Foucault may be an even more dynamic figure insofar as his work exhibits an extraordinary range of competing impulses and investments. One of the primary features of Foucault’s work is a notion of genealogy adopted from Nietzsche, wherein an assemblage of forces converge and interact. What something “is” is nothing more than a collection of forces that can be deployed in a number of contexts. This principle serves as both a methodological point in his own work and a principle through which we can understand his proliferation in critical discourse. When Foucault outlines Nietzsche’s concept of genealogy in the essay “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” he does not offer a complete picture of Nietzsche so much as mobilize particular forces in Nietzsche’s corpus that help further his own project. Like any other historical object, “Nietzsche” ultimately becomes nothing more than the various forces that have taken possession of it over time. It should come as no surprise, then, that “Foucault” also experiences this same fate, his work seized by a number of critical camps that deploy his ideas in diverse and often contradictory ways. Although Foucault’s work contains a dizzying array of emphases and objectives, for my purposes here—even my assessment of the genealogy of Foucault’s work will be a partial glimpse produced for specific ends—we might reduce this variety of forces to two principle impulses: “Foucault the archivist” and “Foucault the cartographer.” I take these descriptions from Gilles Deleuze’s seminal 1986 study *Foucault*, where he characterizes his deceased friend as both “a new archivist” and “a new cartographer.” I make no claims of adhering to Deleuze’s understanding of Foucault as archivist or cartographer. Instead, I deploy these terms for my own ends in diagnosing the disparate and often conflicting ways that Foucault has been incorporated into the American academy.

The differences between the archival Foucault and the cartographer Foucault can be seen clearly in his essay “The Lives of Infamous Men,” a preface for a book that was never published.
Foucault explains that the book is “an anthology of existences” consisting of “[l]ives of a few lines or a few pages” that “convey not so much lessons to ponder as brief effects whose force fades almost at once” (279). Based on Foucault’s description, the book is intended to embody what I’m calling the “archival Foucault,” an intense interest in the odd, the singular, and the peculiar for its own sake. Foucault writes that the process of selecting work for the book “was guided by nothing more substantial than my taste, my pleasure, an emotion, laughter, surprise, a certain dread, or some other feeling whose intensity I might have trouble justifying, now that the first moment of discovery has passed” (279). Foucault’s interest in these long-deceased figures stems precisely from their resistance to being incorporated into a preexisting schematic and thereby being reduced to examples of “lessons to ponder.” Indeed, the book was inspired by his wanderings through the Bibliothèque Nationale, where he spent much of his time simply wading through historical documents. At some level, the pieces in the anthology are included precisely because they defy explanation (even if only momentarily, since their impact “fades almost at once”). Foucault admits that the collection is one “compiled…without a clear purpose,” explaining that “I resolved simply to assemble a certain number of texts, for the intensity they seem…to have” (280). Unlike Derrida, who would immediately feed these texts through a dense conceptual apparatus that would render them intelligible, Foucault wants to pause on the intensely affective moment in which these brief moments of writing defy a self-assured explanation.

And yet, as soon as this “archival Foucault” is fully articulated, a competing “cartographer Foucault” emerges to challenge it. Against his initial interest in the past for its own sake and his fascination with the ability of strange and marginal characters from history to disrupt long-held beliefs and assumptions, this other Foucault enthusiastically embraces the act
of system building and diagramming a range of conflicting forces that produce the effects he finds in these brief lives. During the first portion of “The Lives of Infamous Men,” Foucault explains how the anthology constitutes a “rule-and-game-based book” insofar as there were a number of restrictions he imposed on himself in terms of what could be included. The pieces must not only address actual people who were both “obscure and ill-fated” but they needed to be “as brief as possible” (281). Furthermore, the actual written document itself must have participated in the fate of the individual (rather than simply describing that fate). Elaborating rules of limitation ultimately leads Foucault to constructing the constellation of social forces that would produce documents conforming to such criteria. Foucault details how these documents embody the introduction of sovereign power into the quotidian affairs of common people, since these documents are part of an apparatus by which individuals could seize “the mechanisms of sovereignty” and “divert its effects to one’s own benefit” (288). As a result, “political sovereignty penetrated into the most elementary dimension of the social body” and a “whole political network became interwoven with the fabric of everyday life” (288). Much of the affective quality of the documents that Foucault enjoys so much stems from the unusual social circumstances surrounding these documents: “the petitioners for internment were lodged by illiterate or semiliterate persons of humble circumstance” and “with their meager skills…would compose as best they could the formulas or turns of phrase they believed to be required when one addressed the king or high officials” (290). The explanatory apparatus that Foucault generates in the latter half of the essay pushes against his opening gambit to allow these brief fragments simply to occupy a delicate, ineffable space.

While this latter set of concerns might seem to be more central to the general Foucauldian project, the first set of questions about the past and marginality would be foregrounded in the
American criticism that claimed to be inspired by his work. Or, perhaps more appropriately, the split between Foucault the archivist and Foucault the cartographer serves as a useful shorthand for two basic conceptualizations circulating in English Studies of how the socius is organized (and which both cited French theory as a support for this writing). Generally speaking, the “archival” model corresponds to a liberal model of identity politics that pinpoints the state as the primary pivot for analysis. Envisioning the state as a largely homogenous entity that has long rejected difference, it demands that marginal groups and ideas be recognized and adequately represented within that system. The fundamental political gesture of work can be seen in its desire to “recover” lost voices that diversify and complicate the past and present. The “cartographic” model, meanwhile, while sharing much with the “archivist” model in approach, diverges in a number of crucial ways. Although it sees the state as an important operator within the socius, the cartographic model focuses on broader structural forces that function beyond the complete control of the state. While these forces are highly mobile and thrive on difference and reversibility, they do not promise political liberation—in fact, they are often more debilitating than the hierarchical power of the state. The cartographic model also cares less about diversity for its own sake (or as the end point of its analysis) than in using it as a springboard for further investigation. In other words, it understands the pivotal categories of the archival model as effects of this structure rather than as fundamental units. I want to stress that my use of “archival” here does not refer strictly to archival work as such. In fact, there is plenty of existing archival work in English Studies that would be decidedly “cartographic.”

It remains an open question how to characterize the relationship between these two models. In many ways, they could be understood as completely incompatible or antagonistic; the

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1 Indeed, the very concept of *mal d’archive* in Derrida’s *Archive Fever* corresponds to the “cartographic” rather than the “archival.”
model of identity politics unintentionally serves as a containment strategy that prevents examining the structural operations at work that produce undesirable power relations. Or, they could be understood as complementary models that should be strategically combined or distinguished based on changing circumstances. Or, one model could be seen as a preliminary or preparatory step for the other. Or, critics can unknowingly oscillate between these two models from one moment to the next and generate strange synthetic models. My point here is not to decide the superiority of either of these models so much as it is to say that both circulate within contemporary academic criticism as ways of interpreting texts and archival materials and as ways of articulating the political effects that critics hope their work will produce.

The most conspicuous and influential critical movement within the social turn in literary studies, the New Historicism demonstrates how the archival and cartographic approaches intermingle in strange and unpredictable ways. Although both approaches can be located within work identifying itself as New Historicist, the archival model has tended to be emphasized. When Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt, reluctant spokespeople for this critical movement (that refuses to consider itself a movement), engage with Foucault in their reflective work *Practicing New Historicism*, they examine “The Lives of Infamous Men” largely for the dilemmas presented in the opening pages and downplay the dynamics found in the elaborate analysis in the piece’s second half. At just the moment that they are prompted to explore the other half of Foucault’s essay, they abandon “The Lives of Infamous Men” and turn to the anecdote that opens *The Order of Things* so as to rehearse the same conceptual dilemmas through another text. The emphasis on these passages in Foucault at expense of other sections is a result of the New Historicists’ investment in recovering the reality of past cultures and a corresponding realization that such efforts will, at best, be short lived. Earlier in *Practicising*
New Historicism, Gallagher and Greenblatt confess a desire for their criticism to recover “a confident conviction of reality” and experience a “touch of the real” (31). This complements Stephen Greenblatt’s admission in Shakespearean Negotiations of his “desire to speak with the dead” (1). What the New Historicists find so compelling in Foucault is the endless cycle of being confronted by the singular strangeness of the past and ultimately “normalizing” this strangeness through an explanatory historical narrative. As Gallagher and Greenblatt explain, the New Historicists found in Foucault “an author who could acknowledge and reflect on the pathos of anecdotalism: the strong desire to preserve the energies of the anecdote by channeling them into historical explanation, which is followed by frustration and disappointment when the historical project stills and stifles the very energies that provoked it” (68). Gallagher and Greenblatt assert that Foucault “seemed to be living” the paradoxes of counterhistory “as an intense drama that all of us shared whenever we set out, as we constantly did, to capture the animation, the dynamism, of things that were bound to become inert and passive under our disciplinary gaze” (68). There is a “knot binding the desire to resurrect life and the power to end it” (70). From their perspective, Foucault can’t escape the realization that his own work is part of the power structure that began by condemning these marginal figures to death. Even though he wants to bring them to light and reveal unacknowledged marginal figures from the past, he recognizes that the desire to do so merely repeats the ways in which these individuals were brought under the gaze of power.

Although it would be difficult to deny that these concerns aren’t operating in Foucault’s writing, his work seems primarily occupied with a different set of questions. Foucault’s itinerary moves in an altogether different direction from the majority of New Historicists; the New Historicists’ preoccupation with the dilemma of silencing the past in the attempt to recover it proves to be something of a provisional throat-clearing gesture within his work. A wide range of
statements throughout his corpus point to these differences. Take, for instance, the final moments in the introduction to *Discipline and Punish*, where he announces his intention of writing a history of the modern penitentiary system. “Why? Simply because I am interested in the past? No, if one means by that writing a history of the past in terms of the present” (31). Here, Foucault acknowledges the impossibility of ever transcending the limitations of one’s own moment in order to accurately seize the past as it unfolded in its unique specificity and he appears unwilling to simply rehearse the endless failure to escape one’s presentist biases. Foucault’s project—what he calls a “history of the present” (31)—is admittedly “presentist.” His explorations of past phenomenon exist only insofar as they help him better understand the specific arrangement of forces that structure the present day. This is the “cartographer” Foucault, a figure who relishes in constructing genealogies that include both discontinuities and continuities.

The reasons motivating Gallagher and Greenblatt’s emphasis on the “archival” over the “cartographic”—a decisive reversal from that in Foucault—becomes clear once we see its connection to the social democratic values that they understand their work to be advancing. Their desire to have “an encounter with the singular, the specific, and the individual” has an unapologetically liberal political agenda behind it, one meant to promote difference against stifling conformity. Looking at the other inspirations for the New Historicism reveals that these critics saw their work operating within a larger political context where progressive, marginal social groups were battling a dominating, totalitarian power. For instance, their turn to the anecdote, meant to puncture the grand narratives of official history, correlates to the figure of Eric Auerbach. Their appreciation for his use of textual fragments to construct compelling analytic readings is necessarily connected to the political context in which his magnum opus,
Mimesis, was composed. They argue that Auerbach’s “informed appreciation of multiple styles bespeaks a kind of cultural catholicity, an openness to alternative ways of responding to the world” during a period when a war was raging and the enemy “would have consigned him to the gas chamber” (42). Auerbach’s attention to difference and particular textual strategies for representing the world are placed within the much broader context of a fight against fascism. Gallagher and Greenblatt see their own work as a continuation of this fight, albeit in less dire circumstances. In the opening pages of Practicing New Historicism, they make clear that their work was inspired by the social movements of the 1960s, noting that Women’s studies served as a “model for new historicism in that it has inspired its adherents to identify new objects for study, bring those objects into the light of critical attention, and insist upon their legitimate place in the curriculum” (11). They regard the social movements of the 1960s as structurally analogous to the fight against totalitarianism during World War II—they want to preserve and promote previously marginalized pockets of difference against a homogenizing central power.

At the same time, however, New Historicists often work to extend the broader “cartographic” work found in Foucault’s analyses. In fact, this cartographic work can be found in the writing of figures who also advance a notion of “archival” politics, thereby underscoring the important point that the relationship between the “archival” and the “cartographic” cannot be reduced to a simple antagonism or opposition. For instance, in the opening essay to H. Aram Veeser’s 1989 collection The New Historicism, Greenblatt examines the impersonal structural forces that Foucault seems preoccupied with tracing. He writes that “capitalism has characteristically generated neither regimes in which all discourses seem coordinated, nor regimes in which they seem radically isolated or discontinuous, but regimes in which the drive towards differentiation and the drive towards monological organization operate simultaneously,
or at least oscillate so rapidly as to create the impression of simultaneity” (6). From his perspective, the oscillation between these two regimes is “built into the poetics of everyday behavior in America,” suggesting that he too, like Foucault, is concerned with the broader structural dynamics that would produce the strange idiosyncratic personalities that his “archival” work is intent on recovering.

But in many cases, a mix between the archival and cartographic forms produces a strange mixture wherein the state is ascribed more power than it deserves. New Historicism’s tendency to read the cartographic model through the lens of the archival model explains its peculiar investment in “co-optation,” a concept ostensibly derived from Foucault. As Veeser articulates in the introduction to his collection, these “key assumptions continually reappear and bind together practitioners” of the titular critical practice: “that every act of unmasking, critique, and opposition uses the tools it condemns and risks falling prey to the practices it exposes” and—what may amount to a simple rephrasing of the first point—“that a critical method and a language adequate to describe culture under capitalism participate in the economy they describe” (xi). This formulation that regards co-optation as an unavoidable ontological reality takes certain positions in Foucault’s corpus and combines them with a preexisting preoccupation with state power. Taking Foucault’s dictum that there is no “outside” to power, the New Historicism reads this as a case of an inevitable appropriation of the energies of the margins that will be diluted through contact with a homogenizing power. Gerald Graff articulates the specific dynamics of this process later in Veeser’s collection, explaining that new historicism outlines how “societies exert control over their subjects not just by imposing constraints on them but by predetermining the ways they attempt to rebel against those constraints, by co-opting their strategies of dissent” (168-169). What Graff’s cogent formulation reveals is the degree to which “co-optation”
assumes a starting point of authenticity that is then corrupted (typically unknowingly). Frank Lentricchia’s analysis later in the volume further underlines the degree to which Foucault is seized by the New Historicists and fashioned into a thinker of an inescapable totalitarian power. He writes that “Greenblatt’s account of the ‘I,’ like Foucault’s, will dramatize its entrapment in a totalitarian narrative coincidental with the emergence of the modern world as dystopian fruition” (235). As Lentricchia’s subsequent sentence makes explicit, Foucault is equated to an updated version of the paranoid musings found in George Orwell’s 1984. While I find Lentricchia’s assessment compelling in its generalities, his conflation of Foucault and Greenblatt remains problematic.

In the first volume of The History of Sexuality, Foucault dispels this version of power relations that Lentricchia ascribes to him. He writes that “[p]ower is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere” (93). He clarifies the point: “Should it be said that one is always ‘inside’ power, there is no ‘escaping’ it, there is no absolute outside where it is concerned…[that] power is the ruse of history, always emerging the winner?” (95). Foucault clearly rejects this formulation. Indeed, his analysis of power, which he insists cannot be reduced to an “institution” or “structure,” seems to be interested in moving beyond the sovereign model of the state to a distributed form of relations that cannot be directly tied back to a central authority. Meanwhile, during his analysis of the Panopticon in Discipline and Punish, he anticipates Lentricchia’s critique a decade later. Against the New Historicists (and their critics) who see it as the pinnacle of the totalitarian state, Foucault stresses that it should not be understood as a “dream building” but instead as “the diagram of a mechanism of power reduced to its ideal form” (205). The Panopticon should not be taken as a general metaphor for diagnosing the social world at large but instead a particular apparatus that works in varying
degrees of intensity in localized sites. But it is difficult to read Foucault in this manner if one begins with certain assumptions about the centrality of the state as the dominant form of power in the contemporary world.

At this point, I’d like to adopt a signature move from New Historicism to further contextualize that critical camp’s emergence in literary criticism. As Gallagher and Greenblatt make clear in *Practicing the New Historicism*, one of the chief gestures in their writing involves incorporating literary works that had been previously overlooked and crowning them as “major achievements” (10). While Gallagher and Greenblatt’s admit that their initial interest may have resided in canonical figures, these new voices make clear that the literary “[a]chievements that have seemed like entirely isolated monuments are disclosed to have a more complex interrelation with other texts by ‘minor’ authors’” (10). By their account, their critical work “helps raise questions about originality in art and about the status of ‘genius’ as an explanatory term, along with the status of the distinction between ‘major’ and ‘minor’” (10). What if this same maneuver were applied to critical texts as well as literary texts? Using their own interpretive protocols, one of the first steps toward properly understanding the New Historicism (and the social turn within English Studies more broadly) would involve putting its central documents in conversation with less prestigious work circulating within the same general economy of written material. Although Gallagher and Greenblatt problematize the notion of genius that attaches itself to the traditional canonical text, their very problematization often receives the same sort of breathless deferential treatment afforded these quasi-divine writings. “New Historicism” has, in many real ways, been canonized much like the writing their criticism works against reifying. What might Gallagher and Greenblatt, paragons of elite coastal universities, and their work look like when situated next
to less distinguished criticism composed in the American heartland and rustbelt during the same period?

II.

Within English Studies, James Berlin’s work emerged at the same time as the New Historicism and helps complicate the standard narrative of the discipline. Take this programmatic statement about the direction of the discipline:

“Rather than organizing its activities around the preservation and maintenance of a sacred canon of literary texts, it would focus on the production, distribution, exchange, and reception of textuality, in general and specific cases, both in the past and present. English studies would thus explore the role of signifying practices in the ongoing life of societies—stated more specifically, in their relations to economic, social, political, and cultural arrangements” (113)

While one might be tempted, given the preceding analysis, to attribute this statement to Gallagher or Greenblatt, it actually can be found in Berlin’s *Rhetorics, Poetics, and Cultures*. Although this work was not published until 1996, two years after Berlin’s untimely death, it can be considered a summation of work that Berlin had been producing since the early 1980s.

Although his graduate work at the University of Michigan focused on Victorian literature, Berlin’s professional research agenda focused on the history of rhetorical education in American universities and rhetoric’s role in contemporary debates in college curricula. Beginning with 1982’s *College English* article “Contemporary Composition: The Major Pedagogical Theories” and extending through his major publications, 1984’s *Writing Instruction in Nineteenth-Century American Colleges* and 1987’s *Rhetoric and Reality: Writing Instruction in American Colleges, 1900-1985*, Berlin sounds a refrain that shares much with someone like Greenblatt, whose major
pieces of New Historicism, 1980’s *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* and 1988’s *Shakespearean Negotiations*, bookended the same decade.

Much like the New Historicists, Berlin draws upon Foucault to anchor his project, and while his reading of Foucault is split between the philosopher’s “cartographic” and “archival” dimensions, his work ultimately emphasizes the latter features. In the introduction to *Rhetoric and Reality*, Berlin counts Foucault, along with Kenneth Burke and Hayden White, as his main theoretical inspirations. Berlin’s most extensive treatment of Foucault can be found in *Rhetorics, Poetics, and Cultures*, where he characterizes Foucault and Jean François Lyotard as “the two most conspicuous figures” in the challenge against “Enlightenment claims for the power of reason in arriving at universal truths” (66). From Berlin’s perspective, Foucault offers a version of history that eschews any “confidence in subjects as completely free makers of history and in reason as the principle undergirding human action” (66). His description of Foucault’s project as a documentation of how individuals serve as “instruments of impersonal institutions” (67) hints that he may be more invested in a structural, “cartographic” approach than an “archival” one. Yet in the next breath, Berlin swerves away from the implications of these insights. He claims that Foucault “is particularly interested in exploring those historical events that represent resistance to the dominant power-knowledge formations, stories of the victims of history that have been ignored. Here the coherent narratives of conventional histories are especially repudiated” (67). The rest of his work seems informed by this final assessment, enlisting Foucault to undermine “dominant power-knowledge formations” like the “objective rhetoric” of current-traditional pedagogies that cast their own interested perspectives as universal truths.

Indeed, Berlin mobilizes those threads within Foucault’s work that contribute to the promotion of a broad social democratic movement. Berlin’s particular formation of Foucault can
be pinpointed more easily if we look to the main source through which he understands Foucault: Göran Therborn’s *The Ideology of Power and the Power of Ideology*. Berlin explains in “Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Class” that Therborn’s analysis insightfully weaves together the strengths of both Althusser and Foucault while discarding their weaknesses. Berlin finds Therborn’s reading of Althusser attractive because it rejects the claims of scientific objectivity of Marxism found throughout his work. He agrees with Therborn that it is not a choice “between scientific truth and ideology, but between competing ideologies, competing discursive interpretations” (478). Meanwhile, Therborn adopts Foucault’s analysis of the “micropolitics of power” without having to situate subjects “within a seamless web of inescapable, wholly determinative power relations.” As a result, “power can be identified and resisted in a meaningful way” (478). In Berlin’s endorsement of Therborn and his specific deployment of Foucault, we hear echoes of Lentricchia’s dismissal of New Historicism and Foucault as a totalitarian cage that allows no room for resistance. Refusing to discard him entirely, however, Berlin offers a reparative reading of Foucault. The opening pages of “Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Class” reveal that this reparative reading treats Foucault as a supplement to Althusser, a way of allowing the ideology of state apparatuses to infiltrate everyday language and activities.

If Berlin actualizes the “archival” dimensions of Foucault’s thought at the thematic level in his work, he actualizes the “cartographic” features at the formal or methodological level. Departing from the New Historicists, his conception of history writing unabashedlyforegrounds its unavoidably “presentist” orientation. In the introduction to *Rhetoric and Reality*, Berlin responds to Robert Connors’ objections that his first book failed to be an objective account of writing instruction in American colleges in the nineteenth century. Berlin denies Connors’
assumption “that it is possible to locate a neutral space, a position from which one can act as an unbiased observer in order to record a transcendental object, the historical thing-in-itself” (17). Rather than simply rehearsing the failure to seize the past in all its radical alterity like the New Historicists, Berlin foregrounds his limited perspective and thereby provides an alternative rationale for conducting historical research. As he explains in the opening moments of “Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Class,” his surveys of rhetorical education in American universities are meant to intervene in the present moment. The competing rhetorical approaches to textual consumption and production that he outlines—his taxonomy comprises objective rhetoric, subjectivist rhetoric, and transactional (later called social-epistemic) rhetoric—are not objective phenomenon but provisional categories meant to facilitate a practical agenda. If Berlin’s disciplinary histories trace the fates of these three different modes of rhetoric, Berlin does not hesitate to announce that his narrative is motivated by a desire to promote social-epistemic rhetoric. While all three rhetorics operate at any given moment in history, one tends to be dominant (typically, it has been objective rhetoric), and Berlin envisions his narrative as a way of mapping the present moment and providing a justification for endorsing social-epistemic rhetoric. Berlin admits that he is “arguing from ideology” and that his support of social-epistemic rhetoric “provides the ground of my critique of its alternatives” (478).

If Berlin’s histories are deliberately practical analyses meant to inspire change in the present, one feature of these works that warrants further exploration is Berlin’s conceptualization of contemporary literary studies. In Rhetorics, Poetics, and Cultures, Berlin argues “English studies was founded on a set of hierarchical binary oppositions in which literary texts were given an idealized status approaching the sacred” (xiv). To be sure, this characterization works fairly well in terms of assessing critical conceptions of the literary work earlier in the century. Several
pages later, Berlin maintains that these oppositions still adhere in the present moment: “all that is
important and central in the study of discourse falls within the domain of literary texts and all
that is unimportant and marginal falls within the realm of rhetoric” (3). But as my previous
analysis of Gallagher and Greenblatt illustrated, literary studies had already made internal steps
toward problematizing the sacredness of the literary text and placing it on the same social plane
as other texts. When Berlin insists that “workers in rhetoric…find themselves aligned with
department colleagues in literary theory and cultural studies” in “challenging the dominant
hierarchies of texts and tasks in the discipline” (xvi) he posits fairly clear separations between
rhetoric, literary studies, and theory/cultural studies. In doing so, however, Berlin seems to
overlook the degree to which theory had been integrated into the everyday workings of literary
studies. Berlin wants rhetoric and theory to join forces against the worst tendencies in literary
studies, but his proposal overlooks an emerging consensus throughout the discourse. Rather than
point out the inaccuracy of Berlin’s claim, I suggest we instead understand the statement as a
savvy tactical move.

We might understand Berlin’s decision as a way of situating the emerging discourse of
Rhetoric and Composition as a marginalized discourse warranting closer attention. If the “social
turn” in English studies was generally oriented around recognizing and incorporating the
marginal and the different, Rhetoric and Composition could strengthen the case for greater
visibility and influence in English Studies by positioning itself as a marginal and different entity.
Rhetoric and Composition, which was still in a position of defining itself as a field and
consolidating its strengths, drew upon fundamental maneuvers from the social movements of the
1960s to lend an additional degree of importance or authority to the work that was being
generated during this time. Berlin’s decision to cast Rhetoric and Composition in this light is less
It is surprising when we learn that his books are among the first monographs of the field. Although a few important full-length books on composition (most notably Janet Emig’s *The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders* and Mina Shaughnessy’s *Errors and Expectations*) had been published in the 1970s, it was not until early in the following decade that the field began producing scholarly monographs en masse. Scanning through the book review section of *College Composition and Communication* reveals a decisive shift in the early 1980s from solely reviewing composition textbooks to mostly reviewing scholarly monographs on writing and rhetoric. Southern Illinois University Press’s series “Studies in Writing and Rhetoric,” which began in 1984 with five titles including Berlin’s *Writing Instruction in Nineteenth-Century Colleges*, marks the beginning of a concerted effort to showcase innovative work in the burgeoning field. In order to acquire credibility and cultural capital to improve its standing in the discipline, this discourse had to fortify its foundations. The most obvious way Rhetoric and Composition accomplished this goal was by connecting itself to rhetoric, a tradition dating back to the ancient Greeks (far longer than any literary tradition). But it also did so by asserting that the field had already long been in existence and had simply been overlooked. At some level, the field required a quickly evaporating version of literary studies (one oriented around sacred texts) as a foil to solidify its own standing.

As a result, histories of composition studies proliferated during this period and have become a staple of the discourse. One of the field’s most important early composition historians, Robert J. Connors offers a compelling explanation of this trend. Indeed, in addition to producing specific analyses of particular moments and movements within the history of composition studies, Connors should be counted as one of the field’s earliest thinkers on the value of writing history for the field of Rhetoric and Composition. In his essay “Composition History and
Disciplinarity,” he documents the growth of historical accounts of Rhetoric and Composition, including the groundbreaking work of Kate Adams, Jim Berlin, Sharon Crowley, Nan Johnson, Tom Miller, David Russell, and Bill Woods. While Connors claims that many of these figures wrote histories “simply because they were fascinated by it” (411) he also asserts that “we were also writing history in order to create ourselves as members of a discipline…[and] unify it” (412). Connors clarifies this position in the essay “Dreams and Play: Historical Method and Methodology,” declaring that the act of writing history is “the telling of stories about the tribe that make the tribe real” (234). From his perspective, “the recovery of composition history” is “so important” because in “telling the stories of our fathers and our mothers…we are legitimating ourselves through legitimating them” (234).

The double meaning in the following book titles by specialists in Rhetoric and Composition confirms Connors’ claims: *Rhetoric at the Margins*, *Writing from the Margins*, and *Writing on the Margins*. Beyond the obvious fact that the concept of marginality assumes a prominent role in the discourse, these titles all suggest the close connection forged between the subject matter being analyzed and the investigator conducting the analysis. In the case of the first book, David Gold’s *Rhetoric at the Margins*, which explores writing instruction at three small colleges during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the title is meant to refer to the instructional practices at schools that serve minorities who are marginalized both from society at large and from “elite” educational institutions (Gold’s book examines one African American college, a women’s college, and a normal college for working-class students). But the title might also be read as a description of the author of said analyses—the field of Rhetoric and Composition is “at the margins” of English Studies. An implicit connection is made between unearthing the lost voices of the past and the field’s current disciplinary status. By documenting
marginalized figures and incorporating them into the growing history of Rhetoric and Composition, not only will these historical figures escape their marginalized position. Additionally, the discourse that has brought these figures to light will also assume a more centralized role within English Studies insofar as the account will further solidify Rhetoric and Composition’s own history, thereby granting it more legitimacy as an academic area of interest.

A similar dynamic operates in a title like Jessica Enoch’s *Refiguring Rhetorical Education*. In documenting the teaching practices of female instructors of African Americans, Native Americans, and Chicano/a Students from 1865-1911, Enoch hopes to bring to light the innovative teaching practices of neglected marginal figures from the past. She also envisions her work as a way of contributing to current efforts “to revitalize rhetorical education in the twenty-first century” (11). In refiguring the rhetorical educational practices of the past, Enoch aims to simultaneously refigure the status of Rhetoric and Composition today. The discipline’s strategy might best be encapsulated in the title of Sheryl Fontaine and Susan Hunter’s 1993 edited collection *Writing Ourselves into the Story: Unheard Voices from Composition Studies*.

In fact, the field is so united around the concept of marginalization that one might see the competing modes of historiography in composition studies as simply two sides to the same coin. In his essay “Writing the History of Our Discipline,” Connors maintains that revisionist historiography in Rhetoric and Composition has divided into two competing camps: “those who seek to promote a specific program or perspective, and those who point out the incompleteness, potential for totalization, or naivete of any specific program or perspective” (216). Connors counts Sharon Crowley, Jan Swearingen, James Berlin, and Wallace Douglas in the first group and Victor Vitanza, John Schilb, and Susan Jarratt in the second group. Although certain emphases and values obviously separate these groups, closer inspection suggests that they share
an underlying foundation. If the first group engages in “recovering heretofore marginal figures in rhetorical history” (216) while the second group problematize the act of writing history by showing “the undecidability of meaning in texts” (217), both parties seem equally committed to challenging a notion of totalization. While this goal is made more explicit in the latter camp, particularly in the work of Vitanza, the former camp’s focus on marginalized figures, while making objective claims, does so in the service of overturning the existing “grand narratives” of English Studies that exclude composition. So long as first group’s recovery of marginalized figures remains an ongoing process that continually revises its own insights, it can be considered to largely conform to the second group. In this respect, beneath the seeming antagonism among its various practitioners, the historians share an implicit attachment to marginalization that orients their various research investigations.

Examining Rhetoric and Composition’s emphasis on marginalization serves as a useful way of exploring tensions that the field has never been able to escape. Wanting to achieve the status of a respected area of study, Rhetoric and Composition has often had to indulge in the qualities and practices that it finds most problematic. Connors’ ambivalence about the growing success of Rhetoric and Composition as an area of research is symptomatic of a fundamental tension structuring the field: “I know I am not the only one…who has viewed the growing success and status—what I think of as the ‘MLA-ization’—of the field with strongly conflicted feelings. We entered composition work out of a deep dissatisfaction with the fatuity of overly specialized and theoretical literary studies—but we brought more baggage from that world than we meant to” (420). Against Connors, who seems to regard this “MLA-ization” as an unfortunate accident that could have been avoided with more vigilance, I would argue that the turn toward specialization and theorization is a necessary condition for the field to emerge and gain respect at
all, since some form of theoretical problematization is what founds a research area in the first
place. The field’s numerous research publications lamenting the academy’s focus on research
underscores this point (Spellmeyer’s article from my introduction serves as a paradigmatic
eexample). While making compelling arguments that teaching and service constitute important
forms of intellectual work that should be counted toward tenure and promotion, this writing
cannot escape its own formal character—that is, as scholarly research—that undermines some of
its critical thrust.

A related tension organizes the field’s commitment to a notion of politics that uses the
concepts of recognition and respect as a way to assess all structural issues. By necessity, it has to
lean toward the “archival” rather than the “cartographic.” This is not the fault of any of its
individual practitioners so much as it is an indication of the contradictions governing the
discourse. At some level, Rhetoric and Composition would be remarkably well positioned to
address the structural issues that create exploitative labor practices since it confronts them more
directly than literary studies. However, it has tended to interpret this exploitation in terms of
respect and recognition (a matter of persuading a powerful and homogenous center to appreciate
different or marginal practices like itself) because the discourse of Rhetoric and Composition is
actually distinct from those suffering from structural inequalities. In other words, the demand for
“respect” and “recognition” has been an overriding concern in the vast majority of scholarship in
Rhetoric and Composition since that is the terrain on which it can justify the study of writing as a
research agenda to its colleagues in the rest of the department. According to this argument,
rhetoric and writing are not respected as much as literary studies and the way to end the
exploitative labor seen in composition teaching is to foreground the intellectual depth of research
in this area. Understanding politics largely in terms of inclusion and exclusion, Rhetoric and
Composition argues that it has been excluded because it is different from literary studies and only by highlighting its unique contributions to intellectual study will the exploitation of its practitioners be addressed. Unfortunately, Rhetoric and Composition’s desire to be represented and respected as a field of intellectual inquiry conflicts with its capacity to illuminate the structural labor inequalities that plague the discipline. Merely “respecting” the research discourse that investigates writing practices will not automatically lead to equality among all those who teach in an English Department. Similarly, the exploitation of cheap adjunct labor cannot be directly connected to issues of recognition and respect, since merely respecting the composition teacher (and his or her students) will not cleanly translate into the elimination of their exploitation.

I would like to stress here that I am generalizing about the field. There are a significant number of critics who have articulated a similar version of what I’m advancing. But it bears repeating that a rights-based politics of recognition always presents itself as an attractive option for diagnosing the ills plaguing Rhetoric and Composition, even amongst those who at some level recognize its limitations. Take, for instance, Joseph Harris’ article “Meet the New Boss, Same as the Old Boss: Class Consciousness in Composition,” published in College Composition and Communication in 2000. Here, he cogently points out that attention is usually shifted “away from present and real labor practices—who does what work for what pay—and toward questions about the potential disciplinary status of composition” (56). From his perspective, “we need to distinguish between questions of disciplinary status and working conditions,” recognizing that “the two issues are connected but not identical” (57). But while he distinguishes between these two concerns, he quietly imports useful concepts from one arena in order to fix the other, arguing that “what teachers want” in addition to reasonable pay and work conditions is “to be treated
with respect as colleagues” (57). Responding to this assertion, Marc Bosquet corrects Harris by explaining that “[w]hat a large sector of composition labor… ‘really wants,’ is not to be ‘treated… as colleagues,’ but instead to be colleagues” (182). The term that Bosquet excises from his quotation of Harris—“respect”—actually provides the key for approaching some substantial issues within the political imaginary in contemporary composition studies.

III.

The previous section adopted a fundamental gesture of the New Historicism to contextualize the New Historicism itself, situating the work of Gallagher and Greenblatt by putting it in dialogue with the work of James Berlin and other historians of composition. This section extends that gesture further. As Gallagher and Greenblatt explain, New Historicism does not simply bring noncanonical literary works into conversation with canonical literary works; it also incorporates texts that would not be considered literary. Novels, poems, and plays can only be fully understood if they are placed alongside legal documents, business plans, and other decidedly non-literary texts. Retaining the loose analogy between literary works and critical works, my discussion of the social turn in English Studies should, in following the spirit of the New Historicism, also examine writing that would not be considered critical scholarship but that nevertheless circulates within the same network of textual artifacts and plays a decisive role on how we interpret these critical texts. Speaking more concretely, I explore how the scholarship of the social turn in English Studies should not be separated from broader changes in the university during this period and the administrative discourse that has accompanied these changes.

Donna Strickland’s 2011 *The Managerial Unconscious in the History of Composition Studies*, a revisionary history of the field of Rhetoric and Composition, serves as a useful starting point for examining the interaction between “critical” and “non-critical” texts since her analysis
addresses the intersection of disciplinary scholarship with institutional demands. Detailing pivotal moments in Rhetoric and Composition’s institutional development, most notably the founding of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) in 1949 and the establishment of the Council of Writing Program Administrators (WPA) in 1977, Strickland asserts that historians of the field have not fully appreciated the importance of these professional organizations. From her perspective, these organizations reveal that composition specialists have long been governed by a managerial impulse. While most (if not all) English professors split their time among research, teaching, and administrative duties, Strickland’s analysis stresses that composition specialists’ research and teaching interests have a unique relationship with these administrative tasks. Although they freely teach their own courses and conduct research about liberatory pedagogical strategies, they also impose orders on an underclass of precarious untenured adjunct instructors. The gap between its professed values and its daily administrative practices produces a schizophrenic experience for many working in the field. As Strickland explains, “[t]o profess composition…is to occupy a position unlike most other professors of English” insofar as it “is to study one thing and to do quite another” (2). Strickland wisely notes how the “social turn” in the 1980s and 1990s—her primary target is none other than James Berlin—which advanced a liberatory pedagogy valorizing equality and democratic participation, possesses an ironic subtext when put in dialogue with the increasing hierarchical bureaucratization of the labor force teaching this material. Rhetoric and Composition is split between widespread espousals of democracy as a value and its increasing scarcity as an actual practice in the field.

Strickland’s analysis suggests that this gap is being closed, but not in a way that most would consider desirable. Scholarship in Rhetoric and Composition is becoming increasingly
organized according to these administrative demands—or, perhaps more appropriately, administrative strategizing has begun to count as a form of scholarship—thereby dissolving the once sturdy boundaries between these two spheres. The founding of the WPA in 1977 marks the period when scholarship with a decidedly administrative tenor would assume a legitimate position within the institution. Although the founding of the CCCC in 1949 was designed to support composition professionals, most of the research produced by these scholars was a step removed from the administrative duties they were expected to perform. As Strickland points out, “what seems surprising is that composition professionals felt, some twenty-five years after the founding of the CCCC, the need for a new organization devoted exclusively to administration.” After all, as her earlier analysis revealed, “the CCCC itself had come into being to meet the needs of composition professionals, which more often than not meant administrators rather than simply teachers” (76). The founding of both the WPA and its journal *WPA: Writing Program Administration* signal a shift whereby one’s research agenda could explicitly focus (at least in part) on one’s administrative responsibilities. Not only a blurring of the boundaries between scholarship and administration, the emergence of what we might call “administrative scholarship” hints at a shift in priority away from scholarship and toward administration. Rather than being conducted for its own sake, scholarship is conducted in the service of more efficient administrative service. While admittedly a small fraction of the scholarship produced within English Studies, “administrative scholarship” has continued to grow, evident in the emergence of scholarship on the assessment of college writing.

Published only a month after *The Managerial Unconscious*, Benjamin Ginsberg’s 2011 *The Fall of the Faculty* not only provides a compelling narrative of the sweeping changes to higher education over the past several decades but also includes a helpful account of the
discursive regime that has emerged to facilitate this transformation. His tale recounts the slow transfer of power in the university away from the faculty and into the hands of a ballooning administration. As Ginsberg points out, while the growth of full-time faculty has barely kept pace with the growth of the student population, administrative positions have increased by over eighty percent (and administrative staff positions have increased by 240%). While the faculty-to-student ratio has remained basically unchanged between 1975 and 2005, the administrator-to-student ratio has shrunk drastically: from 1 administrator for every 84 students to 1 administrator for every 68 students. Ginsberg writes that “as colleges and universities had more money to spend they chose not to spend it on expanding their instructional resources, i.e., faculty. They chose, instead, to enhance their administrative and staff resources” (26-27). From his perspective, the growth in university administration has led to a decline in the power of the faculty to influence policy and make decisions. An “army of professional staffers” has become “the bulwark of administrative power in the contemporary university”; before they created this army, “administrators were forced to rely on the cooperation of the faculty to carry out tasks ranging from admissions through planning” (25).

The administrative takeover of higher education has stifled diversity in two important ways. Most obviously, it has centralized decision-making and transformed the faculty into employees fulfilling the whims of their administrative superiors. Furthermore, the actual policy initiatives inaugurated by administrations have a strikingly similar feel regardless of the institution. As Ginsberg explains, professors tend to “advance their careers by advancing ideas different from and superior to those of their professional colleagues. The same is most definitely not true of administrators. In my four decades in the academy I have seldom heard an administrator voice an idea that diverged much from those concurrently being articulated by
virtually every other administrator. Imitation seems to be the norm in the world of higher education administration” (135). Sometimes this imitation borders on outright plagiarism, and Ginsberg’s analysis of contemporary universities’ “strategic plans” illustrates a striking case of this problem. “Similar phrases and paragraphs can be found in many plans,” Ginsberg explains, describing a case where the chancellor of Southern Illinois University was forced to resign when it was discovered that he had copied portions of Texas A&M University’s strategic plan. Ironically enough, administrative plagiarism is very common in “diversity planning” documents. Johns Hopkins’ 2008 “Commission on Equity, Civility, and Respect” ultimately generated policy recommendations “remarkably similar in character” to those made by the University of Virginia several years before (113). There is a lack of diversity when it comes to statements about diversity within the administrative ranks of the university.

In *The University in Ruins*, Bill Readings proposes an alternative to this top-heavy managerial form. In the eighth chapter of the book, Readings explains that he wants to articulate a new function for the University, one distinct from “the vast majority of those who” articulate “either nostalgic calls for a return to the Humboldtian ideals of modular community and social functioning, or technocratic demands that the University embrace its corporate identity and become more productive, more efficient” (125). Rejecting both of these options, Readings argues that the University should become a site where knowledge is produced and circulated without being tied to a “notion of identity or unity” (127). He declares that “we should seek to turn the deferentialization that is characteristic of the posthistorical University to good advantage. That is to say, we should try to think what it may mean to have a University that has no idea, that does not derive its name from an etymological confusion of unity and universality” (122). From his perspective, the University must be a place where questions are never settled conclusively but
are instead constantly discussed and reassessed. The question of value should always be central to the University, particularly the value of the University itself. Readings envisions a University where those in it “have to speak amongst themselves and to others in terms that acknowledge the complexity of the problem of quality” (132). Any judgment about the purpose or value of the university must itself be judged (and this judgment must be judged in turn, ad infinitum), such that any metrics used to evaluate performance will always remain provisional tools at best. Readings detests the idea that a completely “objective” metric could ever be devised that would settle the question of value once and for all, noting that a huge gap exists between “accounting” and “accountability.”

Readings’ analysis shares much with the work of Alain Badiou, who in *Manifesto for Philosophy* makes an impassioned plea for the practice of philosophy to root itself in dissensus. Badiou argues that philosophical thinking arrives at knowledge through four distinct and incompatible “truth procedures”: poetry, politics, math, and love. Each of these procedures arrives at knowledge through a different set of questions that cannot be reduced to the other three. Arguing that philosophy requires all four truth procedures in order to remain vibrant, Badiou warns that often one of these truth procedures takes precedence over the others so that philosophy becomes completely tethered to a single form of inquiry. He calls this situation a “suture” and writes that “[p]hilosophy is placed in suspension every time it presents itself as being sutured to one of its conditions” (61). Badiou regards much of twentieth-century philosophical thought as being sutured to the poetic truth procedure, most evident in the work of Martin Heidegger and his followers. Badiou’s “manifesto” for philosophy amounts to “desuturing” it from the poetic truth procedure so that it can reconnect once again to politics, math, and love. Although Badiou may undercut his own argument by ultimately calling simply
for a new suture for philosophy—this time math rather than poetry—the basic model and vocabulary that he provides are enormously helpful in thinking through a site rooted in perpetual dissensus.

Indeed, Readings’ notion of the university as “a locus of dissensus” resonates strongly with Badiou’s conceptual schema insofar as we replace “philosophy” with the “University.” As Readings explains, the contemporary University is composed of three distinct functions: research, teaching, and administration. From his perspective, the University of Excellence is the name for a University governed by what we might call an “administrative suture.” As Readings explains, “the University of Excellence is one in which a general principle of administration replaces the dialectic of teaching and research, so that teaching and research, as aspects of professional life, are subsumed under administration” (125). The logic of accounting that underwrites the administrative suture shapes the practices of both teaching and research. For instance, student evaluations of courses typically work according to a fixed scale that makes the question of “excellent teaching” a matter of straightforward calculation. Questions like “did the professor respect the syllabus?” and even broader ones like “did you think this was a good course?” contain a number a problematic assumptions. Concerning the first question, for instance, Readings wonders whether a course can be judged poorly if the instructor departs from the syllabus after realizing its material “seems pitched at the wrong level for the class” (131). Concerning the second question, Readings asks us to doubt “whether student pleasure is the absolute criterion of value” since successful “learning may be a painful experience” in certain circumstances (131). Likewise, the value of faculty research ends up being determined by rather inflexible scales that are ultimately decided and monitored by a centralized administration.
Readings doesn’t simply want to replace one suture with another (something that Badiou’s analysis lacks). Later in the book, he sees through calls to strike down elitist professors and thereby make education more accessible and egalitarian as a simple reversal of the status quo: “[t]o mount an attack on the professors’ authority, on the professor as the transcendent subject of the educational process, must not simply be to seek to replace the professor by the student” (163). Readings emphasizes that the main focus should be resistance to closure within the university, a fate that arises whenever one of the groups of constituents of the university seizes enough authority to ignore the others. Readings imagines a scenario where all three major stakeholders in the university—students, professors, and administrators—are all constantly held accountable for both the valuations of their own practices as well as their valuations of the others’ practices (and the valuations of these valuations). He argues that students, rather than filling out a predetermined course evaluations at the end of the semester, should be asked to produce their own criteria for evaluating the course as well as offering a justification for said criteria. University administrators should not simply collect and synthesize these judgments but also be required to produce evaluations themselves, crafting and defending criteria to judge the quality of the university instead of composing “banal and cliché-ridden mission statements…and then quantify[ing] how far they have lived up to them” (133). Readings admits that “this will mean a lot of work for University presidents” but that these forms of “evaluation, judgment and self-questioning are the real business of the University” (133).

In this respect, Readings clearly differs from Ginsberg, who concludes *The Fall of the Faculty* by simply replacing an administrative suture with a faculty one. He maintains that the university should be run according to the vision of the faculty; students and administrators should be beholden to the decisions made by this informed and powerful sector of the university.
Ginsberg totally resists the shaping of curriculum based on student concerns or interests: “few students actually arrive on campus with preferences that should be taken seriously” (171). From his perspective, “professors quite reasonably believe that they are better qualified than students to decide what the latter should learn” (171). At first blush, Ginsberg’s arguments are difficult not to endorse, since they provide a necessary antidote to the consumer model of education that has transformed higher education in recent years into largely “employment or career preparation” with “a hefty dollop of clubs, sports, and other activities” (171). At the same time, however, Ginsberg’s doubling down on faculty autonomy is problematic when one recalls that the student movements of the 1960s initiated the push for diversity within the curriculum. Replacing one form of hierarchical power with another does not fix the problem since it is unchecked power in itself that leads to unnecessary growth, waste, and fraud. The university needs (and thrives on) a series of checks and balances among the students, faculty, and administrators, all of whom approach the university from unique perspectives that are valuable but limited (of course, Ginsberg’s emphasis on the faculty regaining control of the university is premised on the idea that the faculty will become indistinguishable from the administration as they once were, as those multiple functions will be occupied by individuals rather than reified into discrete positions without any overlap (the full-time administrator with no research agenda as a professor)).

The concept of the suture can also be usefully deployed at the disciplinary level. If the university writ large involves a struggle among faculty, students, and administrators for supremacy, the discipline reformulates this contest in terms of how research, teaching, and administration are prioritized. Much like the University in its entirety, departments should ideally avoid privileging one of these practices at the expense of the others. In reality, of course, as numerous complaints from both inside and outside the university have made clear, research is
championed over the other two functions, effectively producing a “research suture” within departments to accompany the “administrative suture” of the university more generally. While it remains up for debate whether the first suture helped to produce the latter, or vice versa—in all likelihood, they were co-constitutive—I am more concerned with the effects produced when these two sutures converge. More specifically, I argue that Rhetoric and Composition as a discourse should be understood as an outcome of the confrontation of the research and administrative sutures. As Strickland’s analysis in *The Managerial Unconscious* makes clear, tenure-track positions within Rhetoric and Composition were largely a response to the growing need for administrative and managerial work within the department, namely the supervision of adjunct labor. If managerial tasks constituted the primary purpose for these new hires, they would not lessen the demand to publish that typically accompanies tenure-track positions.

Composition scholarship is therefore constantly trying to reconcile the demand to publish with high volumes of administrative work, thereby producing a number of unusual research agendas. On the one hand, we have work like the aforementioned “administrative scholarship,” which could be interpreted as largely indistinguishable from bureaucratic documents like strategic planning or progress report since it is so closely related to the daily workings of the department. On the other hand, we have scholarship seeking to problematize the borders separating department service from intellectual work. If Rhetoric and Composition has historically been undervalued because it focuses more on teaching and administration than on research, some of its specialists have sought to correct this imbalance by using their research as a means of outlining how administrative duties should be understood as a form of intellectual work and thereby be reevaluated more favorably for tenure and promotion. Take, for instance, Shirley K. Rose and Irwin Wesier’s twin volumes *The Writing Program Administrator as Researcher*
(1999) and The Writing Program Administrator as Theorist (2002) or Gary A. Olson’s edited collection Rhetoric and Composition as Intellectual Work (2002). While this scholarship has thoughtfully aimed to reconfigure the borders that separate research, teaching, and administration, this work has done little to slow the publish-or-perish model that makes a substantial research agenda a high priority for tenured faculty in Rhetoric and Composition. In fact, it serves as the fiercest articulation of the stranglehold of the “research suture” insofar as its existence undermines its explicitly stated goals—that is, it participates in the publish-or-perish model despite its attempt to think outside its logic. I would like to argue that the social turn within English Studies, particularly the version advanced within Rhetoric and Composition, should also be read by situating it along this uneasy border between a department’s “research suture” and the university’s “administrative suture.” The drive to make composition studies more legitimate—and one of the ways that composition studies articulates its importance is by providing a more inclusive and accessible pedagogy that literary studies lacks—may necessitate an unintentional (and perhaps unavoidable) turn against the values that it most dearly cherishes.

One underlying theme throughout Ginsberg’s The Fall of the Faculty that warrants more attention is how administrative rhetoric has adopted commendable values and principles and deployed them for questionable ends. Ginsberg specifically emphasizes how the demand for diversity, part of the broader 1960s social movements, was taken up by administrators as a way to wrest power away from the faculty. ² “Administrators will always seek to use our principles against us,” Ginsberg warns, arguing that their efforts to do so “should be resisted even though administrators and some credulous colleagues will declare that such opposition indicates a lack of proper political commitment” (213). One specific phrase that demands further analysis is the

² For a broader account of how the energy of the 1960s social movements were incorporated into the university, see Ferguson.
phrase “outside the classroom,” which Ginsberg explains has become “an administrative mantra” in recent years (20). While administrators claim that attending college involves more than coursework and that engaging in extracurricular experiences plays an integral role in creating well rounded, fulfilled, and socially committed graduates, Ginsberg remains suspicious of these efforts and mocks the “event planning” training and other relatively trivial activities that administrators promote. From his perspective, “the phrase outside the classroom usually signals an effort by administrators to shift budgetary priorities from teaching, which the faculty controls, to other activities where…faculty claims of expertise are weaker and administrators have an opportunity to expand their bureaucratic domains” (12). Interestingly enough, however, conducting a brief genealogy of the phrase “outside the classroom” reveals that it actually originated in some ways within the classroom, beginning as a form of self-critique that was ultimately seized for drastically different purposes.

The word “classroom” initially operated as a synecdoche for the forms of disciplinary knowledge legitimized by the institution; the attempt to move “outside the classroom” involved questioning these existing disciplinary specializations. The turn to “local” and “minor” knowledge that helped to establish interdisciplinary programs like ethnic and women’s studies could be seen as an impulse to move “outside the classroom” insofar as these forms of knowledge had never held a place within higher education. Although this impulse to move “outside the classroom” may not have been initiated within the classroom, its effects were ultimately located there. In other words, while external pressure—“outside the classroom”—was required to make higher education more democratic by serving and studying previously ignored constituencies, the result of this external pressure was a transformation of a curriculum firmly situated within an existing institutional space. Using English Studies as an example, we can see
that the concept of the “classroom” can be traced to the literary canon, which necessarily
enshrines certain texts while discrediting others. A variety of forces converged to prompt a desire
to move beyond or outside this restricted territory to discover and include other literary works.
Reflecting on its practices, English Studies aimed to be more inclusive and expand the range of
texts that it circulated and analyzed. But this initial move beyond the classroom ultimately
became a return to it, since texts previously outside of the domain of the institution’s purview
would not simply play a role in transforming its curriculum but also in fortifying the institution
in which this curriculum was disseminated.

But the gesture to move “outside the classroom” was also taken more literally—that is, as
a challenge to the institution’s investment in existing educational strategies. Rather than
reforming higher education by adding or subtracting texts material in the classroom, it has
involved restructuring education in much more fundamental ways, beginning with the
modification of teaching practices and extending to the reconfiguration of the institution’s
relationship to the broader public. Rhetoric and Composition has played a pivotal role in
questioning traditional forms of classroom instruction. Some of these reforms have been
relatively minor, like its nearly ubiquitous emphasis on constructing a “student-centered
classroom.” But small changes like these are part of a much larger effort to rethink higher
education’s relationship to the public it serves. As Christian Weisser explains in his 2002 Moving
Beyond Academic Discourse: Composition Studies and the Public Sphere, the desire to transcend
disciplinary concerns so as to impact the social world more directly is a defining feature of
contemporary composition studies:

For many compositionists, the classroom—or, more specifically, the writing
course—has emerged as a microcosm of the public sphere, as our point of contact
with the ‘real’ world out there somewhere. This point of contact is something that distinguishes composition from many other academic disciplines; our close and personal connections with students differentiate our work from the ‘merely academic’ pursuits of our colleagues down the hall. If we believe that power is entrenched in discourse and that language is an instrumental tool in shaping knowledge and reality, we could, by extension, assume that the work that we do can have real implications in the world. (43)

The “colleagues down the hall” that Weisser gestures to are clearly those working in literary studies whose very subject matter, he would argue, presupposes and reinforces hierarchical social arrangements. From his perspective, traditional forms of teaching grant all authority to the instructor and none to the students, thereby ensuring the perpetuation of oppressive power relations both within the classroom and society more generally. Insulated academic discourse becomes a problem since it divorces itself from the pressing social matters that education is ostensibly meant to address. It is no surprise, then, that Rhetoric and Composition has made it a priority to transcend the limitation of the classroom altogether and connect to society directly. Rhetoric and Composition doesn’t want to prepare its students for entry into the real world following graduation but to make them interact and change the world while being educated. Weisser ventures that “‘public writing’ and ‘service-learning in composition’…might very well become the next dominant focal point around which the teaching of college writing is theorized and imagined” (42). Weisser notes that the turn toward the “the writing classroom and public discourse” must be understood as “the progeny” of radical democratic theories of pedagogy embraced in composition studies (26). Weisser’s analysis alludes to the fact that radical pedagogy was itself an effect of student-centered pedagogical practices that constituted an
attractive alternative to the traditional literature classroom: “[t]hese theories argued for greater attention to the writing that was being produced by students and less attention to the consumption of great works of literature” (11).

But if Rhetoric and Composition is firmly committed to achieving social justice through the promotion of a democratic politics, the discourse has also contributed to precisely the opposite effect in a sphere that it all too often overlooks—that is, the university itself. While Rhetoric and Composition has leveled the most full-throated defenses of democracy in the classroom, in the discipline of English Studies, and in society more generally, its efforts to produce these admirable goals have sometimes contributed to the increased hierarchization of the university. The phrase “outside the classroom” has been generally linked to both a revision of the canon within the traditional literary studies as well as to a mode of engaging students with discourses outside the university altogether, but its circulation within university administrative discourse constitutes a third space in between the micro-level of the classroom or department and the macro-level of “society” or “the real world” that must be acknowledged. In all three spheres, the metaphor of expansion or of transcending an existing set of constraints is configured as participating in a project of social justice. It would seem that the same phrase or concept unites the figures in these different areas. As Ginsberg’s experience suggests, however, the same phrase can be deployed for diametrically opposed ends:

“[M]any of the new administrators would like to redefine…the mission of the university to enhance the centrality of their own roles….This point was brought home to me when I served as one of the few faculty members of a search committee organized to find a new director of admissions. The dean who chaired the committee…informed us that while some people might think that the
admissions process entailed bringing students to the campus to work with the faculty, this was a mistaken notion. There were, he intoned, many ‘stakeholders’ in the admissions process who should have a voice in admissions decisions and the selection of an admissions director. When I inquired who these might be besides, of course, the coach of our often-national championship lacrosse team, he mentioned the counseling staff, the librarians, the residence hall staff, the dining hall staff, and many others. A good deal of education occurred ‘outside the classroom,’ he declared….I suggested that students did not come to Hopkins to work with our dining services personnel, our counselors, or even our distinguished administrators, but my objection was dismissed. This dean was determined to redefine the purposes of the university in terms that inflated the importance of his own place in it” (20).

Whereas the demand to move beyond the existing canon or academic discourse altogether was a part of an effort to be more inclusive and less hierarchical, the same phrase has been mobilized to weaken democratic and participatory formations and make them more hierarchical (although this done under the auspices of making the university more inclusive). If the move to go outside or beyond the existing set of texts or practices was used to strengthen the academic disciplines from within, this same gesture has been used to undermine the influence these same academic disciplines exert on the affairs of the university. This is not to denigrate all service learning or “outside the classroom” initiatives so much as it is to say that these practices may work against their explicitly stated goals if we recognize them functioning within multiple contexts or spaces simultaneously.
A different model is needed for understanding how these counterintuitive effects can be produced. The “archival” form of politics seems to subscribe to a “domino-theory” of social change. According to this model, if a small space like a classroom can be made democratic, that can create a ripple effect that will ultimately transform the university and the broader public into a more democratic space as well. Unfortunately, history has shown that the democratization of one space can actually contribute to the hierarchization of adjacent spaces (which can in turn lead to the de-democratization of that initial space). In the introduction to *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari offer an alternative understanding of how democratic and hierarchial formations interact. Here, they outline the differences between two competing models of organization: the hierarchical model of the tree (with its corresponding roots) and the non-hierarchical distributed model of the rhizome. Although it would be easy to envision these as two totally disparate and competing models in which one would have to choose sides, Deleuze and Guattari point out that “the root-tree and canal-rhizome are not two opposed models” (20). Instead, they co-constitute one another. If the tree “operates as a transcendent model and tracing,” it nevertheless “engenders its own escapes”; if the rhizome “operates as an immanent process that overturns the model and outlines a map,” it also “constitutes its own hierarchies” and “gives rise to a despotic channel” (20). As they explain, “[t]here are knots of arborescence in rhizomes, and rhizomatic offshoots in roots. Moreover, there are despotic formations of immanence and channelization specific to rhizomes, just as there are anarchic deformations in the transcendent system of trees, aerial roots, and subterranean stems” (20). For Deleuze and Guattari, one should attend to the general process that produces the interconnection between these two modes of organizing space, “a model that is perpetually in construction or collapsing” but nevertheless “prolonging itself, breaking off and starting up again” (20). Deleuze and
Guattari’s understanding of the relationship between hierarchial and rhizomatic formations suggests a more complex dynamic between democratic spaces both within and outside the university, since they challenge the belief that the democratization of a small space (like a classroom or university department) will serve as a launching pad for broader democratic uprisings in society more generally. In fact, their analysis points out that these democratizing movements can actually help to produce hierarchical formations in adjacent spaces.

*The Fall of the Faculty* provides a vivid example to illustrate how practices in one social space can produce unintended consequences in adjacent social spaces. At one point in the book, Ginsberg details how university administrations have increased their power through their relationships with various institutes and centers on campus, most notably race and gender studies programs. While admiring the commendable goals underwriting these programs, Ginsberg notes that the relatively low enrollments in these programs has led to its directors “constantly having to defend its share of the school’s budget against rival claimants with demonstrably more student need” (105). As a result, “Africana studies and similar programs [have] a stake in supporting the college presidents, provosts, or deans from whom it has received its largesse and on whose suffereance it depends” (105). He cites an infamous case at the Du Bois Institute at Harvard to support his argument. During his tenure as Harvard’s President, Larry Summers committed so many egregious administrative errors that the faculty called for his resignation. Henry Louis Gates was “seldom if ever” (106) critical of Summers, however, even though the President had been highly critical of Gates’ colleague Cornel West and precipitated West’s departure for Princeton. As Ginsberg explains, “despite Summers’s alleged mistreatment of an important black faculty member, the university’s president and the chair of Afro-American studies had negotiated a mutually satisfactory renewal of their previous accommodation” (106).
Although Ginsberg’s book does not explore this aspect of the incident, it is important to point out that both Cornel West and Henry Louis Gates are prominent public intellectuals who have sought to disseminate their work beyond the confines of the university. The creation of the Du Bois Institute, while situated within the university, should be understood as an extension of their work in public outreach; the Du Bois Institute’s website claims that the center aims “to increase public awareness and understanding of this vital field of study.” But if the Institute serves as a point within the university to enact positive change in society more broadly, we should also be attentive to the ways in which it can produce negative effects within the university that it never intended. The Institute should be understood as a nodal point operating simultaneously within the university and the general public. While the Institute has undoubtedly accomplished much important work in terms of raising awareness in the public consciousness surrounding issues of racial equality and social justice in the hope of producing a more democratic society, the hidden cost of achieving these goals has been to potentially make the space of the university less democratic by further shifting the balance of power toward the administration and away from the faculty.

Composition programs and their directors face these irresolvable problems on a more frequent basis than many other academics insofar as their work, which affects a wide swath of the university community, by necessity has more oversight and interaction with the university’s central administration. As Kenneth Bruffee articulated in an early editorial piece for the *WPA Newsletter* in 1978, there is a “fast-growing tendency in colleges and universities throughout the country to involve whole campuses in writing programs. In many institutions today, writing is no longer perceived as the exclusive province, responsibility, and tough luck of the English department….As a result, the director of the writing program at many schools has been
catapulted into a new, important, demanding, and highly visible position of leadership” (7-8). The same forms of dependency and symbiotic relationships that Ginsberg identifies between the Du Bois Institute and President Summers would be less avoidable for composition program directors because their work tends to extend beyond the confines of the English department, thereby necessitating a greater degree of assistance through non-departmental administrative units.

The close contact between university administration and Rhetoric and Composition can be rather easily teased out in the title of Emily Isaac’s “The Emergence of Centers for Writing Excellence,” published in the edited collection Before and After the Tutorial: Writing Centers and Institutional Relationships. The discourse of excellence that Readings identifies as inseparable from contemporary university administrative practice has smuggled itself into the vocabulary of Rhetoric and Composition and its attendant facilities. Near the conclusion of her piece, she recommends “[t]he CWE [Center for Writing Excellence] director and budget should…be independent of an academic or other department, reporting directly to a high-level administrator such as the provost. Further, although clearly there are successful centers that do not follow this approach, given that the CWE needs faculty interest and engagement to be effective in affecting the lives of every student, the CWE should be tied to the academic side of campus. Many faculty will not see a center located in student support services as a place where they can get support for their teaching and writing” (142; my emphasis). Her recommendations confirm that the work of Rhetoric and Composition is increasingly occupying a precarious liminal space within the university that is considered simultaneously “academic” and “outside the classroom” since it is not under the control of a traditional department.
Isaac acknowledges Readings’ work, but the lessons she draws from *The University in Ruins* are telling. She considers the risks involved in assuming the corporate language of “excellence” in order to promote writing studies in the university. From her perspective, “writing people can and should give up their fear of appearing un-English, un-academic or anti-intellectual in choosing to use the language of the dominant culture (and yes, that is often corporate culture) because it’s the very language that will allow us to reach much-need and desired public and student alliances” (133). She deftly recognizes the rhetorical situation in which her work is embedded and suggests that her goals are dependent on having her wider audience identify with her cause—“the language of excellence attempts to speak the language of administrators, potential donors, non-humanities faculty, and the general public” (134-135). But the notion of language that she advances in doing so warrants further exploration. Indeed, there is nothing “anti-intellectual” about adopting the language of the dominant culture, as if language were a possession that one had to purchase wholesale. As Foucault explains in *The History of Sexuality*, “[t]here is not, on the one side, a discourse of power, and opposite it, another discourse that runs counter to it…[discourses] can, on the contrary, circulate without changing their form from one strategy to another, opposing strategy” (1980a, 101-2). And, in fact, Readings attempts in *The University in Ruins* to recuperate certain strands of the rhetoric of excellence and deploy them for different ends.

But this inherent flexibility of language should not be read as automatically liberating. Preoccupied with the costs of adopting the discourse of excellence, Isaac’s analysis misses the fact that the greater political risk actually emerges from the other direction—namely, when other parties use the same primary signifiers with which one most clearly identifies. When interacting with these groups, it is tempting to assume that a shared language translates into common beliefs...
and goals. Given the lasting memory of the infamous “affair at U.T.,” where university administrators stymied the attempts of Composition Director Laura Brodkey to create a first-year writing course at the University of Texas revolving around questions of difference and diversity, it might be difficult not to embrace university administrations that explicitly encourage diversity and “outside the classroom” initiatives. Since these administrators share the same signifiers as activists in Rhetoric and Composition, the university administration understandably appears as a fitting ally in producing positive social change, particularly since Rhetoric and Composition has understood its colleagues in literary studies as not only indifferent but actively resistant to such work. The excitement of finding an ally elsewhere in the university can obscure the fact that phrases like “diversity” or “outside the classroom” can be used for drastically different purposes without violating some fundamental authenticity attached to those terms.

In closing, I want to stress that my analysis is not meant as a finger-wagging critique of the Du Bois Institute or WPAs or Rhetoric and Composition in general. These various individuals and collectivities all have commendable values and their actions are usually underwritten with the best intentions. Instead, my analysis has attempted to outline the unavoidable risks involved in any practical action, risks that are only more difficult to avoid in the kind of increasingly decentered structure that characterizes our contemporary moment where the interiorized intentionality of subjects matters less than the unexpected consequences of their external actions. This distinction returns us to the crucial tensions between “archival” and “cartographic” politics (always keeping in mind that these two modes are not in direct opposition to one another). One way of articulating the differences between these two approaches is revisiting the notion of an “unconscious” that Strickland uses in *The Managerial Unconscious in the History of Composition Studies*. In her review of Strickland’s book, Shirley Rose (editor of
two volumes on Writing Program Administration as theoretical research) questions the notion that a “managerial unconscious” is the best way to understand the actions of leading figures in the history of composition studies including James Berlin. “How might we understand their rhetoric differently,” she asks, “if we read it as strategic action, rather than the product of a ‘managerial unconscious’?” (225). From her perspective, composition directors and administrators were not subjected to pernicious psychic forces that compelled them to dominate others; instead, they should be regarded as activists “engaged in community organizing” who understood that the professionalization of composition “was, at the time, the only argument that could be effectively made for systematically developing the necessary body of knowledge of teaching composition” (225). A different conception of an unconscious would complicate Rose’s assurances without reverting to Strickland’s problematic conception. As Foucault once explained, “[p]eople know what they do; they frequently know why they do what they do; but what they don’t know is what they do does” (quoted in Dreyfus 187). But it is precisely this murky region where one does not know what one’s “doing does” that Fredric Jameson called the “political unconscious,” a concept that proved to be the main sticking point in his debate with Kenneth Burke in 1978. The managerial unconscious in composition studies cannot be located so much within the subjectivities of its practitioners, like in a reductive Freudian model. Instead, it must be located in the unintended consequences of the actions produced by composition specialists that can only be unearthed through broader structural analyses.

The map constructed in this chapter has attempted to produce a broader structural analysis of the “political unconscious” within English Studies during the social turn. If it began by documenting the translation of theory into a multicultural “archival” politics, it ends by showing how the fundamental nature of appropriation that unites many of the key thinkers of
French theory (Foucault’s genealogy served as the primary example, but a similar analysis could have been conducted using Derrida’s trace structure or Deleuze’s notion of multiplicity) provides a useful set of tools for showing how the “archival” politics of English Studies, found in its most intense form in Rhetoric and Composition, was itself appropriated for very different purposes within the contemporary university. “Cartographic” politics was appropriated and became “archival” politics, which itself was appropriated for very different ends, thereby becoming a compelling illustration of “cartographic” politics. Or, using Foucault as a specific example, genealogy was appropriated into a version of democratic identity politics that was itself ultimately appropriated to serve decidedly undemocratic ends; Foucault’s notion of genealogy helps us better understand how that appropriation works.
Chapter 4:
Toward an Aesthetics Without Literature

The previous chapter documented Rhetoric and Composition’s antagonistic attitude toward literary studies that, while justified in certain respects, blinded its practitioners from fully grasping their field’s current role within the university. The field’s commitment to an “archival politics” has prevented it from seeing the full range of forces both within and outside of the discipline that have configured it over half a century. The chapter concluded with the problematic convergence of Rhetoric and Composition and the discourse of university administrators, a convergence that Donna Strickland’s *The Managerial Unconscious* intimates has long existed. In this chapter, I want to extend the previous analysis by examining the kinds of pedagogical reforms that correspond to the complicated dynamics among literary studies, literary theory, Rhetoric and Composition, and the increasingly corporate university.

As a way of doing so, I examine two important critical works published in the early 1990s that have become touchstones within English Studies: Susan Miller’s 1991 *Textual Carnivals* and John Guillory’s 1993 *Cultural Capital*. *Textual Carnivals* won three prominent book awards (the Modern Language Association’s Mina P. Shaughnessy Prize, the Conference on College Composition and Communication’s Outstanding Book Award, and the Association of Teachers of Advanced Composition’s W. Ross Winterowd Award), while *Cultural Capital* won the René Wellek Prize from the American Comparative Literature Association. Over the last two decades, both books have received hundreds of citations and have solidified the reputations of their authors. Beyond being published at roughly the same moment and subsequently showered with accolades, both books attempt to theorize the entirety of English Studies in the
contemporary university and its future direction. *Textual Carnivals* presents a sustained analysis of the history between literary studies and composition studies, and while *Cultural Capital* does not invest much of its energy exploring the specifics of composition studies, this discourse nevertheless makes a significant appearance at crucial moments in his argument. In many ways, *Textual Carnivals* and *Cultural Capital* might also be conceived of as fairly early texts addressing what is now commonly known as “the crisis in the humanities.”

Given all these similarities, it is striking how differently Miller and Guillory assess the state of English at the end of the twentieth century. Whereas Miller’s *Textual Carnivals* conceives of composition’s low status as an unavoidable effect of its relationship to literary studies, Guillory’s *Cultural Capital* regards composition as the new center of English Studies, replacing an obsolete literary studies. I argue that Miller’s account differs so drastically from Guillory’s because she understands composition’s status within the university as wholly determined by its connection with literary studies rather than a host of additional forces. Her subsequent rejection of literary studies leads her to embrace an ideology of immediate practicality that may actually work against her explicitly articulated progressive agenda. Not only does this ideology dovetail with the short-term logics of contemporary capitalism that underwrite the university but it also threatens the long-term viability of English Studies by reducing its curriculum to a set of fairly mechanical service courses. To avoid this path, the discipline should retain a notion of aesthetics that is distinct from the concept of literature that I develop out of the final chapter of Guillory’s book.

I.

In *Textual Carnivals*, Susan Miller argues that composition studies in the contemporary
university must be understood as a recent invention. She rejects the idea that composition studies simply continues a long tradition of writing instruction dating back to ancient Greece. Rather than a point on a seamless continuum between past and present, composition studies is a historical event. Failing to recognize the discourse’s historical specificity may have relatively minor consequences like preserving obsolete pedagogical methods. Miller explains that composition scholars who have linked themselves to the rhetorical tradition (which is rooted in oral delivery) may overlook emerging writing technologies that call into question the usefulness of these ancient techniques in the contemporary world: “[n]eoclassical historians do not account for this technology or for new ways of publishing and reading that have inevitably recentered ‘rhetoric’ in a series of actual changes in its doctrines” (40). But Miller’s critique of the ostensible union between composition and neoclassical rhetoric extends beyond pointing out ineffective pedagogy. From her perspective, positing this union also obscures the existence of certain social inequalities and, in some respects, perpetuates them. Only by emphasizing “the actual historical discontinuity with earlier curricula that composition courses embody” will critics ever be able to effectively challenge this system of inequality (44). For Miller, the turn to neoclassical rhetoric by many composition scholars is merely a symptom of a much broader trend—it is an unexpected offshoot of the codependent relationship between composition and literary studies that sustains social hierarchies both inside and outside the university.

Drawing upon the work of Peter Stallybrass and Allon White’s *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, Miller asserts that composition studies constitutes a carnivalesque discourse that reveals the interconnections between powerful and marginal populations. Miller argues that literary studies, which has long been the discourse of an elite class, has required non-literary writing as an “other” through which it defines itself. In the contemporary university, composition
has played this role of “other.” As Miller explains, “literary authorship could be openly compared to the inadequacies of popular writing and especially to inadequate student authorship….institutionalized writing-as-composition could be implicitly demeaned as unequal to writing from the advanced elect” (54-55). Without the marginal discourse of composition studies, the very concept of literature on which literary studies depends would fail to cohere. Conversely, those teaching or enrolled composition were able to measure their inferiority by their distance from those engaged in literary studies. Compositions studies was created as a way of ensuring that the vast majority of college students feel unworthy of belonging to this elite and powerful class and thereby willingly accept a lower, denigrated station within society. Miller writes that the dynamic between literature and composition

“reenacts earlier discriminatory practices that kept all but upper-class boys out of Harvard and Yale in the early nineteenth century…At the ‘new’ Harvard and at its public imitations across the country, ostensibly founded to educate contemporary students differently, composition has provided a continuing way to separate the unpredestined from those who belong…by convincing large numbers of native speakers and otherwise accomplished citizens that they are ‘not good at English.’ By helping to make this inadequacy the tenor of academic textual production and by providing a way to distinguish insiders from outsiders, institutions of writing instruction have willingly marginalized the majority of students.” (74-75)

A social process that once was more immediately visible (only a small fraction of students were ever even allowed entry in Harvard and Yale in the nineteenth century) has now been incorporated into the structure of the school curriculum, helping to preserve and reinforce social inequalities.
Given her rejection of the neoclassical rhetoricians due to their lack of historical inattentiveness, Miller’s own understanding of the specific historical coordinates of composition studies in the second half of the twentieth century proves surprisingly problematic. In many respects, her account of composition becomes just as ahistorical as the ones she criticizes and the coherence of the account begins to unravel when inspected more closely. For starters, one might wonder about the effectiveness of including young adults in higher education as a means of ensuring their exclusion from the powerful upper class when this exclusion was previously achieved simply by excluding them from higher education altogether. Also problematic is how Miller’s account of composition studies treats literacy as a form of ideological indoctrination; for her, governing and controlling populations largely involves shaping the way that they think about a particular topic. Miller maintains that the composition curriculum has been invested in a project of “spiritual regulation, a process of assuring a well-behaved, cooperative body politic” (28). She targets literary studies for creating a sense of helplessness and passivity on the part of the students in composition courses. By ignoring literary works’ conditions of production, literary studies posits that these writings were divinely inspired and required no preparation or revision: the “history of ‘literature’ must by definition be told as a history of authorship and of the authorized voice, whose origins, successes, and privileges are not bound to the material circumstances of either readers or writers” (27). As a result, students who struggle with writing convince themselves that they do not possess the innate talents necessary to make consequential contributions in society, concluding that these tasks are better left to an elite class which does possess said innate gifts. But if this were how the process of social distinction and exclusion functioned, wouldn’t it be just as effective (if not more so) to place less talented writers in literature classes, forcing them to confront the inadequacies of their own writing more directly,
than to experience that inadequacy secondhand by being excluded from these courses? At the very least, enrollment in either composition or literature courses would ultimately achieve the same desired effect.

It would seem that Miller fails to take her own recommendations seriously and follow through on the compelling logic that she uses to diagnose the concept of “literature.” While Miller stresses the material conditions that are necessary to the production of any written text, she actually fails to address the historical specificity of contemporary writing instruction, beginning with a misunderstanding of the educational system itself. While schools have long played a role in the formation of social classes, it would be a mistake to see all of the social classes inscribed within them, as if each institution replicated the broader class dynamics of society within its institutional walls. In other words, it is not immediately apparent why a lower class would necessarily be included within the university, even in a demeaned position.

Throughout Textual Carnivals, Millers continually conflates the university and the nation, seeing the former as a small-scale replica of the latter. She writes that composition was “set up to be a national course in silence” that “stripped from new students and a nation of unschooled potential writers their needs and desires to create significant pieces of writing” (55; my emphasis). Here, the students entering the school are conceptualized as direct representatives of a nation and in doing so, Miller reads the school as a reflection of society more broadly rather than attending to the specificity of the school itself. At several important moments in the text, Miller compares composition’s struggle for recognition to other broader social struggles and therefore participates in the same gestures that I analyzed earlier in Chapter 3. In doing so, Miller mistakes the university as representative of the entire school system and the school system as representative of broader social dynamics, resulting in her comparison of composition studies to an exploited
lower class.

Miller’s conflation brings her into sharp disagreement with John Guillory, who in
*Cultural Capital* warns against confusing the school system and the nation in which that school
is located. His book begins with a study over recent conflicts concerning the literary canon and
its exclusion of marginalized voices from an elite “Western culture.” The major blind spot of all
the participants in the canon debate, he maintains, is the educational system itself. Writing is not
a universal medium possessed by all but has instead historically been restricted to certain
segments of the population through access to the education. Those arguing for “non-hegemonic”
figures to be added to the canon fail to realize that the exclusion of minorities occurs at the level
of access to writing itself, not to the content disseminated in the school. For example, there are
fewer women in the canon less because of some current prejudice against them and more
because so few women were even granted access to literacy in previous centuries, making texts
by women writers much more rare. As Guillory points out, a “critique which is confined to the
level of consumption must necessarily misrepresent the historicity of literary production, the
systemic effects of the *educational system* in the determination of who writes and who reads, as
well as what gets read, and in what contexts” (19). While by no means identical to Guillory’s
targets, Miller similarly leaps over the crucial function of the school itself when she emphasizes
the differences between the composition and literary curriculum.

The sharp differences between Miller and Guillory become even clearer when comparing
their respective treatments of the concept of “remediation.” For Miller, remediation refers to the
process of convincing students of their own inadequacies as writers and thereby reinforcing
inequality among students. It is inevitably a word directed at the individual, isolating him or her
and pointing out their unavoidable internal flaws—the school simply identifies these flaws and
responds to the student accordingly. Remediation stigmatizes the individual and prompts them to believe in some inherent flaws of which they may have only been dimly aware. But Guillory rejects this formulation of “remediation” in an essay produced several years after *Cultural Capital*, explaining that while it “has been rejected by most recent teachers of composition as stigmatizing, remediation properly understood has nothing to do with the innate abilities or disabilities of students. It refers to a demonstrable social fact: the gap between the competence produced at the top of the secondary level and the competence demanded at the bottom of the tertiary level. This structural gap represents a failure of the system, not of students” (1157). Against someone like Miller, who sees the creation of composition as a deliberate tactic at stigmatizing individuals and keeping them in a “low” position within society, Guillory argues that remediation is an inevitable fact of tertiary education insofar as secondary education remains a fragmented and uneven endeavor. Since the curricula of the secondary schools and the universities have never been coordinated—a situation that has arisen for a number of reasons—remediation has always been an unavoidable fact of life in the university. It is only because a four-year college degree has increasingly come to be regarded as the natural next step after high school that remediation has become so noticeable in the last few decades.

Miller and Guillory’s divergent understandings of remediation only begin to gesture toward their much larger differences concerning the current state of English Studies in the contemporary university. The differences are so startling that one could be forgiven for thinking that the two critics occupied completely separate worlds. And while a substantial distance (both literal and metaphorical) exists between Guillory’s Harvard University and Miller’s University of Utah, the general nature of their accounts transcends any idiosyncrasies specific to these critics’ home institutions. In other words, both Miller and Guillory are offering a “big picture”
view of the discipline as it nears the end of the twentieth century, and their assessments of composition and literary studies’ respective future prospects are almost diametrically opposed. After reading *Textual Carnivals*, one has the impression that literary studies remains a mighty monolith that has never been questioned, let alone experienced its foundations being dramatically shaken. In fact, one of the motivating principles behind the book is to expose the “entrenched investment in literature” that typically goes unnoticed (19). While Guillory’s *Cultural Capital* begins by documenting a fierce intellectual contest about the canon that would only seem possible if the discipline’s underlying belief in “literature” were still stable, it ends by stating that the participants in this debate will eventually be stranded “on an ever shrinking island within the university” (45). Far from invincible, literary studies is in very real danger of becoming extinct.

Meanwhile, if Miller characterizes composition teachers and students as a pitiable group of outcasts who deserve more respect and ultimately equality with their counterparts in literary studies, Guillory suggests that they are already usurping their colleagues as the predominant group of literacy training in the educational system in the United States. He argues that “the function of producing in a segment of the populace a minimal degree of linguistic uniformity (in ideological terms, ‘competence’) has been given over to the field of composition, which has developed a nonfictional prose syllabus specific to its function, a syllabus which seems to have no necessary relation to the study of literature” (263-264). So while Miller regards literary studies as the discourse of an elite whose privilege continues to go unchecked, Guillory’s account of English Studies hints that this elite group’s days are nearing an end—or, at the very least, that they no longer possess the same power or influence that they once did.

Put slightly differently, each account argues that English Studies is moving in the
opposite direction. Miller declares that “the existence of composition within English permits literature to displace and translate an older social identity onto only one of its parts. Composition is a site for residues and traces from earlier literary identities that first coded English as ‘female’ among ‘hard’ disciplines” (139). Composition becomes the site by which the weaknesses of literary studies are externalized and chastised so as to protect itself from external critiques of irrelevance or ineffectiveness. But for Guillory, the transfer of power is working in the opposite direction, with composition as the veritable replacement of literary studies. Literary studies is, in fact, the residue and trace of an earlier disciplinary identity. It has become the site of precious affective experience that is increasingly marginal within the profit-driven corporate university, while composition has begun to receive respect from constituents both inside and outside of the university as more practical and immediately useful. So whereas Miller regards a basic holding pattern within English Studies, where reform and resistance efforts are, if anything, only strengthening literary studies, Guillory sees a tectonic shift occurring wherein a once-powerful paradigm is quickly but quietly being eclipsed. Why then Miller does insist on stressing the degradation of composition studies at its very moment of ascendancy within the university? As Guillory points out, “[a]t the present moment, the nation-state still requires a relatively homogenous language to administer its citizenry, but it no longer requires that a distinctive practice of that language identify a culturally homogeneous bourgeoisie” (263). Composition fulfills this need quite adequately, rendering literary studies as an anachronistic endeavor whose endpoint has come into clear view on the horizon. If Miller’s analysis can be registered as a rallying cry for radical change within the discipline, why does it fail to emphasize the support that composition has been gaining outside the discipline?

Reversing the trajectory of Miller’s argument, where literary studies requires composition
studies to make clear the privileged nature of its own discourse, composition studies now uses an old version of literary studies to make itself appear to be the position of the “silent” masses who have finally been given a voice. *Textual Carnivals* derives the force of its argument using a concept of literature that even those in literary studies have largely abandoned. She argues that literary study must be divorced from the conditions of its production: “its particular mission, development, and character are devoted to displacing the inevitably ordinary circumstances around the texts it chooses to call extraordinary…literary study logically must be dissociated from textual production” (27). But much like James Berlin, Miller does not recognize that the literary studies has begun an earnest effort to undermine the very concept of literature. Miller seems to be fighting a useless war against a nearly dead enemy, a choice that makes sense only when one attends to the additional effects this war might have.

I would argue that composition studies needs this bogeyman of literary studies as a way of securing its own status as a universal discourse. As Guillory argues, the emergence of composition “marks the appearance of a new social formation for the university, the task of providing the future technobureaucratic elite with precisely and only the linguistic competence necessary for the performance of its specialized functions” (263-264). Composition is nothing other than the production of a “new kind of ‘oral performance’” that proves to be “the speech of the professional-managerial classes, the administrators and bureaucrats; and it is employed *in its place*, the ‘office.’ It is not ‘everyday’ language” (80). Guillory’s analysis hints that the transition from “literature” to “composition” should not be understood according to the model of the proletariat seizing power from the ruling class. Instead, it should be understood as a transition from an old moneyed bourgeois culture to a growing techno-bureaucratic culture, or, put slightly differently, a transition of power within the university from *cultural* conservatives to
economic conservatives. Of course, if composition is nothing more than the discourse of a new “technobureaucratic elite,” its claims to universality, its capacity to speak for all, would become an obvious problem. Guillory maintains that although this new culture is no more universal than the one it replaced, it nevertheless still makes these claims: “[i]n taking over the social function of producing a distinction between a basic and a more elite language, composition takes on as well the ideological identity of that sociolect, its pretension to universality, its status as the medium of political discourse” (80). This may help explain not only why composition makes an effort to link itself to the rhetorical tradition, since its connection to deliberative democracy produces an aura of universality that this emerging culture requires, but also why it continually beats the dead horse of a stodgy conception of “literature” since this reinforces its own pretensions toward universality.

While the values that composition champions may ostensibly be understood as politically progressive since they aspire to universality, Guillory’s suggestion that they are merely the values of the business-managerial class invites us to explore how these values might serve ends other than those advertised. Take for instance, composition’s attitude toward the practice of reading—and, to a certain extent, thinking or contemplation—which it has coded as the possession of the dominant class. Indeed, a common refrain within composition studies suggests that the study of literature or theory can seem like a decided disengagement with the political; even when it studies political topics and gives voice to marginal figures, it does not engage directly with this political process. Rather than learning writing strategies that could somehow change that situation, literature students are trained to become passive bystanders. As a result, the act of reading is conceived of as politically conservative insofar as it does nothing to intervene in the world. At best, even when it points out political atrocities, it stops short of
actually doing anything about them. At worst, it is one of the most effective tools for reinforcing the status quo and maintaining social inequalities. The act of writing, meanwhile, is typically coded as politically progressive insofar as it is a productive tool for engaging in practical matters. Rather than simply thinking about and interpreting the world, it strives to change it. Composition studies seems to have adopted Marx’s eleventh Theses on Feurbach as its mantra, modifying it only slightly: “The [literary critics and theorists] have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to change it” (145).

But as numerous literary and cultural theorists have noted, we are living in an era where this demand for immediate action is inescapable and might be characterized as the paradigmatic conservative political and economic gesture of our time. Slavoj Žižek has pointed out that the pervading impulse today is “Don’t just talk, do something!” only to add that “the problem lately has been that we have been doing too much…Perhaps it is time to step back, think and say the right thing” (11). In much of his recent work, particularly For a New Critique of Political Economy, Bernard Stiegler links the attenuation of contemporary attention spans to late capitalism’s short-term orientation that dooms the latter’s long-term prospects. And Fredric Jameson has articulated his frustrations with questions about the political ramifications of his literary analysis, bemoaning the demand for immediate action implicit in the inquiry: “it is worth asking ourselves what the mirage of the great single-function political ‘line’ or strategy draws its power from. And I think, particularly for intellectuals, this mirage comes from impatience with the mediated, with the long term; it gets its power from the desire (quite proper to a business society, by the way) to show immediate results, to feel some ego satisfaction, to make the tangible mark right now. That is a pleasant luxury, a wonderful gratification, but it is not for us” (16). As Jameson’s remarks underscore, what may appear as a politically progressive agenda of
immediate action may actually be hard to disassociate from the predominant logic of a certain business culture that it seeks to work against.

All of this is to say that the transition from the “university of culture” to the “university of excellence” has rendered the political and economic status of certain concepts or practices ambiguous. As the following section will illustrate, this is particularly true of aesthetics, a discourse that Rhetoric and Composition has generally sought to eradicate since it is understood as inseparable from the suspect notion of literature found in the upper class. I hope to show that aesthetics can not only be separated from the concept of literature that Rhetoric and Composition rightly finds so problematic, but that it may in fact serve as a lynchpin for the discipline of English in the coming years.

II.

Susan Miller’s critique of literature and literary studies in Textual Carnivals renders the notion of aesthetic experience as a concept perpetuated by bourgeois elites to obfuscate their privileged status. In the final chapter of Cultural Capital, Guillory attempts to construct an understanding of aesthetics that differs from the one that is commonly rejected in contemporary criticism like Miller’s. From his perspective, recent debates about the literary canon foreground the tendency of critics to regard the aesthetic and the political as “discursive antitheses” (273). Although the Marxist tradition has long been sympathetic toward aesthetics, prevailing opinion sees it as a universalist discourse that unjustly champions certain cultural objects over others, ascribing to them a natural value that is actually quite arbitrary. While he agrees with the critique of universalism that these critics advance, Guillory aims to dismantle the notion that aesthetic experience is inextricably linked to an elite culture. His main target is Barbara Herrnstein Smith, who in Contingencies of Value strikes down universalist values by revealing
their fundamentally relative nature. For Guillory, her “critique of value has been conducted as
the most arid exercise in philosophical debate, as the choice between the two positions of
relativism and absolutism” (324). While her analysis has rightly “exposed the groundlessness of
‘absolute’ values” it has done so “without raising its own discourse of commensuration to the
level of historical self-reflection” (324). Guillory bristles against Smith’s recourse to the
“contingent” and “relative” since these concepts all too quickly overstep the concrete historical
processes that make some things more valuable than others. Guillory enlists Pierre Bourdieu to
help him resuscitate a notion of aesthetics that moves past the shortsightedness of Smith and
others (like Miller), who would find literature and aesthetics as interchangeable terms that should
both be rejected.

Guillory readily acknowledges that, given the way it has been configured historically,
aesthetics deserves the bad reputation it has received. Aesthetics has been defined in two distinct
but inseparable ways that divide cleanly according to the broad social markers of “dominating”
and “dominated” classes. If aesthetic experience can be understood in terms of the relationship
between form and content, where aesthetics is understood as an attention to the formal
characteristics that produce content, then neither class has had much of an investment in studying
these formal properties. Indeed, the dominated class would appear to have an entirely negative
relationship to aesthetics since its response to cultural objects are instantaneous and thoughtless,
a form of immediate consumption that necessarily privileges the content over the form. If the
dominant class appears to offer an escape from this content-oriented immediate consumption, it
actually just reifies formal relations as new versions of content, which “effectively suppresses
their specificity as relations of contents” (335). More specifically, the only pleasure that the
dominant class seems to derive from cultural objects is the pleasure of being able to distinguish
itself from the dominated class; the cultural artifacts assigned universal values are merely the
tools used to reinforce that distinction. Aesthetic experience is not needed to enter this game of
distinction—the art collector doesn’t need to know anything about art to feel superior to people
who do not own or have access to this art, yet the act of possessing this material is far from
engaging with it in any aesthetic sense. In other words, the dominating class defines aesthetics in
terms of rejecting immediate pleasure—the sensuous object, instant gratification—in favor of a
“deferred pleasure,” but this deferred pleasure proves to be nothing more than distaste for
immediate pleasure. Thus, although initially it might appear that the dominant class cares about
form while the dominated class cares only about the content, Guillory demonstrates, through
Bourdieu, that a notion of sheer content prevails in both camps, thereby foreclosing the
possibility of actual aesthetic engagement.

At some level, then, aesthetics seems to not exist at all, being canceled out from both
directions: “at the level of the dominant aesthetic, the ‘pleasure’ in aesthetic pleasure is ideally
reduced to a zero-degree, to the experience of ‘distaste,’ while at the level of the popular
aesthetic, the pleasure produced by cultural products fails to be aesthetic at all. At neither level is
‘aesthetic pleasure’ actually experienced by anyone” (333). While Guillory is not disappointed to
see the elitist pretensions of bourgeois aesthetics disappear, he does not want to endorse the
dominated class definition of the term either. In fact, the dominated class’s rejection of aesthetics
conforms to the same content-oriented logic of the upper crust “by the more direct route of
rejecting the fetishized forms of the dominant aesthetic just because they are the recognizable
signs of working-class cultural dispossession” (335). What both parties overlook, Guillory
asserts, is a conception of aesthetics that is not reducible to serving as a mere tool for reaffirming
class distinctions. Even if aesthetic experience will always be affected by class antagonisms (as
well as any number of other social forces), it should not be seen as simply derivative of them. As Guillory argues, Bourdieu may be right that aesthetic experience cannot be separated from the class system or commodity production. However, “the specificity of aesthetic experience is not contingent upon its ‘purity.’ Is this ‘mixed’ condition not, after all, the condition of every social practice and experience?” (336). In rejecting the dominant culture’s notion of aesthetics as a purification ritual that separates the upper and lower classes, the dominated class actually perpetuates this logic by regarding the very concept of aesthetics as irredeemably impure, a discourse it must reject and excommunicate at all costs. It demands immunity from the immunization that the concept of literature promises to the dominant class.

Instead of following this path, Guillory pursues a course wherein the notion of aesthetics and aesthetic judgment is not completely tethered to class antagonisms. He maintains that aesthetic experience is always already everywhere in society, an essential element in every cultural work, since “the relation of form and content” is “something other than a binary opposition” (335). Indeed, it would be a mistake to see form and content as ever being separable. Content can’t exist outside of the formal relations that constitute to it, and formal relations necessarily must produce content. As a result, “[t]here is no cultural product, then, which does not possess form, and therefore no way to experience cultural objects without having aesthetic experience” (336). The discourse of canonicity, the broader concept of literature that underwrites it, and the dominating culture’s understanding of aesthetics all prove so deeply problematic because they perpetuate “the illusion that aesthetic experience is really restricted to the experience of High Cultural works” (336).

Like Guillory, I worry that we may throw out the baby of aesthetics with the bathwater of literature, and that doing so has enormous disadvantages for the future of English studies.
Dispensing with the elitism of the dominant class’s notion of aesthetics can occur without much of a problem, in many ways because this definition is inseparable from an elite bourgeoisie that is quickly disappearing today and to which the vast majority of those working in literary studies do not subscribe. In fact, as the previous chapter illustrated, the critique of literature as a simple marker of class privilege not only occurred outside of the discourse in something like the criticism of James Berlin, but it also occurred within the confines of literary studies as well, most evident in the New Historicism. The more threatening concern comes from the complete rejection of aesthetics that is found within the dominated class. The wholesale rejection of aesthetics that Guillory laments has been smuggled into the discourse of contemporary composition studies through a deep suspicion of the non-immediate. Composition studies is often accused of anti-intellectualism, and whatever the merits of such criticisms, the more important thing for my purposes is the response that compositionists provide to such charges. Beyond a certain point, compositionists regard intellectual work as not only practically useless—“sterile intellectual puzzles” as Kurt Spellmeyer puts it—but also politically suspicious. The abstract speculation that is inseparable from theoretical intellectual work is typically understood as a diversion from important concrete political and economic matters.

This is a common refrain within Miller’s Textual Carnivals, and the popularity of book may in fact stem at least partially from its frustration with the lack of instruction in writing courses on composing for concrete “real world” situations. She is critical of the daily themes assigned in composition classrooms where students write about what they find to be “interesting” and about which they “know something,” since these exercises separate writing from the important social functions it possesses beyond the schoolroom walls. She writes that “[a] new purpose for beginning courses must have had something to do with the disappearance of practice
in writing generic documents that a student might have to produce outside a classroom” (61).

While I would be one of the last people to defend the value of this “daily theme” writing, I am nevertheless skeptical about Miller’s push for writing instruction to have immediate real-world applications and focus largely on producing various “generic documents.” Her argument makes a number of claims about the connections among writing, economic productivity, and political engagement that warrant close examination. One is the correlation between practical applicability and political progressivism. As her argument makes clear, the emergence of composition served politically conservative agendas insofar as it informed the notion that writing was divorced from socially effective action. New writing assignments “divorce writing from the mundane—or active—reasons that students will write” and provide “a diversion from the actual task of learning to write consequential discourse” (61). Vague, ill-defined theme writing fails to equip students to productively engage in society after graduating, and therefore in danger of becoming politically suspect.

It is no surprise, then, that Miller laments the fact that “[t]he ‘social usefulness’ of a composition program…depends in large measure on a director’s ability to leave the uses of writing undefined or tied only to generic processes, forms, and formats that are not openly implicated in social or political conflicts” (167). From Miller’s perspective, composition program directors’ decision to steer away from the concrete scenes of writing simply rehearses problematic banalities from literary studies about literature as a vehicle for producing a generally sensitive subjectivity. The vague quality of the subject produced in the composition course is a damning sign for Miller, since it betrays this subject’s privileged distance from oppressive social arrangements from which it benefits. In other words, the composition student is trained in a manner similar to members of the old bourgeoisie, who certainly know of grimy, industrial labor
and the uncouth cultural practices that accompany this labor, but cannot speak about them directly. Miller writes that “[c]omposition studies is again implicated in the position that has traditionally preserved literary humanism from details in the ‘real’ world it claims to know best, but to be free from” (151). Although the word is never explicitly articulated, aesthetics is the key term underwriting Miller’s analysis. Her demand for immediacy and concrete writing situations is inseparable from a rejection of the abstract and airier practices associated with a bourgeois notion of aesthetics that she believes troublingly papers over class antagonism.

While we shouldn’t discredit the degree to which composition adopts this hazily-defined subjectivity from literary studies, we might consider these remarks a bit more charitably. What if a program director’s characterization of writing in vague terms was not an evasion of social and political realities but instead the sharpest assessment of them? To provide instruction that simply prepares students for already existing writing practices and genres indulges in a shortsighted understanding of the “real world” that undersells the degree to which this world functions according to perpetual innovation and creation. The most banal practical consequence of this reality is that most of our students will not hold a single job for their entire careers—nor even stay in the same company, for that matter—rendering an attachment to narrow concrete objects and skills a recipe for imminent obsolescence (both for workers with those skills and the educational programs that train them). Miller’s attachment to the immediate actually renders her proposed pedagogy increasingly less useful than she envisions.

We might translate this language of immediacy and abstraction into the discourse of aesthetics. Rather than consuming the concrete object in all of its immediate sensuousness, aesthetic engagement consists of examining the formal qualities that converged to produce the object. Crucially, it is only when the object is no longer taken for granted as a pre-made entity
that an aesthetic experience can even occur. And perhaps today the slowing down of aesthetic experience to perceive the formal characteristics that constitute an object is more necessary and valuable than ever, if for no other reason than “objects” don’t last long today. More specifically, late capitalism operates according to unanchored flows rather than reified objects (or, at least, the perpetual oscillation between the two). As Marx and Engels famously asserted in *The Communist Manifesto*, under capitalism “[a]ll fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air” (476). The symbolic-analytic knowledge work of today involves tracing, assembling, and rerouting this complex and often cacophonous swarm of flows rather than territorializing on a specific object and “mastering” it just as it returns to the ether. While there are still “objects” they are continually being modified and transformed by the various intensifications and reversals of the flows that constitute them. Miller’s characterization of aesthetic experience and analysis as an escape from reality into abstract speculation ignores the degree to which reality is now abstract and speculative. As Jameson points out in *The Political Unconscious*, “we can think abstractly about the world only to the degree to which the world itself has already become abstract” (51).

If the scenario described above accurately captures the contours of contemporary reality, then the most practical education would involve equipping students with the capacities necessary to dealing with ever-fluctuating fluid scenarios. Fortunately, this does not render much of the work done in English Studies completely useless. In fact, it suggests precisely the opposite. The future of English Studies does not involve overhauling the entire discipline to accommodate harsh new economic conditions but instead in better articulating the ways in which English Studies already positions its students to better succeed in these conditions. Indeed, if education
as job training constitutes a veritable dispositif in the contemporary university, a bundle of conceptual presuppositions that cannot be escaped, then any resistance to the existing situation must work through this predominant logic rather than trying to transcend it altogether. Attempts like Martha Nussbaum’s in Not for Profit, which valorizes the uselessness of the humanities, fail to register the degree to which such arguments only accelerate the elimination of the liberal arts from higher education. At the same time, however, there are just as many figures who overcorrect Nussbaum’s error, emphasizing the importance of immediate skills in education. By my estimation, these are two primary obstacles that must be overcome in refashioning English’s “public image”: (1) an impulse to retain old notions of “literature” and (2) an impulse to completely territorialize around the immediately practical. As my discussion in this chapter should make clear, both of these tendencies are closely connected to the problematic notion of aesthetics that Guillory and others want to abandon.

The practice of reading serves as a useful example for thinking through some of these complications. Reading is often conceived as a form of passivity that opposes the more productive practice of writing. Translated into economic vocabulary, reading corresponds to consumption and writing to production. The long-held associations of reading with the leisure time that follows a grueling day of labor—or, more directly, with a “leisure class” that does not labor at all—only reinforces the idea that this practice is somehow outside the circuit of production. For these reasons, literature courses are regarded as an indulgence that cannot be afforded in the contemporary university, while composition courses, which more obviously conform to a production model, are still deemed acceptable. Of course, the schematic I’ve just constructed is so reductive as to be laughable. Composition studies doesn’t jettison reading and interpretation altogether, and its stress on invention strategies certainly constitute a clear version
of these practices. Similarly, literary studies is not completely devoid of imparting practical writing skills (although, admittedly these are often less well defined). Just as Marx saw the chain of production-distribution-consumption as interconnected moments in a cycle rather than discrete practices, we might reconceptualize reading and writing as inseparable activities in a productive process. Rather than choosing sides in the simple binary reading/writing, we should think about the proportions established between these two interrelated practices on a temporal scale—a matter of speeds and slowness. How much reading is necessary before writing, acknowledging that the amount of reading performed changes the goals of writing? A hypothetical example: a certain amount of reading time is required to write an op-ed piece for the newspaper, but perhaps a certain extra amount of reading might convince one that the very act of writing a piece to the newspaper will not constitute an effective strategy for addressing the issue at hand (and that it may actually worsen the problem).

Indeed, I understand reading not as outside of the practices of writing but an integral stage within this productive practice. I’m using “reading” in the loosest possible way, more as a broad term to characterize the preparatory stage preceding action than as the solitary act of getting absorbed in a hardbound book (although this practice obviously counts as an important form of “reading”). Putting it in the action-oriented vocabulary of the rhetorical tradition, we might think of “reading” as a form of invention—the discovery and creation of the tools needed to intervene “successfully” in a given context. In fact, “reading” may be the most important stage of this productive process, at least if we take seriously Aristotle’s definition of rhetoric, which orients almost all of the work done in Rhetoric and Composition today: the ability in given situations, “to see the available means of persuasion” (37; my emphasis). Aristotle’s entire definition pivots around the act of seeing or observing, and the rhetor’s ultimate actions are
inevitably constrained by the degree to which they adequately diagram and redirect the various forces that have created the situation in which he or she is immersed. Thinking is not opposed to action but instead constitutes a specific mode of it. As Gilles Deleuze says in “Intellectuals and Power,” his well-known conversation with Foucault, “[t]here is only action, the action of theory, the action of praxis, the relations of relays and networks” (207). If I’m championing reading practices as a certain form of slowing down the production process, it’s not with the aim of halting the process altogether but of ultimately making a better product. Returning to the discourse of aesthetics, it’s interesting that the appreciation of formal qualities was understood as a form of “deferred pleasure.” But we could also understand aesthetic experience as a form of “deferred production” that would bracket one’s immediate impressions of a situation so as to diagnose the mobile forces that continually shape it anew.

Thinking about aesthetics in these terms not only serves as a way of linking literary studies to the work done in rhetoric and writing studies but also provides a ground (of sorts) for the discipline more generally. The discipline of English would not orient itself around a stable body of knowledge like a literary canon but on the various formal relations and transversal connections that link together any number of different domains. At some level, doing so would merely articulate in clearer terms the grab bag, interdisciplinary nature of the work that’s been circulating within English for quite some time, providing a coherent but not constricting identity that foregrounds the discipline’s wide range of critical and creative investigations. Whether the umbrella term for this work would be “rhetoric” or “writing” or “aesthetics” or some combination of the three would largely be a matter of clarifying the already existing connections among these discourses. Although this is the kind of work that’s undoubtedly already been going on in both literary studies and Rhetoric and Composition, each side has approached issues of
form and aesthetics with its own unique set of assumptions and emphases, ensuring that its practitioners illuminate certain formal processes while remaining ignorant of others. If these respective fields were brought into conversation, each field could help point out the other’s necessary blind spots.¹

Where would literary works fit into this schematic? Recall that Guillory sought to recover a notion of aesthetic experience that was not dependent on the concept of literature, which both he and Miller demonstrated to be a tool to preserve clear distinctions between social classes. But there is no reason why the various imaginative works and other cultural artifacts that have been characterized as literature should no longer be taught, as if these objects magically manifested within them the insidious values of the upper crust (or that non canonical works inherently manifested the values of the dominated culture). As Guillory writes, “[n]o cultural work of any interest at all is simple enough to be allegorized in this way, because any cultural work will objectify in its very form and content the same social conflicts that the canon debate allegorizes by means of a divided curriculum” (52). If this were not the case, then there would be no way to explain “the use of the same canonical works to inculcate in different generations of students many different and even incompatible ideologies” (63). For our purposes, Guillory’s argument underscores that we need not completely dispense with Shakespeare and other canonical figures but that we will need to conceptualize an alternative frame for how they will be approached and

¹ And if this shift toward questions of form and process seem be lacking a historical dimension, I want to stress that not only are forms themselves historically embedded and have their own histories, but that the process of history itself might thought of the mutations of various formal arrangements. For more, see Jonathan Culler’s *The Literary in Theory.*
deployed.

Perhaps the most effective way of answering this question is by thinking about the relationship between literature and theory. As my earlier analyses have demonstrated, the introduction of literary theory into the discipline of English acted as a threat to the longevity of literature as a concept. The regime of literature was initially so strong that it actually interpolated the deterritorializing threat of theory to further its own ends, both by enlisting it to proliferate the number of interpretations of canonical works or by turning these theoretical interventions into just another canon of important texts. And while the concept of literature still hasn’t completely died—recall my analysis in the first chapter of its ambivalent configuration within the New Historicism—it can’t be said to make the same claims upon us that it once did. At the very least, it is no longer the cultural dominant within the critical community. But if we now operate within a regime of the “interesting”—that is, critical work today is judged not by how well it illuminates certain privileged texts but simply by how well it commands and rewards the attention of its readers—it would seem that theory has become a more useful term for diagnosing the kind of work that goes on today (even work that appear particularly anti-theoretical in the tradition sense). The clearest symptom of this triumph of theory is the rise of the various “studies” concerning gender, race, media, animals, and a host of other topics, which don’t have a vested interest in literary works although they might use them to in order explore certain questions within their broad research agenda. In this way, literary works have been transformed into a form of theoretical reflection and engagement.

Indeed, one thing that many of the foundational works of French theory did was emphasize the aesthetic qualities within philosophical inquiry. “Literary theory” was not so much a theory of literature as it was a form of theory that foregrounded its own aesthetic or
literary characteristics, underscoring that these formal properties could not be separated from the “arguments” being advanced. Much of the canon of French theory exhibits a daring range of experimentation that examines the relationship between form and content. This is what led many of theory’s critics to dismiss it as “merely literature” and for its proponents to deride those who wanted to reduce Derrida, Foucault, and Deleuze to a series of arguments, as if those could be extracted from the stylistic and formal characteristics engaged with in their prose. If theoretical works foreclosed the possibility of decisively extricating form from content, then it should follow that literary works could be considered a particular form of theorizing, since they too assemble a range of material to pose questions or offer provisional strategies to vexing social dilemmas. Of course, “non-literary works” (and by this I mean writing that does not fall within the recognizable genres of imaginative writing like poetry, fiction, and drama) also conduct this same theoretical speculation since they too are an assemblage of various forces, suggesting that the discipline might be better served by organizing itself around specific theoretical or conceptual questions rather than the existing divisions between literary and non-literary texts (although even those boundaries have become increasingly untenable).

Conclusion

In the preceding pages, I’ve briefly attempted to sketch out a potential future path of the discipline that avoids the problems associated with retaining the increasingly marginal concept of “literature” or migrating toward shortsighted technical training—pitfalls that I regard as two sides of the same coin. My alternative approach to aesthetics not only overcomes these limitations but also gestures toward fruitful connections between literary studies on the one hand and rhetoric and writing studies on the other that could eliminate the unproductive impasses that
currently inhibit intradisciplinary conversations. English Studies would be able to shed some of its unhelpful historical baggage and thereby recenter itself as a significant player in the university for the foreseeable future rather than an anachronistic oddity occupying a marginal corner of the campus.

But, of course, if this all seems like a too tidy solution to a much more complicated situation, it is. Indeed, even if the discipline can attend to its own past blindesses and adjust accordingly, it is nevertheless trapped within the broader networks of the university and American culture more generally that will be resistant to (or merely bewildered by) the proposed changes made within the discipline. Our updated marketing strategy may not be able to easily pierce the web of preconceptions about the value and purpose of English. Complicating matters further, even if the discipline is successful in becoming a prominent player once again in the university in terms of a viable option for students, that victory does nothing to address the labor patterns within the discipline.\(^2\) As the previous chapter stressed, the conflicts between literary and rhetorical education should not be simply conflated with the economic issues surrounding the growing pool of adjunct labor that teach English courses. In this respect, in spite of the many missteps in Miller’s *Textual Carnivals*, the book nevertheless remains admirable in its effort to address in a substantial way the adjunct problem that has only worsened since its publication. So while Guillory provides a more perceptive diagnosis of English Studies, including the startling reversal in fortunes between literary studies and Rhetoric and Composition in the contemporary

\(^2\) Furthermore, debates about reforming the curricula to become more socially and ethically just—Miller’s championing of composition studies over literary studies is a prime example—have become largely arcane since the 1990s when changes in lending practices for higher education loans transformed the university into a veritable engine for intensifying (rather than mitigating) social stratification and economic inequality. For more on these changes to policy, see Mettler. For more on how education remains inadequate for addressing economic inequality, see Marsh, as well as Benn Michaels’ *The Trouble with Diversity*. 
university, Miller should be credited for emphasizing the economic disparities within the discipline that *Cultural Capital* largely elides. In the final chapter, I examine how aesthetics might be usefully deployed to respond to this labor situation and the broader crises afflicting higher education.
“I wonder what it feels like to work in a real fucking police department,” disgruntled Baltimore Police detective Jimmy McNulty grumbles in the final season of David Simon’s television series The Wire. Those who have followed McNulty’s tribulations over the first four seasons of the series know that his desire to join a “real fucking police department” will forever remain elusive insofar as every organization suffers from a malaise that prevents it from becoming (at least in McNulty’s eyes) “real.” While The Wire continually incorporates new characters and locales into its ambitious five-season narrative, it remains anchored in a familiar refrain, one lamenting the effects produced by modern institutions. McNulty’s failure to fully recognize these limitations stems from his limited perspective. Projecting his fantasies onto a nameless police department that exists somewhere “out there,” he does not see how his localized struggles remain conditioned by a set of broader social forces that simultaneously link him to other distant individuals and ensure his isolation within a single institutional setting. Indeed, in the same episode, a reporter for the Baltimore Sun newspaper, Roger Twigg, articulates a similar desire produced by this isolated condition: “Someday I want to find out what it’s like to work for a real newspaper” (5.1). As viewers of the show, however, we have been afforded the luxury of an overarching synthesis denied to the characters.

The Wire’s widespread adoration in literary and cultural studies can be attributed in part to its compelling assessment of the institutional imperatives now driving higher education. The

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1 This scene occurs in the first episode of the fifth season of Simon’s The Wire: The Complete Series. All subsequent quotations from the show will cite the season and episode (ie, “the third episode from the second season” or “2.3”).
“crisis in the humanities” and any potential response to it must account for the intensifying bureaucratic logic underwriting the “corporate university.” I imagine that most of us in the profession, in a moment of utter frustration or despair, have echoed McNulty or Twigg: “Someday I want to work in a real English department.” Of course, these spontaneous outbursts are immediately tempered by the realization that the department exempt from these problems remains a utopian fantasy. Unlike McNulty, we are aware that the crisis extends in all directions and afflicts everyone in the field. And yet, at the same time, to characterize the crisis as one merely limited to the humanities commits us to the same erroneous thinking that ensnares McNulty. Our ability to adequately diagnose the current crisis—an ability, I might add, that has been refined through the broad, open-ended training found in literary studies, the kind of aesthetic approach that I developed at the end of the previous chapter—should force us to recognize that it is not simply “our” crisis. Any disciplinary response to the crisis should attempt to extend beyond the localized borders of humanities departments. Who else is in crisis and how might we productively connect with them?

While there are many potential candidates, one obvious answer should be the student body. Confronted with the dangerous cocktail of massive loans and diminished job prospects, these students are in just as much crisis as their instructors. The evisceration of tenure-line positions and the humanities more generally has not translated into a better or more affordable education for them. The crisis extends well beyond those few brave souls still willing to major in the liberal arts, affecting those who have elected ostensibly safer courses of study like business marketing or hotel management. In fact, the crisis should explain why many have chosen this

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2 The literature on the corporatization of the university and the corresponding crisis in the humanities is too expansive to be encapsulated in a single footnote. Nevertheless, the work of Donoghue, Newfield, and Readings offer excellent starting points.
course of study, with its largely unrewarding technical training, over the more holistic enterprise found in the humanities. Given the dwindling enrollments in literature courses, there would seem to be fewer opportunities for forging connections between faculty and students that highlight their shared crisis; a series of factors have isolated these separate but interconnected populations. Fortunately, the opportunity to form a critical mass exists insofar as nearly every university student encounters the English department at some point during their college careers due to mandatory composition requirements. At the same time, however, a number of institutional procedures and disciplinary biases will need to first be addressed.

As a way of contextualizing the matter, allow me to turn briefly to Gerald Graff’s canonical article “Taking Cover in Coverage.” In this 1986 piece, Graff argues that literary study can be revitalized at the undergraduate level if students are exposed to the conflicts that have divided their teachers in their professional research. Writing at a moment when many regarded literary theory as a threat to the stability of the discipline, Graff asserts that undergraduate education in fact needs to become more theoretical. He maintains that this goal will not be achieved by force-feeding undergraduates difficult French philosophical texts but instead by allowing them to confront fundamental debates about the literary object. For Graff, “if the introduction of theory is to make a real difference in the average student’s level, we must find some way to modify the field-coverage model, if not to scrap it entirely. Otherwise, theory will be institutionalized as yet another field…that can be safely ignored. We will lose theory’s potential for drawing the disconnected parts of the literature curriculum into relation and providing students with the needed contexts” (44). Whatever gains might be made by Graff’s recommendations—I, for one, think there are many—it bears pointing out that his article does not address the most significant ossification structuring English curriculum: the divide between
“composition” and “literature” courses. In other words, while Graff’s “teaching the conflicts” model encourages students in the literature classroom to interrogate the fundamental concepts of the discourse, including “text,” “interpretation,” and “reading,” the disadvantages of the “field-coverage model” have asserted themselves most forcefully in the split between “literature” and “non-literature” courses. This division is an effect of a number of assumptions—including a stubborn binary between the “practical” and the “literary”—that warrant intense scrutiny and revision. More specifically, I contend that these assumptions have contributed to students and teachers failing to see their similar economic conditions.

My recourse to *The Wire* that begins this essay is not incidental. Indeed, Simon’s narrative foregrounds numerous interpenetrations between aesthetics and economics in the contemporary world. In what follows, I deploy *The Wire* in two distinct but complementary ways. First, I use the series as a way of thinking through some of the institutional forces that shape English Studies today. Second, I deepen these insights by incorporating my experiences as a graduate student teaching *The Wire* in a mandatory business writing course. In other words, I analyze *The Wire* as a text that both reflects upon contemporary American culture and circulates within it. My analysis suggests some possible ways of reorganizing disciplinary tendencies that could revitalize English Studies and allow it to more effectively connect with other sectors of the university. Returning to Graff, we might say that changing the discipline requires more than “teaching the conflicts.” Modifying his original formulation, I argue that we need to “teach the crisis”—that is, we should find ways to use literature and other texts to foreground the connections between our students’ economic hardships and our own. As a mode of inquiry willing to tackle important questions, critical engagement with aesthetic objects like *The Wire*
can illustrate that the “crisis in the humanities” is part of a much broader struggle as well as provide some tools for addressing it.

Any attempt to reimagine the relationship between the literary and the practical or the aesthetic and the economic must first recognize the forces that initially produced such divisions. The harsh realities of the job market have pushed students away from the study of literature and other humanistic pursuits, creating a massive migration from the liberal arts to the “practical arts.” As Louis Menand writes in the *Marketplace of Ideas*, today “[t]wenty-two percent of college graduates major in business; only 2 percent major in history” (18). The liberal arts now seem to be a luxury affordable only to the affluent; those students whose job prospects are not secured before entering college must make practical decisions concerning their education. While this line of reasoning makes a certain degree of sense, closer inspection undermines some of its fundamental claims. First of all, as the economy worsens, simply having a more practically oriented degree does nothing to guarantee a position following graduation. The current economic crisis has afflicted recent college graduates regardless of the course of study. To worsen matters, while the emphasis in higher education has shifted from the liberal arts to the “practical arts,” the ability of the latter fields to produce flexible, well-rounded thinkers capable of meeting the demands of an increasingly abstract, fluid world is coming into serious question. Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa have illustrated in *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses* that many college graduates fail to satisfy the basic needs of their employers: competent writing, critical thinking, and complex problem-solving. Students enrolled in the more straightforwardly practical or technical fields, which tend to assign negligible amounts of reading

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3 For more on the changes to higher education, see Delbanco.
and writing in their courses, registered the lowest gains in these general skill categories (liberal arts and science majors, meanwhile, fared much better). In fact, the situation has become severe enough that the business world is beginning to take note of business schools’ inability to produce the kind of thinkers needed to thrive in the contemporary world. In a 2011 issue of the *Harvard Business Review*, CEO Tony Golsby-Smith laments the lack of “innovative thinkers” who can tackle the “thorniest strategy problems.” Golsby-Smith asserts that our educational systems do a commendable job “teaching science and business students to control, predict, verify, guarantee, and test data” but fail to “teach how to navigate ‘what if’ questions or unknown futures.” From his perspective, humanities majors offer a number of skills that are largely ignored in other academic fields.

Much theoretical work in the humanities can account for the emerging usefulness of the ostensibly “useless” literary work. As numerous critics have stressed, the economic and aesthetic, once diametrically opposed in an earlier iteration of capitalism, have now become virtually impossible to separate. As we saw in Chapter 2, in *Postmodernism, Or, the Logic of Late Capitalism*, Fredric Jameson notes that the economic and the aesthetic, opposed in Fordist-style capitalism, now work according to the same logic—“the frantic economic urgency of producing fresh waves of ever more novel-seeming goods (from clothing to airplanes), at ever greater rates of turnover, now assigns an increasingly essential structural function and position to aesthetic innovation and experimentation” (4-5). Christian Marazzi has elaborated on the qualities of an emergent “language economy” in *Capital and Affects*, revealing that language and affect have become integral to the production of goods rather than peripheral or counterproductive phenomena. Extending this line of analysis in *Multitude*, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri explain how forms of physical labor like agriculture now require a sophisticated
grasp of symbolic-analytic manipulation that at its heart has an artistic dimension: “[d]etermining the exact best day to plant or harvest a crop is a complex calculation. This is not a spontaneous act of intuition or a rote repetition of the past but a decision based on traditional knowledges in relation to observed present conditions, constantly renovated through intelligence and experimentation” (110). Those critics charting the course of English Studies have become increasingly aware of these theoretical interventions and have sought to deploy them as a way of revitalizing the discipline. In *The Employment of English*, Michael Bérubé has explored how the discipline of literary studies might refashion itself to respond to these broad social transformations: “‘literature’ may indeed have declined in cultural authority but ‘English’ remains a potentially valuable career asset” (22).

While I wholeheartedly support these initiatives, their effectiveness will be curtailed if the almost universal distinction between “aesthetics” and “practical writing” remains in effect. While composition studies has enlisted the rhetorical tradition as a way of broaching the potential intersections of the practical and the aesthetic, this impulse disappears when we examine something as instrumental as business writing. Indeed, at my home institution, essentially no crossover exists between the “business writing” and “literature” worlds. Rarely will a tenure-line faculty teach a business writing course (let alone a tenure-line faculty in literary studies), the task relegated to graduate students and adjuncts, many of whom believe that teaching this service course will improve their viability in a tenuous job market. From their

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For more on immaterial labor and post-Fordist labor practices, see also Hardt and Negri’s *Empire*, Paolo Virno’s *A Grammar of the Multitude*, and Franco “Bifo” Berardi’s *The Soul at Work* and *The Uprising: Poetry and Finance*. For more on the relationship between the economic and the aesthetic, see Ngai. For a perspective on the humanities that differs from Bérubé, see Nussbaum.
perspective, the business writing course is a dry, technical operation, a burdensome task that must be weathered on the path to something better (i.e., one’s very own literature course).

But what if we could recombine the literary and the practical in a different way, one that more adequately responds to contemporary realities? In order to do so, English studies needs to do more than just tout its capacity for developing critical thinking and writing skills and leave the rest for the students to piece together on their own. A rapprochement between the liberal and practical arts could be mutually beneficial for both parties. Accordingly, while business programs should be encouraged to recognize the value that literary studies can offer to its line of work, we should also make a conscious effort to engage with them on their own terms. I readily acknowledge that there is some understandable resistance by humanists to engage positively with the business sector, an antagonism dating back at least to Wordsworth. Although I am sympathetic to such reservations—more on this later—one way of potentially changing business practices is by engaging with them more directly rather than avoiding them altogether, a strategy which ignores the fact that we are already engaging with them insofar as we offer service writing courses for their students.

The effort to create a dialogue between the practical and the literary must carefully attend to the broad cultural forces that have contributed to a general decline in “literary culture.”

Certainly, much of this decline can be attributed to a general “anti-intellectualism” in American culture as well as the class connotations surrounding the concept of literature (and hence the need for an “aesthetics without literature”), but we should also attend to the institutionalization

5 See Harpham for more ideas on this potentially symbiotic relationship.
of literature and its subsequent effects. How have fictional works’ incorporation into the educational apparatus, particularly in the secondary schools where many of these works are first introduced to students, produced a specific understanding of “literature” and its potential social function? In *Clueless in Academe*, Gerald Graff has insightfully examined how educational institutions possess an unnerving ability to transform the exploration of fascinating intellectual material into a stale, torturous operation. One significant way the educational system diminishes the vibrancy of fictional works is an overemphasis on hermeneutic interpretive strategies, a perversion of the New Critical principles of close reading and the broader practice of ideology critique. As crystallized in the recent documentary *Room 237*, which examines four wildly paranoid interpretations of Stanley Kubrick’s *The Shining* (the most outrageous participant argues that the film is nothing more than a veiled confession of Kubrick’s participation in the Apollo 11 moon landing hoax), many students believe that in order for a fictional work to be “deep,” its surface content must merely be a diversion from the “true meaning” hiding beneath the surface.

These allegorical impulses have come under intense scrutiny within literary studies, beginning with Deleuze and Guattari’s diagnosis of “interpretosis” and continuing with Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s assessment of “paranoid reading.” Many of our students regard this paranoid mode as the essence of “literature” and accordingly reject fictional works that present themselves as more than mere entertainment. Based on my own teaching experiences, most students with little interest in literature see interpretation as consisting of nothing more than a

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6 For more on American culture’s relationship to intellectualism, see Hofstadter and Ross. For how these forces operate within academia, see Graff’s *Clueless in Academe*, Williams’ *The Institution of Literature*, and Schilb’s *Between the Lines: Relating Composition Theory and Literary Theory*.

7 In addition to Deleuze and Guattari’s *A Thousand Plateaus* and Sedgwick’s *Touching Feeling*, see Nealon’s “The Swerve Around P” in *Post-Postmodernism*. 
sterile decoding operation. Under this allegorical regime, nothing is what it seems—everything stands for something else until the story can no longer even be considered a story. Struggling to accommodate this bewildering apparatus, they quickly reject the entire process and the “literary” objects that accompany it. When these students hear the word “literature” it almost guarantees their brains will run a meaningless script given to them through institutional channels. The notion that literature could be engaged with differently, that it might, to quote a phrase from Kenneth Burke, serve as “equipment for living” remains a foreign concept to them. I certainly observe these tensions operating whenever teaching The Wire to business students, who struggle to reconcile the fictional narrative with their institutionally-sanctioned understanding of literature. While they clearly enjoy watching the show, they quickly revert to a paranoid style when attempting to engage with it on a “deeper” level. Interestingly enough, The Wire, for a variety of reasons I will now explore, helps us think through these problems and the potential ways of reversing them.

To say that David Simon’s The Wire has quickly achieved canonization would be an understatement. While numerous television series have captured the attention of literary critics since the onset of cultural studies, The Wire is being championed as a decidedly literary artifact, one that demands to be stand alongside the traditional literary canon. Series creator David Simon’s constant references to Greek tragedy and the nineteenth century realist novel have contributed to this assessment. As Walter Benn Michaels (2009) has claimed in a recent issue of Artforum, The Wire is “the most serious and ambitious fictional narrative of the twenty-first century so far,” one that constitutes “a reinvention of Zola or Dreiser.” In fact, 2012 saw the publication of a humorous novel entitled Down in the Hole: The unWired World of H.B. Ogden, which restages numerous scenes from the show in Victorian London and features corresponding
illustrations in the style of those included in novels from this period. A bevy of critical commentary has followed from the show’s clear connection to the literary tradition, including special issues from the journals *Critical Inquiry* and *Criticism*. Intellectual luminaries, including Slavoj Žižek and Fredric Jameson, have felt compelled to offer extensive assessments of the narrative and its implications for understanding contemporary political practice. Indeed, the show has received so much attention that a recent article in *n+1* joked that the 2013 MLA Conference had “twenty-seven panels on *The Wire*, and at least a paper, I recall on *Rizzoli and Isles*, a TNT show” (Edwards).

It would be a mistake, however, to regard *The Wire* merely as a precious curiosity object of the ivory tower. More than just a critical darling (both inside and outside of academia—no small feat in itself), the show has enjoyed a steady growth in popularity in the years following its finale. Although it received a small viewership during its initial run on HBO, narrowly avoiding cancellation on several occasions over the course of its five-season run, *The Wire* has benefitted from the emergence of DVD and online streaming as the hegemonic forms of television consumption. Of course, the very media through which the show has most often been consumed suggests a circumscribed audience comprising relatively affluent, college-educated individuals. The satirical website “Stuff White People Like” has exploited this fact to brilliant effect, arguing that these titular “white people” will only appreciate a television show if it is “critically acclaimed, low-rated, shown on premium cable, and available as a DVD box set. The latter is important so that white people can order it from Netflix and tell their friends ‘they are really into <insert series> and I watched ten episodes in a row [over] the weekend. I’m almost caught up’ (“The Wire” 2008). Unfortunately, this (albeit facetious) assessment overlooks the show’s incredibly broad appeal beyond the confines of an elite intelligentsia. While Michaels rightly
notes that *The Wire* resembles a serialized novel that you have “to pay the HBO subscription fee to watch,” his comments fail to mention that the show was rebroadcast (in an edited form) on the cable channel BET and became a staple of the bootleg-DVD market. Furthermore, *The Wire* has become a touchstone within hip-hop culture, referenced frequently in rap lyrics. Boasting a diverse viewership that exceeds the expectations of our “long-tail” era, *The Wire* hints at literature’s broad appeal if it can escape the constraints imposed by an “institutionalized literature.”

This broad appeal of *The Wire* quickly becomes apparent whenever I teach it. Although virtually none of them will admit to reading fiction of any stripe for leisure, most of my students quickly become invested in the dense narrative fully of suggestive, compelling characters. Admittedly, at some level, their acceptance of *The Wire* can be attributed to the show meeting them on their own terms, fulfilling their predetermined expectations about the appropriate medium and content of entertainment. Taking advantage of the negligible restrictions of HBO, *The Wire* contains plenty of sex, violence, and foul language and loosely conforms to the generic conventions of the popular police procedural. As my students immerse themselves in the show, they begin to recognize that these spectacular moments of excess are secondary to other features of the show that make a major claim on their attention. For every minute of gunfire exchange, there are fifty minutes of heated discursive exchange. In other words, my business students are surprised to find themselves enjoying a show consisting largely of bureaucrats talking. How might we account for this puzzling outcome?

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8 *The Wire* actor Felicia “Snoop” Pearson actually confronted bootleggers who were distributing the show on the streets of Baltimore. See http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2qXFxsXhZW4
9 For an example of numerous hip-hop artists’ attachment to the show, see Mlynar (2012).
10 See Simon’s “Letter to HBO” for a sophisticated take on the relationship between quality art and economic considerations.
The Wire defies their expectations about literary language, one of the cornerstones of institutionalized literature. One scene from the third season can serve as a loose dramatization of this phenomenon. During a job interview, a great disparity in vernacular emerges between “Bunny” Colvin, a Major in the police department, and an academic administrator (looking to leave the force, Colvin is seeking a head security position at Johns Hopkins). During the interview, the administrator politely excuses himself, whispering that he “needs to tinkle.” Dismayed by the administrator’s choice of words, Colvin says to his colleague that the administrator “need[s] to take a piss, whether he knows it or not” (3.4). Colvin’s rejection of the administrator’s vocabulary—Colvin and his colleague clearly cast him as an “academic type”—can serve as a loose analogy that explains many of our students’ resistance to the institution of “literature.” From their perspective, a literary work must contain language removed from everyday contexts, and characters—if their ideas are to be taken seriously—must speak in an antiquated dialect. I imagine that much of the general public believes Shakespeare’s greatness lies in his unfamiliar dialect that unsettles modern ears rather than his sophisticated engagement with any number of political, social, and aesthetic issues or the formal properties he deploys in the process. The institutionalization of literature has reduced the aesthetic dimensions of language to a series of harmless, if not annoying, affectations. In other words, our students resemble Colvin and they regard literature as the domain of the academic administrator, who advances a highfalutin vocabulary removed from the everyday. Literature, little more than a vehicle for pretentious language, becomes a form of linguistic credentialing, a process that John Guillory has documented in great detail in Cultural Capital. If this were all that literary works had to offer, our students would be justified in their cynicism (it’s a great irony that figures like Shakespeare and Wordworth often critiqued the institutionalization of language only to be
transformed into its chief advocates by various social institutions). As Michael Bérubé suggests, it remains an open question “whether the distribution of cultural capital serves a purely discriminating function, to naturalize and legitimate socioeconomic inequality, or whether the content of cultural capital might matter in some substantive way to the traditional liberal-progressive project of ‘critical thinking’” (23-24). How can we help our students examine the enormous range of complexities and ambiguities inherent in language, and which fictional works foreground, without being misinterpreted as defenders of this “discriminating” apparatus?

*The Wire* constitutes the perfect vehicle for accomplishing this task insofar as its linguistic and formal properties serve to illustrate and explore these institutional forces. Indeed, in the final episode of the fourth season of the series, a crucial exchange occurs between Colvin, who left the police force at the conclusion of the previous season, and Dr. David Parenti, a professor of sociology at the University of Maryland. Over the course of several months, the pair has worked together on an unusual “pilot” program involving troubled youths attending an inner-city middle school in Baltimore. While the program made enormous strides toward socializing youngsters who would have otherwise created havoc in the classroom and made it impossible for other students to learn, Colvin and Parenti’s experiment is ultimately shut down by the school board administration once the program is deemed to be “tracking, pure and simple.” Having spent three futile decades arresting slightly older versions of these students involved in the local drug trade, Colvin is enraged by such bureaucratic justifications that guarantee the perpetuation of pressing social problems. His research partner Parenti responds in much more measured tones: “We get the grant, we study the problem, we propose solutions. If they listen, they listen. If they don’t, it still makes for great research. What we publish on this is going to get a lot of
attention…from other researchers, academics.” Colvin remains unimpressed by this course of action: “Academics? What, they gonna study your study? When do this shit change?”

While their exchange immediately brings to mind the long-held antagonism between theory and practice, with Parenti’s ivory tower idealism conflicting with Colvin’s gritty pragmatism, the scene is striking for its subtly optimistic undertone that counteracts the grim, fatalistic outlook that pervades Simon’s narrative. In other words, this exchange constitutes a curious moment in the show insofar as it momentarily sets aside a brutal, unflinching outlook on social inequality and dysfunction and descends into the realm of pop culture cliché, which the show from its very inception sought to eradicate in all of its various guises. Although *The Wire* highlights how bureaucratic structures inhibit any positive social action—Colvin’s irate response to the cutting of the pilot program stems largely from the fact that the decision reminds him of his final months in the city’s dysfunctional police department—this scene nevertheless suggests that researchers in the contemporary university remain immune to such red-tape headaches. While the community of scholars that research social inequalities fail to sway public policy, they can be consoled by the fact that their internal organization operates according to democratic principles that actualize these progressive impulses. In other words, Parenti’s complacency about the pilot program’s cancellation can be attributed, at least at some level, to his own comfortable situation—he has no direct compelling reason to make change because his own embodied experience as a professional academic. While he may have some abstract attachment to matters of social justice, his daily experience has not been determined by the same bureaucratic structures that have plagued Colvin for years.

Although I wouldn’t want to completely dispel the show’s representation of academics (after all, academics do enjoy certain privileges that spare them from the painfully mindless
proceedings of most bureaucratic labor), the rather rosy portrait of the head-in-the-clouds academic suggested in the character of David Parenti neglects the degree to which academic labor has been influenced by the university’s metamorphosis into a transnational corporation. As Sheila Slaughter and Larry L. Leslie have demonstrated in their important Academic Capitalism, the intellectual work of professional literary critics has become increasingly instrumentalized and quantified according to the dictates of a university administration that continues to grow in both sheer size and influence with each passing year. Even more distressing, the actual content of intellectual work is being transformed by these administrative procedures. Within the capacious entity known as English studies, a bureaucratic mindset underwrites much of the work in the subfield Rhetoric and Composition, which has long been marginalized as the red-haired stepchild of the discipline but is gaining influence and prominence as the university turns toward the corporate model (the number of jobs in the MLA Job Information List commands a higher percentage of the total jobs in English studies each year). In How the University Works, Marc Bousquet casts composition as a “managerial science” which is more concerned with overseeing the teaching practices of low-wage adjuncts than contributing to intellectual discourse. And, as we saw in Chapter 3, Donna Strickland has extended Bosquet’s analysis in her disciplinary history The Managerial Unconscious in the History of Composition Studies, demonstrating that, as her title suggests, these managerial imperatives are so fundamental to the work of Rhetoric and Composition that they have become all but invisible to its practitioners.

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11 See Bousquet’s “The Figure of Writing and the Future of English Studies” and Richard Miller’s “The Arts of Complicity: Pragmatism and the Culture of Schooling” for more on this growing trend. For compelling accounts of the contentious relationship between composition and literary studies, see Susan Miller’s Textual Carnivals and John Schilb’s Between the Lines: Relating Composition Theory and Literary Theory. For more on the corporatization of the academy, see Slaughter’s work with Gary Rhoades, Academic Capitalism and the New Economy: Markets, State, and Higher Education.
Ubiquitous managerialism certainly structured every aspect of the first business writing course I ever taught (I was given a syllabus for the course and enrolled in a weekly training tutorial), and during that semester I was often reminded of a striking scene from the fourth season of *The Wire* that perfectly encapsulated my experience. The scene cuts between a training session for teachers at a middle school (put baldly, it’s little more than an inspirational speaker) and an eerily similar meeting at the Western district of the police department. Forced to listen to a lecture that completely mischaracterizes the conditions of their respective occupations, both teachers and police quickly disengage from the material and resort to either complete indifference or outright hostility. The teachers’ response is particularly striking since they adopt the poses of the alienated students they are being prepared to teach. Frustrated by the inane material, they check their phones, pass notes, or simply stare off into space rather than listen to the speaker. Regardless of their resistance to the training session, the teachers will soon assume the structural position of the meretricious inspirational speaker when they enter their own classrooms, infecting their students with a standardized curriculum that replicates the same boredom they currently endure. Afflicting student and teacher alike, this generalized malaise is, I imagine, a common experience in any pedagogical setting that prevents instructors from dictating the shape of their own course (hence, a clear advantage of college over high school teaching). During my first semester as a business writing instructor, only the thinnest of lines existed between my own unhappiness and my students’. The undeniable drudgery of the largely mechanical assignments drained me as much as them. Worsening the situation, I was completely unqualified to teach much of the material, and my ethos as a “business professional” was always a necessary fiction at best. While I undoubtedly had material I could teach the students—even
after nearly four years of college, many still struggled to write a compelling sentence—the course clearly existed to fulfill other desires.

In spite of this fact, it was hard to know where to direct my frustration since the responsibility certainly did not reside with my immediate supervisors. Not only was the person coordinating the training tutorial for the first-time instructors of business writing an adjunct, but the entire program within the department was clearly responding to the implicit dictates of the university administration that the English program become “relevant.” As Bousquet stresses, “anyone who has read the discourse of writing program administrators is unlikely to be persuaded that this ‘fortunate’ group of people has found in their managerial positions the kind of satisfactions they hoped from academic work. Indeed, one of the more widespread structures of feeling among WPAs is the desire to be released from their managerial service into the general population of tenure-stream faculty” (236). It seems that nearly everyone in the profession feels themselves being subjected to “necessity” from some superior, more powerful position in the bureaucratic hierarchy. We have all become middle managers. Indeed, Bousquet writes, “[i]f rhet-comp is the canary in the mine for the academy more generally, what it tells us is that the professorial jobs of the future are for an increasingly managerial faculty” (236). The realities of current adjuncts and graduate students, who teach the vast majority of the Rhetoric and Composition courses, provide an unsettling picture of the discipline’s trajectory.

Indeed, the business writing course offers the most intense saturation of these bureaucratic imperatives. The course itself resembles an orientation session for new employees in a corporate setting. Indeed, a glance through any business writing textbook will prove largely indistinguishable from an employee manual. In these texts, “effective” communication merely involves executing the orders of superiors. The prospect that deep antagonisms might exist
between employer and employees (or among competing colleagues) is rarely acknowledged. We could say that the course exists not so much to demonstrate the proper formatting of memos and business proposals as it is to reinforce the docile qualities required of an individual entering a hierarchical organization. Unfortunately, these tendencies are reinforced by the hierarchy structuring the English program, where the business writing course becomes a burden that most wish to escape. Over several decades, literature faculty have gradually farmed out the growing responsibility to Rhetoric and Composition specialists, who face the burdensome task of managing an enormous pool of graduate student and adjunct teachers. And just as Rhetoric and Composition faculty often wish to avoid this unpleasant task, so too do the graduate students and adjuncts teaching the course, who regard the experience as a necessary but hopefully temporary obligation that will ultimately pay dividends with a tenure-track literature position (or a Rhetoric and Composition tenure-track position with the flexible research agenda and teaching responsibilities usually associated with literature appointments). In treating the course as a means to an end, these instructors indirectly contribute to the problem. Registering their teachers’ resigned sense of duty, the students’ subsequent lack of enthusiasm exacerbates the already poor reputation of the course (and English studies more broadly, since many students have little exposure to the department outside of this class). A series of positive feedback loops emerge that hollow out the discipline from the inside, resulting in an enormous pool of energy and resources devoted to a class that few individuals at any level of the institution wholeheartedly support.

This regrettable matrix suggests that the discipline must reconceive its relationship to the broader university community, an act that will remain dangerously incomplete unless it accounts for both the literature and composition segments of the department. So, while there is an understandable resistance to engaging positively with the business school, as this would be seen
as an ethical breach of sorts, this is a risk worth taking. One possible way to reimagine the relationship with business would be to view our students as future members of a precarious workforce rather than emerging business tycoons just waiting to light a cigar and put their feet up on the corner office desk. Accordingly, what if the business writing course were less about refining the practices that maximize the efficiency of the company and more about providing the tools for surviving the labyrinthine nature of contemporary institutional life? Rather than training these students as functionaries in an elaborate machine, we might instead provide them with the conceptual equipment to navigate this machine and minimize the exploitation they will likely encounter. This class would not adopt an anti-business position so much as an agnostic one—businesses exist and many of our students will find themselves in large corporations more out of necessity than choice (some of the best students in my traditional literature courses are business majors simply because their parents demand it). Why wouldn’t we consider it ethical to provide them with ways to better understand the power relations inherent in a “chain-of-command” structure and the rhetorical strategies for maneuvering in such contexts? This has in fact become a central feature of my own business writing courses, and *The Wire* serves as an elaborate example for my students to ponder the complexities inherent in modern institutional life. Our close analysis of various scenes exposes important nuances and ambiguities in ostensibly trivial workplace conversations, including the potentially devious power moves often lurking behind generous offers or partnerships.

Perhaps some concrete examples from *The Wire* are in order. In the first season of the series, Lester Freamon, an older member of the department, relates to McNulty how he spent over thirteen miserable years in the pawnshop unit. Having ignored the recommendations of his commanding officer in a particular murder investigation, Freamon is relieved from his position
as a homicide detective. In a seeming act of generosity, however, Freamon’s commanding officer asks him where he would not like to be reassigned within the department. The superior explains that Freamon’s insubordination cannot be tolerated in the high-profile homicide unit but that his behavior should not prevent him from suggesting other units that he would prefer to join. Of course, this benevolent show of hospitality is merely a subtle means of discovering the unit in the police department that Freamon most dreads. Recognizing that McNulty’s current behavior will result in a similar conversation, Freamon offers the following advice: “When they ask you where you want to go—and, boy, they are going to ask you where you want to go—do yourself a favor. Keep your mouth shut” (1.4).

In another example from the show, this one from early in the fourth season, Officer Thomas “Herc” Hauk, detailed to the security team protecting Baltimore Mayor Clarence Royce, accidentally encounters Royce receiving oral sex from his secretary. Worried that he will be fired for possessing such incriminating knowledge, Herc enlists the help of a trusted advisor who counsels him to remain silent, letting the matter “just [lay] there like a bad pierogi on the plate” (4.2). In the following episode, when Royce calls Herc into his office several days later, their conversation is a densely nested series of threats and promises operating entirely at the level of subtext. Herc’s general oafishness (established in the first episode of the series and confirmed in nearly every subsequent episode) adds dramatic tension to the scene, since it is unclear whether he will be able register the subtleties of Royce’s discourse. After learning that Herc has agreed to provide security for the Mayor because he believes it will help advance his career, Royce intervenes.
Royce: I hear you’re a good cop. I also hear you recognize who your friends are, and that you’re loyal to them. Did I hear all that right?

Herc: Absolutely.

Royce: Where are you on the [sergeant’s] list?

Herc: Thirty-two. They took fifteen, but…

Royce: [laughing] Thirty-two? I thought you were going to say something like “sixty” or “ninety-five.” Let me call my man, Burrell. No need wasting good police like you chauffeuring around politicians.

Herc: I don’t even know what to say, Mr. Mayor. This is unexpected.

Royce: Don’t mention it.

Their conversation, so innocuous at first glance, illustrates the ways in which language can function as the deployment of force. Royce’s characterization of Herc as a “good cop” serves more as a subtle contract concerning Herc’s future actions than a representation of the officer’s past behavior. That is, Royce’s characterization hints at the crippling damage he can inflict on Herc’s career at the same time that he offers to help advance Herc’s ascension in the police department so long as he remains silent about Royce’s infidelity. The end of the conversation broaches Herc’s unintentional observation of Royce’s sexual act without ever explicitly addressing it; Herc finds Royce’s generosity “unexpected” and Royce commands him not to “mention it.” Here, Royce gauges Herc’s reliability not through explicit interrogation but instead through a more ingenious exam. More specifically, Royce uses the conversation to test how Herc will handle sensitive information around others. If Herc were to explicitly promise Royce in this
moment that he would never speak about the infidelity, it would betray an unbridled loquacity on
the officer’s part. He would fail the Mayor’s test and likely face termination.

The capacity to read deeply into the subtext of bureaucratic exchanges like the two
examples just mentioned offers a way of synthesizing the practical to the literary. The practical
writing course should not simply include literature on the syllabus so much as show how the
practical is already thoroughly aesthetic in its fundamental texture. “Basic” practical speaking
and writing requires a sophisticated grasp of the nuances of language, the vicissitudes of rhetoric,
and the fluidity of contexts, all of which can be better understood through literary or aesthetic
study. In my business writing classes on *The Wire*, I actually foreground the aesthetic dimensions
of practical activities through the course assignments. One of the primary tasks I give to my
students is an “executive summary,” a feature common in most business documents. Typically, it
summarizes the entire contents of the larger document in roughly ten percent of the space of the
original (a document of two hundred pages warrants twenty pages of executive summary).

Within traditional literature classes, we tend to privilege analysis over “mere summary,” seeing
the latter at best as a preparatory step toward the former. However, this assignment does not
simply reveal the difficulty of summarizing an unwieldy, sprawling narrative with dozens of
interconnected characters; it also foregrounds the degree to which a number of crucial critical
and aesthetic judgments are made in a seemingly straightforward act. I ask my students to write
summaries of varying lengths of both individual seasons and the entire series in the hope that this
will prompt a number of questions. What material is absolutely crucial when summarizing a
thirteen-hour narrative in 2000 words, 1000 words, or 500 words? How does one negotiate the
desire for clarity with the equally pressing desire for information maximization? When does
simplification become outright distortion? What is the relationship between a summary of *The
Wire to the show itself? What about The Wire’s relationship to the reality it purports to represent? Far from mundane, these are important questions that gesture toward the complexities of group dynamics, political representation, and strategic essentialisms.12

As Graff mentions in “Taking Cover in Coverage,” however, close analysis of a text cannot occur without the necessary contextual knowledge that helps frame the object and bring it into focus. “All the close concentration in the world on the particularities of literary texts,” he maintains, “will not help a student make sense of these particularities without the categories that give them meaning” (1986, 41). Such a turn to broader contextual considerations complicates one potential criticism of my course on The Wire: it merely equips students in a decidedly instrumental, albeit sophisticated, way. After all, couldn’t the course become a different kind of employee manual, something along the lines of Robert Greene’s The 48 Laws of Power, which transplants Machiavellian political maneuvers into a business setting? While there is no surefire safeguard against this possibility, I hope that my students, while accumulating the contextual information necessary for success in the business world, might begin to question that context itself. Although a desire to become savvier symbolic analysts sparks the interest in learning about the rhetorical systems circulating in business institutions, exposure to this material might modify that initial desire. Literature prompts us to adopt alternative values and perspectives, and this capacity to empathize with others may expose the limitations of some individuals’ self-interested impulses.

Indeed, my students are most engaged when we connect their local position as students in the contemporary university to the broader social forces that are addressed in the show. Obviously, the fourth season’s investigation of the Baltimore public school system resonates

12 These executive summaries could be understood as a form of “cognitive mapping” that Jameson outlines in an essay of the same name.
with my own students’ experiences in college; although much separates an inner-city middle school from a research-intensive university, my students nevertheless see the connections between these two sites and possess a better understanding of broader social forces as a result. Along similar lines, current attacks on the millennial generation as lazy, unambitious freeloaders are connected to the discourse surrounding the dismantling of the welfare state that the show documents in the second season. The students deny the charges leveled against their generation, and their self-defense often translates into a critique of the stereotype of the welfare queen and the accompanying discourse. Given that aesthetic engagement forces us to ask big questions and observe broad connections, it should prompt our undergraduates to begin questioning how their own personal struggles relate to other, seemingly distant groups of people, including that strange species known simply as “English instructors.” By “teaching the crisis,” we begin to establish the conditions for adequately responding to it.

My arguments in this final chapter, as well as the preceding ones, have been marked by a deeply paradoxical, conflicted tension, one that I want to conclude the dissertation by briefly addressing. My relationship to capitalism would seem to be anything but consistent. On one hand, I have characterized my business writing classes as a way of helping students to recognize the constraints imposed by modern institutional structures and offering tools to potentially work against these forces. Many of our students are about to be fed into any number of relentless bureaucratic machines, and aesthetic engagement can help them come to a better grasp of this reality, albeit in often small ways. On the other hand, I also argue that English departments should emphasize the value that their speculative, abstract interpretive practices might contribute to the contemporary mode of capitalism. Literary study will make students better equipped to
join the world of “symbolic-analytic” workers that constitute the post-Fordist labor regime. The whole argument, it would seem, is conducted in bad faith, insofar as I rail against the educational institution at the same time that I suture myself further to it by being invested in its perpetuation through my recommendations for reform.

At some level, I’m advocating for a different form of capitalism rather than a wholesale endorsement or rejection of it. While I have a hard time imagining the contemporary university not being a transnational corporation of sorts, I can envision some of its labor patterns and curricula being substantially modified—and not simply as a token gesture to pacify certain constituents within the university but as a way of actually making the university more efficient. As Jeffrey T. Nealon has detailed in his recent Post-Postmodernism, the contemporary university is incredibly anachronistic in terms of its organizational structure, a behemoth bureaucracy whose expanding administration harkens back to the bloated corporations of the 1950s that teemed with ineffective middle managers. Nealon suggests that the contemporary university should refocus on its core mission revolving around teachers and students and shed much of the bureaucratic administration that adds only marginal value to the educational experience. My notion of “teaching the crisis” is designed precisely to facilitate the kinds of connections between students and teachers that would reestablish a sense of equilibrium between students, teachers, and administrators that has been severely disturbed by the “administrative suture” I described in Chapter 3. If Marc Bosquet is correct in suggesting that the adjunct crisis within English will not change without unionization, and if Cary Nelson is correct in proposing that the corporate university cannot be modified without increasing faculty sovereignty, I’m suggesting that both of these strategies will only be improved if the students join both adjuncts and tenure-line faculty in
these struggles (or at least to understand how their own situation, particularly their high tuition, is linked in a number of ways to their instructors’ plights).

While these changes would undoubtedly improve the current labor conditions facing English Studies, their impact on the larger global economy remains much more ambiguous. Could the improvement of conditions in the American university indirectly exacerbate inequalities elsewhere? My analysis in Chapter 4 of Susan Miller’s *Textual Carnivals*, where I point out the problems with her understanding of the university as simply a small scale replica of society at large rather than a specific unit within that broader society, suggests that we shouldn’t too quickly convince ourselves that improving the university will automatically translate into progressive reform beyond campus. The university still remains a small collectivity immersed in the much larger serial situation of contemporary capitalism and any reforms that might be achieved by successfully “teaching the crisis” will always be provisional victories at best. Although it may come as a small consolation, the aesthetic education that I’ve proposed as a possible future of English Studies would at least provide a clearer grasp of that condition.


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