

PIONEERING THE PROFESSION:  
CRISES IN ENGLISH STUDIES AND THE NONTENURED PHD

by

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A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York  
2010



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## Abstract

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This dissertation addresses contemporary nontenured PhDs in English, who face a number of disciplinary crises: (1) tenure is steadily declining, (2) it's increasingly difficult to publish, (3) the general relevancy of the field has become dubious, and (4) the number of English majors is shrinking. This confluence of crises makes competition for fewer jobs fiercer and begs the question of what the backlog of nontenured English PhDs will produce as scholarship, and how and why they will do this. The growing number of individuals in this position is just as qualified as their tenured colleagues are to do legitimate scholarship, but if tenure is not likely or not possible for them, then their motivation and means to do scholarship may likely be quite different. So, then, might their methods be different.

For some nontenured PhDs who choose to “pioneer” new directions, their methods should indeed be different, and they may help revive the field’s perceived relevance, even if that outcome is somewhat incidental to their motivation. A case is made in favor of one alternative method, collaboration—a matter not only of working with other scholars but also of joining the work of separate fields in new ways. This case is demonstrated by adapting literature to teach aspects of rhetoric, with extended examples of felt sense and audience theories. The intention here, among other things, would be to make such ideas more accessible and appealing to a wider readership and to take advantage of non-tenured PhDs’ supposed “freedom” from traditional constraints on scholarship. Chapter one explains the confluence of the four crises. Chapter two introduces the contemporary nontenured PhD and encourages pioneers among this demographic to consider collaborating more and more diversely. Chapter three uses the Orpheus myth to demonstrate a collaboration of literature and rhetoric in order to show how felt sense can cultivate better awareness of audiences. Chapter four uses Chaucer’s *Book of the Duchess* to demonstrate a collaboration of literature and rhetoric in order to show how felt sense can cultivate acceptance of audience indeterminacy, and why this may be an advisable practice.

Dedicated to my aunt  
Virginia A. Syron  
for so many reasons

## Acknowledgments

I wish to thank the members of my examining committee: Professor Sondra Perl, Professor Rebecca Mlynarczyk, and Professor E. Gordon Whatley, especially Sondra, for your generous support—of all kinds—over the years. Thanks also to Professor Rachel Hadas, Professor Gene Hammond, Professor Joan Richardson, Professor Stephen Spector, Professor Scott Westrem, Edna Patton, Ross “Guru” Warfield, and my good friend and colleague Frank Gaughan.

The gratitude I have for my family transcends language, but in keeping with the spirit of this dissertation, I defer earnestly to my feelings: I love you all and thank you from the bottom of my heart. Thank you Judith Syron Schuddeboom; Henry P. Khost, Jr.; Cornelis J. Schuddeboom; Deborah Evers Khost; Virginia A. Syron and Elaine Young; Gregory, Jacqueline, and Maeve Khost; Alexander, Carla, James, and Oliver Khost; Daniel Emerson Khost; Henry Francis Khost; Mary Ann Keirans; Ronnie, Jim, Jillian, Grace, and Rachel Penney; Heather and Lorraine Evers; and Hakim Maloum. Thank you also to my Syron and Khost grandparents, who are always with me in spirit.

Kheili mamnoon Aida Izadpanahjahromi. To eshghe mani!

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When you do things from your soul,  
you feel a river moving in you, a joy.  
When actions come from another section,  
the feeling disappears.

...

Don't insist on going where you think you want to go.  
Ask the way to the Spring.  
Your living pieces will form a harmony.

— Mowlana Jalal-e-Din Rumi

## Chapter One

### The Nontenured English PhD

### And a Confluence of Professional Crises

#### **Abstract**

This chapter addresses four problems facing English studies, namely what may be considered two issues *directly* related to our work: tenure and publishing, and two *indirectly* associated with it: the field's general relevance, and declining numbers of English majors. As they affect the profession, these interrelated crises may be of particular concern to nontenured faculty,<sup>1</sup> whose careers or at least career status may well be jeopardized by such circumstances. In addition to surveying pertinent literature and statistics on these matters, chapter one reviews and critiques existing reform proposals, and in so doing, establishes a case for reshaping the professional personae and some practices of nontenured English PhDs. After an introduction, chapter one includes the following sections,

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<sup>1</sup> The category of "nontenured faculty" of course includes a wide variety of professional lines, from assistant professorships to lectureships to teaching assistantships. This study focuses on nontenured English *PhDs* in particular and will generally refer to them specifically as such, except where contextually inconvenient—in which case they will be identified by their broader designation as "nontenured faculty," or in some cases, "contingent faculty," where the incidental inclusion of nontenured non-PhDs is not inappropriate.

each with their own related subsections: *The Four Crises*, *Proposed Reforms*, and *Some Limitations*.

### **Introduction**

The professional academic persona in general, and especially with regard to nontenured English PhDs, is to some degree indistinguishable from its scholarly publications. So for example, one reads Harold Bloom, or uses Judith Butler to make a point. Similarly, tenure and promotion committees might speak reductively of candidates in terms of their amassed publications. In other words, an undeniable metonymy exists between scholar and publication. One could even say that without publication there is veritably no functional academic persona<sup>2</sup>—particularly for nontenured faculty vying for promotion or for a tenure-track appointment, or for any position these days. At very least, the career prospects for the unpublished academic persona are significantly limited. Given such high stakes for academic publication, it may be worth asking *when* in the cycle of production, distribution, and reception do we determine the value of a published work? Is our scholarship valuable when it reaches a library shelf? When it gets cited favorably in the works of colleagues? When it changes readers'

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<sup>2</sup> Apart, perhaps, from its status as *perished*.

minds or teaching practices? Of course, all of these achievements are commendable, but for many nontenured faculty members and their overseeing personnel committees, these means of evaluating scholarship often clash with the stark imperative of publication. In short, scholarly publication is most valuable to these authors when it earns them tenure. To clarify the point further, one could ask: would recent English PhDs struggle to publish their first and, in many cases, second books in the usual manner if they knew they had no chance of getting tenure but these books might nevertheless reach library shelves, get favorably cited, and change readers' minds? It seems safe to speculate that most would not. The implicit social contract between academe and new PhDs has long since assumed a logical and practicable connection among good scholarship, publication, and tenure/promotion. But today, given the changing landscape of employment in post-secondary institutions and perhaps especially in English studies, this contract appears to need renegotiating and, as many have called for, revising.

Although recent efforts have been made by the Modern Language Association (MLA) and presumably some individual departments to reform both tenure standards and publishing expectations, matters do not seem to be improving (or at least not improving quickly or substantively enough) and, in fact, may be getting

worse. Venues for the scholarly monograph have been curtailed, while standards for publication have been raised. Tenure line appointments have diminished, while varieties of nontenure-track appointments have greatly increased in number. In addition to this, many critics from both ends of the political spectrum, in- and outside the academy, have questioned the relevancy of the humanities scholarship that *does* find its way to publication. For example, even after the PC wars have supposedly simmered down, James Bowman recently resurrected a familiar charge in his response to the 2004 NEH "Reading at Risk" study: that English professors do little more than propagate theories that are useless but to their own, narrow political aims. Meanwhile, Russell Jacoby argues with considerable exposure in The Last Intellectuals that academic life has become isolated from the public, homogenized, and reluctant to take on topics that might not provide immediate career advancement (7). He suggests that the young academic does not need and does not particularly want a wider (i.e., public) audience, because the relevant professional rewards exist within a specialized circle, for instance, scholarly publication being most valuable when it earns one tenure or promotion. Yet traditional professional rewards are harder to come by today than ever before, and academics are increasingly subject to public scrutiny, not to mention susceptible to declines in funding and enrollment. Over

the past few decades the proliferation of such critiques as Bowman's and Jacoby's suggests an important distinction: it is not only the dissemination of our scholarship that is in crisis, but also its very worth. Doubts about the relevancy of work by the humanities negatively influence both the recruitment of new majors and the views of readers, administrators, and other stakeholders to the extent that even the venerable MLA has come to frequently employ the term "crisis" to characterize current professional circumstances.

The tenure crisis fuels the publication crisis, which in turn fuels the relevancy crisis, and—to make matters worse—the same effects occur in reverse order, too. At the same time, the declining percentage of English majors compounds these matters by challenging the viability of tenure lines in institutional and public discussions. After all, one could reasonably ask (and some are asking): with fewer English majors, why not fewer tenured English professors? No doubt troubling to the entire field, such attitudes perhaps most significantly affect emerging English PhDs, who—this chapter contends—must understand the four crises in confluence<sup>3</sup>, consider existing proposals for reform, and (as chapter two takes up, and three and four exemplify) work

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<sup>3</sup> The phrase "confluence of crises" is attributable to the title of Raymond Tumbleson's 2005 Profession article, which posited one of the first explicit connections between the publishing and job crises in English.

creatively to pioneer their own means of adaptation and survival in a new and troubled professional landscape.

### **The Four Crises**

#### *Tenure*<sup>4</sup>

Today it is harder than ever to get tenure in English at the postsecondary level. In fact, only twenty-seven percent of current college instructors are on full-time tenured or tenure-track lines, down from seventy-five percent in 1960 (Stainburn). This present state directly results from market realities that English PhDs have not previously needed to concern themselves with, or at least not nearly as much as they do today. Seasoned English scholar Gordon Sayre summarizes the former golden age of the profession, whose characteristics—outdated as they are—still significantly (but inaccurately) inform the basis for tenuring standards in many English departments:

During the three or four decades since baby-boom students and post-Sputnik investments fueled a boom in United States higher education, scholarly publishing hummed along a path of consistent growth, and

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<sup>4</sup> Some of the same and similar issues as the ones examined below are often referred to as a “labor” crisis, which indeed they also partly comprise. The focus on labor has tended to favor the composition and rhetoric side of the issue, whereas I am pursuing a broader view of all English studies here. Chapter two will take up matters more singularly associated with labor, *per se*.

academics enjoyed a blissful ignorance about the market limits of their business. Publishers could improve revenue by issuing more books; professors could expand their c.v.'s by writing more books; libraries provided a steady market by purchasing more books. It all seemed natural because the same ideology of incessant growth governed the wider economy. (55)

Unfortunately, times have changed a lot since those good old days. Today's catchword may well be "retrenchment," the direct opposite of the golden age's ethos of "growth." The effects of such influences as a global recession and changing attitudes toward higher education may be difficult to measure in terms of direct results on English studies, but the steady decrease in English tenure lines might be an exception, which is to say there's no denying that tenure is down today, consistently, even increasingly so. Such is no wonder, given the reality that the field maintains golden age tenuring practices in a time of recession and widespread public skepticism over the field's relevance. How can publication be expected to grow while the profession continues to cut back?

The data on this trend is overwhelming, such that a sample selection will easily reveal the significant breadth and depth

of the tenure crisis. In 2007 the MLA issued its "Report of the MLA Task Force on Evaluating Scholarship for Tenure and Promotion," the result of a 2005 survey of 1,339 departments in 734 U.S. institutions of higher learning. According to this report, a large majority (sixty-six percent) of today's English and modern language PhDs are not awarded tenure in their initial appointments. In other words, PhDs in the fields represented by the MLA appear to have only a thirty-four percent chance of getting tenure (10). Numbers from the 1.4 million-plus-member American Federation of Teachers (AFT) are even worse. Released in spring 2009, their study of U.S. Department of Education data shows that contingent appointments increased between 1997-2007 from two thirds to nearly three-quarters of postsecondary instructional positions nationwide ("American" 5). The National Education Association reports in the spring of 2008 that since 1990, "the use of nontraditional faculty increased 9.4 percent, while those in the rank of professor decreased 5 percent." This report also speculates that part-time faculty proportions will increase over the next decade (5). In fact, according to the AFT, faculty are already "predominantly part-time at community colleges."

These unfortunate statistics cannot be blamed mainly or perhaps at all on an overproduction of PhDs, as some have tried to do.

A federal study shows that between 1977 and 2007 the number of doctorates awarded in English decreased by thirty-three percent (TABLE 2). English doctoral programs have also maintained even levels of enrollment between 1997 and 2007, despite increases in applications, signaling a higher rate of selectivity than is often assumed by critics of departments as the problem's cause (Jaschik "Graduate Enrollments").<sup>5</sup>

Meanwhile, universities—especially public ones—are cutting jobs and departments at an alarming rate. According to a March 2009 New York Times article, Arizona State "has eliminated more than 500 jobs, including deans, department chairmen and hundreds of teaching assistants," and the university president announced that he will close forty-eight programs. Additionally, "the University of Florida recently eliminated 430 faculty and staff positions, the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, laid off about 100 employees, and the University of Vermont [...] left open 22 faculty positions and laid off 16 workers" (NYTimes). Michigan State University is eliminating its American Studies and Classics departments, and University of Louisiana-Lafayette is terminating its Philosophy department (Zernike). Washington State University has eliminated its entire theater arts and

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<sup>5</sup> See the *Relevancy* sub-section in this chapter for Marc Bousquet's theory on the number of PhDs relative to available jobs.

dance department (Cohen "Arts Programs"), and shockingly, the University of Southern Mississippi decided in August 2009 to eliminate the institution's entire economics department, including its five tenured and four tenure-track positions, as part of an initiative to save money (Stripling "Cruel"). Higher education journalist Patricia Cohen describes the grim professional landscape facing today's new PhDs in particular:

    this year the new crop of Ph.D. candidates is finding the prospects worse than ever. Public universities are bracing for severe cuts as state legislatures grapple with yawning deficits. At the same time, even the wealthiest private colleges have seen their endowments sink and donations slacken since the financial crisis.[...] The anticipated wave of retirements by faculty members who are 60-something is likely to slow as retirement savings accounts and pensions wither, administrators and professors say. That means that some students who have finished postdoctoral fellowships and who expected to leave for faculty positions are staying put for another year, which in turn closes off an option for other graduate students coming up the ladder. ("Doctoral Candidates")

As one can read seemingly everywhere today, instead of tenure-track positions predominantly awaiting new PhDs, like in the golden age, part- and full-time nontenure-track appointments are now the norm, as the percentage of non-tenured faculty positions in post-secondary institutions has steadily increased for years, even precipitously recently. Among many reliable studies of its kind, the 2006 AAUP statement on "Contingent Appointments" notes, for instance, that in 1969 full-time nontenure-track appointments accounted for only three percent of all full-time faculty. By 1998, these positions had risen to as much as twenty-eight percent. Data shows this trend continuing into the 21st century. Drawing on statistics from the US Department of Education, The Chronicle of Higher Education reports in 2004 that "more than half of all new full-time faculty members at four-year institutions are not on the tenure track" (Fogg). To make matters worse, even putting tenure aside, full-time employment of *any* kind appears to be declining in comparison with part-time faculty jobs at postsecondary institutions. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, between 2001 and 2003 full-time positions rose only two percent while part-time positions rose nearly ten percent at degree-granting institutions.

These circumstances constitute a grave professional reality and, for this, not surprisingly, the subject is now a major topic of contemporary scholarship in English. Decreasing tenure-track and increasing contingent lines have led to such stratification, for instance, that Marc Bousquet, Tony Scott, and Leo Parascondola's 2004 collection title, Tenured Bosses and Disposable Teachers, causes no surprise, striking readers in the field as basically an apt, if rhetorical, description. This text and many others like it have long since voiced an urgent call to reform professional practices in English studies (e.g., Horner, Randy Martin, Nelson, Rhoades, Schell Gypsy, Slaughter, Trimbur and Bullock). These numerous calls, however, have been relatively ineffectual in accessing and preventing the causes of the problem rather than just somewhat easing its symptoms. This is not to disparage these accomplished and well-intentioned scholars but to establish how formidably entrenched in higher education the tenure crisis has become.

A recent, telling example of how precariously the state of tenure exists<sup>6</sup> in today's postsecondary climate pertains to the Community and Technical College System in Kentucky. The board

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<sup>6</sup> A host of metaphors have been used to characterize the troubled current state of tenure, including *frozen* (i.e., hiring freeze), *atrophied* (i.e., as in tenure lines), a "sweatshop atmosphere" (i.e., raised expectations [Tumbleson]), "on the chopping block" (i.e., poised for eradication [Moltz]), and even "Playing Mozart on the Titanic" (Nelson "Playing").

of regents there voted in March 2009 to eliminate tenure in *all* new hires at the sixteen colleges in the system, citing as its reasons: "financial concerns and a need for flexibility." This follows a trend in that community college system over the past seven years of hiring contingents at more than three times the rate of tenure-track faculty (American Federation of Teachers). The Associated Press reports that only four of the fourteen regents voted against the proposal, and three of these carry only the power of half a vote for having been elected (rather than governor-appointed) faculty and student members of the board. We may use this example to extrapolate the lesson that with declining numbers of tenured positions comes decreased faculty power to influence administrative decisions affecting their own working conditions.

Steve Street, a thirty-year veteran contingent writing and literature instructor, states in a February 2009 article that problems facing nontenured faculty today are nothing new. But he adds that the problems have grown more urgent with institutional retrenchment from the current recession, and because of the fact that contingent positions now comprise the majority of faculty appointments in higher education. In addition to Street's point, it should be acknowledged that while some contingent faculty appointments may not carry the noulal

status of *adjunct*, they are still adjectivally adjunct (i.e., nonessential, impermanent, lesser status) in terms of employment conditions. So even the full-time so-called "humane lectureship" (Brumberger) is still undeniably second-tiered for a number of reasons, including applied (i.e., job security) and abstract (see below). But competition for lecturer positions continues to escalate because these are the only jobs available for many English PhDs. To make matters worse, as Street notes, contingent work risks becoming a self-fulfilling destiny, since to some administrators "contingent service on a C.V. tends to be considered valid only for more contingent service."

A pervasive uncertainty exists about the kinds and views of employment contingency in academe. Is it, as Street asks: "a stepping-stone for career starters? Occasional employment of industry professionals? A nonsensical labor practice that exploits the fresh and the willing, under-rewards expertise, depreciates experience, and discourages students?" Nontenured faculty are, of course, all of these things and probably many more, but regardless, they all work under worse conditions than do their tenured colleagues. But Street and others like him argue that "[c]ontingents do equivalent work. Get over it." He is careful to disclaim a notable difference between *equivalent* and *equal*. The present work disclaims further that equal work

does not usually apply to scholarship, of course. But in many cases it does not have to. The fact remains that today most new English faculty are not hired to do scholarship but to teach, cheaply, even though this contingent hiring pool is ironically increasingly qualified to conduct scholarship. In other words, each year this faculty is comprised of more PhDs than ever before. These are not lesser scholars but scholars with lesser opportunity, support, and reason to publish.

Even putting aside salary inequities, other insidious and exponential problems affect contingents' working conditions, individually, as well as the landscape of tenuring practices in English, generally. These include, as Street outlines: "the effects of lifetime employment guarantees vs. none, a clear promotion progression vs. no title change ever, [...] committee work vs. none, scholarly and creative requirements vs. non, etc." He goes on to point out how the current recession is worsening matters because contingent appointments are ironically well-suited for tough economic times. While hiring freezes prevent the filling of vacated tenured lines, college enrollments continue to rise, so low-paying temporary lines may

be easily created and then terminated<sup>7</sup> as need be to hold down the fort—or, more precisely metaphorically, to prop up the leaning ivory tower. Street notes that these supplementary “dead-end jobs” become even easier to justify because, as this chapter has been asserting, nontenured faculty increasingly hold advanced degrees, including PhDs. Such troubling circumstances may be what MLA president Catherine Porter refers to when she notes in a winter 2009 MLA Newsletter President’s Column that “unlike others experienced in academia since the 1950s, [the current recession] threatens to be not so much a period of retrenchment followed by recovery as an opening onto a thoroughgoing transformation of the postsecondary system” (2).

### *Publishing*

The list of problems facing English studies does not end with declining numbers of tenure-track jobs and rising contingent appointments. In fact, this signals only a beginning of the trouble facing the field. It is also increasingly difficult for manuscripts in the discipline to find publication, regardless of their quality, in part because of the perception of their decreasing relevance (see the “Relevancy” subsection below), but also and mainly because of economic difficulties crippling the

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<sup>7</sup> This is the “flexibility” spoken of by the Kentucky board of regents (above).

publishing industry and curtailing library acquisitions - especially in the humanities. So, today, the professional reality of "publish or perish" has a new and complicating dimension to it: publishing, *itself*, is perishing.

In a landmark 2002 letter to MLA members, then President Stephen Greenblatt exposed many thousands of English scholars to the severity of the problem for the first time. The letter clearly states that a major problem exists in requiring scholarly monographs for tenure. Greenblatt said that university presses cannot afford to publish enough of these manuscripts, and budgetary constraints are forcing cutbacks to already strained editorial staffs. Eight years after the letter, circumstances today have not improved, as presses face even more cutbacks and the potential for dissolution altogether. For example, the University of Missouri Press laid off nearly half of its staff in March 2009 because of financial difficulties (Kumar); SUNY Press fired fifteen percent of its staff in December 2008 because of economic hardship (Parry); and the highly regarded Utah State University Press stands to lose its entire subsidy under proposed legislative budget cuts (Jaschik, "Could a

Press")<sup>8</sup>. However, institutions have hardly updated their tenuring policies in response to this knowledge of Greenblatt's letter. In fact, MLA Task Force member and chair of English at West Virginia University Donald E. Hall reports that by the year 2007 "one third of all departments and half of all PhD-granting institutions now demand progress toward a *second* book for tenure" (83, my emphasis). Hall's Task Force colleague John Guillory also concludes that tenure standards for publishing have only increased and narrowed in the field over the past few decades (80, 82).

These and other examples verify that Greenblatt's diagnosis of shrinking scholarly publishing opportunities was accurate, and that the problem has now reached a crisis level in English studies. We can see the seeds of today's proliferating crisis in Greenblatt's 2002 account, as he warns that university presses "are cutting back on the publication of works in some areas of language and literature. Indeed, we are told that certain presses have eliminated editorial positions in our disciplines," and, "[r]esponding to the pressure of shrinking budgets and of skyrocketing costs for medical, scientific, and

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<sup>8</sup> Even director of the prestigious University of Chicago Press, Garrett P. Keily, admitted in June 2009 to nervousness about the fiscal state of his press, noting that "the entirety of the University of Chicago Press is summarized as auxiliary revenue" (qtd. in Jaschik, "Change").

technical journals, libraries have cut back on the number of [humanities] books that they purchase." These cutbacks suggests that financially strapped libraries and university presses find publications from other disciplines to be more viable investments in the current economic climate than those from fields like English studies.

Circumstances have only worsened in the past six and a half years. Take for instance the potential consequences of scholarly presses going under, as mentioned above. Utah State reports that around "1,000 current faculty members nationwide were promoted or granted tenure based in part on a book published by" their small press. Only 125 university presses currently exist across all disciplines (Jaschik, "Could a Press"), and almost none of them has as good a reputation in composition studies as does Utah State. So the potential for this press, and other ones like it, to go under poses a particular problem for nontenured PhDs in composition (where supposedly the "jobs are" these days in English studies) who need such venues to publish, or else perish.

Greenblatt's now well-known letter was prompted by two earlier articles on the publishing crisis by Lindsay Waters, executive editor for the humanities at Harvard University Press. These

are "A Modest Proposal for Preventing the Books of the Members of the MLA from Being a Burden to Their Authors, Publishers, or Audiences" in PMLA (2000) and "Rescue Tenure from the Tyranny of the Monograph"<sup>9</sup> in The Chronicle of Higher Education (2001).

Through the help of (1) a favorable PMLA response from Cornell University Dean Philip Lewis, which decries the "mediocre" and "superfluous" quality of many published books ("Is Monographic Tyranny"), (2) a special fall 2003 forum of letters about the crisis in PMLA, and (3) the extensive publicity of Greenblatt's letter, Waters generated considerable concern among humanities scholars over a publishing crisis in their midst. This momentum inspired several important initiatives and studies, including The 2002 MLA Ad Hoc Committee on the Future of Scholarly Publishing, and the 2007 "MLA Task Force Report" cited above.<sup>10</sup> Dozens of prominent scholars have since responded to these efforts with interpretations and recommendations.

Harvard University professor Judith Ryan writes about the crisis admirably, with a degree of candor one would hope for from the chair of the 2002 MLA Ad Hoc Committee on the Future of

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<sup>9</sup> Far more memorable a title than its predecessor, this phrase caught on well with readers, and since then the monograph has frequently been referred to as tyrannical.

<sup>10</sup> Waters also developed his position into a 2004 book, Enemies of Promise: Publishing, Perishing, and the Eclipse of Scholarship, which argues the same point that we need to publish fewer books and increase their quality.

Scholarly Publishing. She adds to the list of publishing problems the fact that although some forms of academic and intellectual publication generate a profit, literary criticism no longer generates much purchasing demand. In short, few people buy our books; even the scholars who write these books do not tend to buy them. Ryan notes: "History and even philosophy still sell; scholarship on literature does not.[...] We want our own books on literature to be published, but we scarcely buy those written by our peers" (9). Such a system is hardly sustainable on a grand scale, yet tenure and promotion committees around the nation and across the spectrum of institutions continue, even increasingly, to regard book publication as the "gold standard" for tenure and promotion. In lamenting the powerful influence of such allegiance to the status quo, Guillory demonstrates a usefully down-to-earth insight similar to Ryan's. He notes the simple fact that the current system favoring the monograph is so dominantly prevalent because of its convenience, since "the willingness of a university press to incur the cost of publication" is an easy means of determining the merit of scholarship (78-9). To make matters worse, the scope of acceptable monographs remains remarkably narrow. Task Force member Donald Hall decries an "unjust and untenable state of affairs," with reference to a survey of over 1,300 universities, wherein "a third of all

departments and half of all PhD-granting institutions now demand progress toward a *second* book for tenure," while such work as "textbooks, bibliographic scholarship, scholarly editions, and journal editing are being devalued" (my emphasis, 83).

In 2007, Waters again reveals a crucial and pernicious oversight at work in higher education, which is the fundamental assumption that "the career of a humanist parallels the career of a scientist" (94). His view is that the sciences (one might think especially of math) highly value precociousness and early publishing in their scholars. He insinuates that it is easier to publish early in those fields but does not quite say so explicitly. Waters calls on institutions, however, not to make uniform publishing expectations across the disciplines, seeking to counteract a bias in current hiring and promoting procedures that notably works against "late bloomer[s]" in English studies, whose ranks include such accomplished figures as Samuel Johnson, Paul de Man, and Edward Said, to name only a few. Yet, no matter how sensible they may be, abstract arguments like Waters' suffer significant limitations in effecting genuine change in practice.

Hall diagnoses the practical state of the field's attitude toward publishing. He claims the humanities have become so

"fixated" on the monograph that they've fetishized the book. That is to say we praise the thing itself more than the values it represents, such as "sustained thought, hard work, a rigorous refereeing process [...] research originality, scholarly rigor, and a significant impact on the conversation in a given field" (84, 86), which may be determined by more (and perhaps better) means than just book publication (see the *Proposed Reforms* section below). Hall provides a useful history of how the field has gotten to this point. The monograph became the gold standard during the 1970s and 80s, when the humanities were hotly competing with the sciences for institutional prestige and gaining attention to their publications through the culture wars. This is when the so-called "star system" arose, with its "fixation on the big book." In those days, however, these particular circumstances were restricted to relatively few elite institutions that required small teaching loads and which provided big subsidies to university presses and libraries to respectively produce and buy these books. Since then, a widespread "status envy" has caused less prestigious (and far less endowed) universities, and even institutions down the scale of the Carnegie classification system, to mimic such publishing expectations of their own faculty. Hall believes this is how the field "got trapped in the grandiosity of our own rhetoric,"

and why "[w]e still have not fully recovered from the egotism and wannabeism of those decades" (84).

So it seems clear that today there are both fewer opportunities to publish humanities books and fewer readers buying them.

There are also fewer opportunities just to *write* this material, even for tenured faculty. In 2009-10, and most likely beyond, research sabbaticals are being eliminated, cut back, or discouraged at institutions around the country. Standards for approving sabbatical applications are consequently also being raised (Stripling "Sabbaticals"). However, a troubling discrepancy exists between these industry realities and the seemingly unrealistic expectations facing many of today's English PhDs, whereby—to repeat—some hiring committees demand publication (even of books) from doctoral candidates before graduating, and increasing numbers of tenure committees expect progress toward a second book.

Ever at the forefront of arguing professional issues, and even several years before Waters and Greenblatt sounded their respective alarms, Michael Bérubé began to expose this troubling discrepancy, which he understates in his 1998 book, The Employment of English, as an "increasingly tenuous relation between our discipline's expectations for publishing and the

jobs our discipline characteristically offers its new Ph.D.s" (104-5). Bérubé has been a leader among academics in conceptually linking the tenure and publishing crises, such that today this troubling information about tenure and scholarly publishing, as well as the linkage, would likely not come as a surprise to any minimally informed English scholar, especially as a veritable nationwide hiring freeze in the 2008-10 academic years compounds the field's preexisting job problems. In fact, works about the state of the profession—such as the present work—are now no less typical in literary studies than are those about Shakespeare. As a case in point, Jeffrey Williams chose American Literary History for his 2004 article about the boom in scholarship about the profession, noting that "in the past decade, the university has become a central topic in" humanities scholarship: "In literary studies particularly, [...] it has become a primary field" (200). However, while increased self-scrutiny has become one of our "primary" objectives, the rest of the country has considerably decreased the attention it pays to English Studies. It might fairly be asked whether our publishing does considerably more than keeping a shrinking minority of us from perishing. At very least, our work is not nearly as relevant to the greater culture as it once was or as many of us still think it is.

### *Relevancy*

More and more generally, and increasingly publicly, the purpose and identity of the university, and especially the validity of liberal arts humanism therein, has recently been called into question. There has been a boom in publications about the relevancy crisis over the past two decades, to such an extent in fact that the subject may have reached a veritable saturation point. It is starting to seem commonplace these days to find New York Times pieces like the April 2009 Op-Ed by Columbia University's religion department chair, Mark C. Taylor, "End of the University as We Know It." Taylor draws an unfortunately apt analogy for today's nontenured humanities PhDs to consider:

Graduate education is the Detroit of higher learning. Most graduate programs in American universities produce a product for which there is no market (candidates for teaching positions that do not exist) and develop skills for which there is diminishing demand (research in subfields within subfields and publication in journals read by no one other than a few like-minded colleagues), all at a rapidly rising cost (sometimes well over \$100,000 in student loans).

We can defer to the vast body of existing work for greater detail on the relevancy crisis, so offered here is a brief

overview of three main channels this criticism has taken, by reference to representative texts. It must be noted that (1) these three channels are not purely discrete or self-conscious movements but general categories—overlapping at times—invented to demonstrate a point, and (2) the cited texts are representative but not exhaustive of the issue at hand. This subsection of the chapter owes a great debt to Jeffrey Williams' excellent 2006 essay "The Post-Welfare State University," which offers wider reaching bibliography on the subject than offered here, and which presents its own five-part categorization of recent scholarship about the state of the profession. Williams sorts this work into the following types: (1) critiques of "academic capitalism," (2) labor scholarship, (3) theoretical examinations of "the idea of the university," (4) "apologies" seeking to merge corporate and educational politics, and (5) histories of the university (200-207).

In three-part scheme here, the first and most important channel of relevancy criticism concerns the general purpose and viability of the current state of higher education in the United States. A trend has appeared in the field's theory over the past few decades announcing either a relative collapse or at least the need for a serious reconsideration of the established university and its traditional ideals and methods. Diagnoses

and prescriptions vary widely, but all the critics in this school of thinking agree to some degree that the state of the university is deeply troubled at its foundational level.

Perhaps most notable among these critiques is Bill Readings' highly influential 1996 The University in Ruins. Extremely well-grounded in history, theory, and debates about the purpose of the university, this text argues that in today's globalized economy the university no longer serves its previously primary role as generator and protector of national identity. In the absence or decline of this mission, universities instead often pursue the empty and bureaucratically malleable (some have said nihilistic) ideal of "excellence," which coincides with the postmodern turn that denies (or *saves*, depending on your standpoint) any obligation to teach Truth. Part cause and part effect, today neither the student nor the teacher but the administrator occupies the central role in post-secondary institutions (8). Along the lines of this argument, the purpose of the university is at best in flux, or "dereferentialized"; at worst, the university functions primarily as an agent of global capital, a corporation. As one would expect, Readings' assertions have generated considerable attention, including some unfavorable remarks. Dominick LaCapra, for one, criticized the text for being "hyperbolic," "decontextualized," and

analytically "loose" (35, 38, 39). But many more scholars have praised The University in Ruins, including Nicholas Royle, who capably refutes LaCapra's points on the author's behalf, since Readings unfortunately passed away shortly after publication of the book.

A more viable critique of Readings' type of reasoning takes a wider and less extreme view than LaCapra's does, such as former Harvard University president Derek Bok's positions in his 2003 Universities in the Marketplace<sup>11</sup>. He smartly acknowledges the rhetorical side of the issue, noting that it is mainly humanists (and often literature critics) who complain of institutional corporatization using the argument that the university has lost its purpose. Commercialization<sup>12</sup> has long since played a significant role in university decision making, a fact that has its pros and cons, says Bok. Yet it is the humanities that are "most widely accused of having lost their intellectual mooring, [so] it is not surprising that their professors see a similar aimlessness as the cause of other ills that have overtaken the

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<sup>11</sup> Bok has written about the relevancy crisis for decades. His other books on the subject include Beyond the Ivory Tower: Social Responsibilities of the Modern University (1982), and Our Underachieving Colleges: A Candid Look at How Much Students Learn and Why They Should be Learning More (2007).

<sup>12</sup> Bok notes that he limits his use of this term to denote "efforts within the university to make a profit from teaching, research, and other campus activities" (3).

academy" (5). The work of humanists has never been highly valued for its profitability, and fields in which commercialization is a considerable force (e.g., business, computer science, biology) possess a far clearer understanding of their purpose and mission. So Bok asserts that "loss of purpose is not a useful explanation for the recent growth of money-making ventures in the university" (6). Nevertheless, it may be a fairly good explanation for changes in publication practices (see above) and declining majors (see below) in some humanities disciplines, like English.

In the same year that Bok's book appeared, Kurt Spellmeyer published his Arts of Living: Reinventing the Humanities for the Twenty-First Century, which offers its own account of the relevancy crisis traceable through the university's perceived purpose and viability. Like Readings, Spellmeyer acknowledges the damaging influence of the culture wars, and states clearly that the humanities must change—notably away from its alienating propensity for abstruse theory—or else continue to face relevancy problems outside of its insular and decreasingly tenured community of scholars. His ideas for reform would presumably boost the relevance of the humanities (e.g., attending to matters of class, globalization, and the

environment), but Spellmeyer has been criticized for falling short on specifying how to implement his recommendations.

In her review of Spellmeyer's book, Marilyn Cooper admits that "Spellmeyer's hesitation to spell out how his insights might be enacted in new institutional structures, curricula, pedagogy, or research is a little frustrating" ("Untitled" 774). Also in a review essay, John Rouse contextualizes this kind of frustration about such arguments as Spellmeyer's: after the decline of big theory, the professoriate needed "something new to talk about" (452), so it turned to the subject of the profession itself. But according to Rouse, Arts of Living more or less replicates the "pretentious obscurities" (460) of theory (derived from competition for authority with the sciences) from which Spellmeyer seeks to rescue the humanities. Of course these limitations in Spellmeyer's work, and other texts like it, do not reflect any lack of desire to affect change on the author's part, nor do they mean these efforts utterly fail to influence the field. But the limitations that Cooper and Rouse point out do suggest how difficult effecting real change is (i.e., practice)—as opposed to only calling for it abstractly (i.e., theory)—especially when it comes to changing the administrative and political policies and bodies that govern our work. These critiques also suggest how gradually ideological shifts develop,

if at all, and how impractical (and ironic) it is to have to fight theory, more or less, with more theory. So despite awareness of the relevancy crisis and the will of some scholars to stand up against it, solving the problem appears to require more than just theorizing about it.

Yet humanities scholars continue to publish many theoretical texts about the relevancy crisis as if this were not the case. The crisis has become a subject, like a text or an author, but not quite a catalyst for practical change. Twenty-five years after Bok's far more levelheaded initial book on the subject, and twenty-one years after the preceding generation's analogue in Bloom's The Closing of the American Mind, Anthony T. Kroneman of Yale Law School offered his 2008 Education's End: Why Our Colleges and Universities Have Given Up on the Meaning of Life. This book critiques what Kroneman considers to be higher education's contemporary default purpose—a careerist finishing school—and calls for a return to a higher state of relevancy through a Great Books-style approach to investigating the meaning of life. Ten months after this book appeared, Spellmeyer issued a scathing review in College English, in which he directly acknowledges "our present crisis" ("Review" 634), condemning Kroneman's kind of solution to it as being logically flawed, anachronistic, exclusionary, deceptive, and terrorizing.

Both Spellmeyer and Kroneman decry the corrosive influence of the culture wars, yet it seems neither of them is prepared to put aside internal disciplinary squabbling, which would appear to many in and outside of the academy, as more of the same. And so the relevancy crisis appears to remain unresolved to date, despite the abundance of attention it has drawn from scholars.

The selection of texts and reviews offered above should make at least two things apparent: (1) that there is indeed at least a perceived relevancy crisis relating to the purpose and identity of the university, especially the humanities (what is called here the first main channel of relevancy criticism), and (2) that two and a half decades worth of theory on the subject cannot agree on what to do about this persistent problem, let alone institute practical reforms to counteract it.

The second main channel of relevancy criticism concerns what has been called the *corporatization* (or the "market model") of the university, a subject that naturally overlaps with the work examined above, especially Bok's. Scholars who write in this train of thought seek to reveal and critique how, as the matter of its relevancy came into doubt, the university has increasingly become managed like big business. That is, in sharp contrast with the professional culture of the university's

Golden Age, the ethos in today's academy tends to mirror that of profit-driven corporations: charging clients great sums in for an ambiguous package of "excellence" and test scores, at the lowest possible cost to the institution, particularly in the area of labor in the humanities. In turn, the once very distinct (and supposedly still non-profit) realm of academe is literally and figuratively starting to resemble *business* as usual. Partly as a cause and partly as an effect, the university's former cultural relevance as champion of truth has been significantly challenged, if not gradually replaced, by an administrative insistence on efficiency and economy in its service to the material quest for upward mobility.

Once again, the issue bears on English studies perhaps most significantly in terms of faculty hiring and promoting. Williams argues that as the university became corporatized (or, in his terms, moved into its "Post Welfare State" phase), the structures and ethos of the marketplace took hold regarding flexible labor practices for nontenured faculty and hyper-productivity on the part of tenured faculty. For English scholars, who don't usually earn lucrative consulting deals or secure grants or patents for practical application, professional productivity takes the form of scholarship—notably, the published monograph. Since there are now far fewer tenure-track

positions and fewer opportunities to publish than before, competition in the labor market has naturally gotten fiercer.

Marc Bousquet critiques the accuracy of the marketplace analogy as representing the conditions of employment in academe. He reminds readers of the subtle but significant distinction that the term *market* is not a literal but a rhetorical descriptor. In his 2008<sup>13</sup> How the University Works: Higher Education and the Low-Wage Nation, Bousquet argues emphatically that current labor problems stem not from an overproduction of PhDs but an underproduction of tenure-track jobs. Overreliance on contingent faculty is neither a temporary fix for difficult economic times nor an accident, but in fact a permanent, deliberate system effectively compensating the same or similar work with considerably less reward and security, because of a rise in corporatized approaches to university management. Meanwhile, a divide continues to grow between the minority tenured and majority nontenured faculty, since the former must serve to manage the latter as a second class. Bousquet analyzes the self-perpetuating consequences of this mentality:

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<sup>13</sup> In this same year, Ohio State University English professor Frank Donoghue published a fairly similar critique, The Last Professors: The Corporate University and the Fate of the Humanities. But between the two, Bousquet is deferred to for his longstanding reputation as an expert on the subject.

Whatever actions faculty might take to secure their own working conditions, job-market theory defines their responsibility toward graduate students and former graduate students not as a relationship of solidarity with coworkers but, instead, as a managerial responsibility. In multiple roles [...] the tenured [regard] their responsibility to graduate [and contingent] employees through the lens of participating in the administration of the 'market.'

(20)

Professor of public policy at the University of California Berkeley David Kirp offers a considerably different point of view on the subject in his 2003 Shakespeare, Einstein, and the Bottom Line: The Marketing of Higher Education. Like Bok, he reminds readers that achieving economic flourishing has long since been a top priority in administering post-secondary education, and he warns against romanticizing academe or succumbing to false nostalgia for ideal old times. However, Kirp stipulates that "[w]hat is new, and troubling, is the raw power that money directly exerts over so many aspects of higher education" (3). His book is more of an inquiry into how and why universities market themselves than an indictment of that process, though Kirp seems to be suggesting that we keep in

check the increasingly extreme marketing strategies of higher education. He provides many examples of the burgeoning consumerist approach to the administration of universities, in which students are regarded as customers, presidents have become primarily fundraisers, and the brand status of institutions is paramount. Students and parents today expect material results as a result of paying the high cost of tuition, since universities are constantly raising prices to protect their status against competition, a process referred to by economists as "positional warfare" (2). But unlike Bousquet, Kirp regards these goals and tactics that come with the corporatization of the academy as a matter of seemingly irreversible fact, regardless of whether or not faculty approve of them. The values that determine one's approval or disapproval are relative to one's point of view, and in the case of faculty opinion, somewhat incidental with regard to high-level administrative policy, in practicality. As it stands, the contemporary university administrator is mainly preoccupied with the bottom-line, especially during the nation's current state of recession. Kirp notes neither disparagingly nor approvingly that "Entrepreneurial ambition, which used to be regarded in academe as a necessary evil, has become a virtue" (4).

The third main channel of relevancy criticism concerns the dubious state of the humanities, themselves, and English studies, particularly. There is an overlap here with the corporatization of the academy, as the humanities lag behind other areas in perceived economic viability. Largely for this reason, work in most humanities fields receives correspondingly less compensation and support than does the work of their more profitable institutional neighbors. For instance, Patricia Cohen reports in a March 2009 New York Times article that according to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences' Humanities Indicators Prototype, professors in the humanities are among the lowest-paid faculty members in the university ("Doctoral Candidates"). This phenomenon directly coincides with what is being called here the relevancy crisis. Cohen notes the decline in public and private humanities funding over the past thirty years and cites as an example the National Endowment for the Humanities budget, which today "is roughly a third of what it was at the high point of 1979, after adjusting for inflation."

Sociologist Stanley Aronowitz, of the City University of New York Graduate Center, also perceives a link between institutional corporatization and the decline of true post-secondary education. In his 2000 book The Knowledge Factory:

Dismantling the Corporate University and Creating True Higher Learning, Aronowitz criticizes contemporary universities for having too much become specialized training grounds for big business instead of providing a well-rounded education and promoting a greater intellectual culture. The pernicious causes and effects of this trend include, respectively, corporate partnerships that can compromise institutional missions, and a lack of critical engagement on students' parts—apparently even at the top institutions. Aronowitz's general complaint reads like a broad analogue of Robert Scholes' more specific critiques of English studies. In seeking reform, both scholars call for a renewed focus on teaching and the restructuring of higher education around learning and the pursuit of truth (liberally understood).

In his 1999 book The Rise and Fall of English: Restructuring English as a Discipline Scholes' offers an historic overview of the field's development toward today's relevancy crisis, including the field's consistent marginalization of composition<sup>14</sup> in that time, which ironically contributes to the problem of English's perceived obsolescence. Scholes colorfully explains:

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<sup>14</sup> For more on the literature/composition divide, see chapter two.

The useful, the practical, and even the intelligible were relegated to composition so that literature could stand as the complex embodiment of cultural *ideals*. [...] Teachers of literature became the priests and theologians of English, while teachers of composition were the nuns, barred from the priesthood, doing the shitwork of the field. (35-6, my emphasis)

However, the "ideals" maintained by the culture in question here have changed during the hundreds of years of English's development as a field. In short, literature today is simply not considered to be as relevant to people as it has been in the past. Scholes traces this problem to two now anachronous assumptions: first, that literature is "the scripture of modern civilization," and second, that "graduates of our literary curriculum would live sufficiently gracious lives for literature to remain intellectually and spiritually important to their lives" (77). In today's culture, neither of these appears to be the case, and few people outside the field of English studies are concerned about that. Scholes characteristically puts the matter in memorable terms: "our present enterprise is a leaky vessel, and the vessel is adrift in a culture almost as indifferent to its fate as the ocean itself [is]" (81).

Six years after The Rise and Fall of English Scholes still considers the field to be falling. He asks at least half seriously in the essay "Whither, or Wither, the Humanities?": "Are we going somewhere—or just going away?" (7). Scholes believes the work of English scholars has gotten too theoretical and specialized such that, for instance, biography does not tend to count as scholarship toward tenure. He wants English departments to evaluate scholarship in terms of its teaching function, not just for its status as an object (8), which is to say in most cases a monograph that few people read. For if we do not convince others in and outside the academy of the significance of our work, we risk—Scholes even says we "deserve"—withering away (9). Among the "neopragmatists" Scholes criticizes for denouncing the pursuit of truth and other defenses of the humanities is Stanley Fish, with whom he has frequently sparred, especially in Textual Power.

In a pair of much-discussed New York Times Op-Ed articles, Stanley Fish directly questions the relevancy of the humanities in today's culture. In his 2008 article he writes, "To the question 'of what use are the humanities?', the only honest answer is none whatsoever." In essence, and with a great deal of exposure, Fish is denying that the work of scholarly humanists achieves the ends it typically aims to serve, or at

least that it achieves them especially effectively. These are: good character, active citizenship, and aesthetic sensibility, for example. Fish goes so far as to claim that while "humanistic study" may teach critical thinking and increase one's cultural capital (i.e., even less lofty defenses of the humanities than above), it doesn't necessarily do so better than other disciplines or media do. In his 2009 article he argues abstractly that "higher education, properly understood, is distinguished by the absence of a direct and designed relationship between its activities and measurable effects in the world."

Scholars have variously responded to Fish's provocations, finding in these articles signs of everything from philistinism (Paquette) to sentimentality (James K. A. Smith). Regardless, when notable members of our own ranks make such declarations as Fish's, who would blame the public—with all its other reasons—for doubting the relevancy of the humanities? After all, fellow humanities scholars may be able to take his polemical outbursts with a grain of salt, but the public does not share our predisposition to rhetorically contextualize Fish's statements, nor does the public necessarily share our capacity to overturn such attacks on the humanities as being reductive, insidious, and destructive.

So in a market-driven environment, where the field's relevancy faces considerable skepticism, it should be little wonder that demand for, and therefore course offerings and tenure-track positions in, English studies would be down, since the pervading question about the English major has long since become "What are you going to do with *that*?" and a variety of common jokes link the English major variously with waiting tables or going back to (graduate) school. But relevancy is a serious matter that shows signs of getting worse. Citing a study by the National Center for Educational Statistics, Steven Brint exposes what he calls the "absolute" (which is to say, *not relative*) crisis facing liberal arts subjects like English at post-secondary institutions: "During a period [1970-1995] in which the [university] system grew by 50 percent, almost every field which constituted the old arts and sciences core of the undergraduate college was in absolute decline" (235).

### *Declining English Majors*

A fourth issue troubling the professional state of today's nontenured English PhD concerns English as a main course of study. In short, the major has been declining for some time and does not project favorably to rebound. Over the past three and half decades, the number of degrees conferred in English has

almost halved. As previously mentioned, this matter of the English major is considered to bear *indirectly* on the worsening state of nontenured English PhDs, so the subject will be treated with somewhat less attention here than the directly related crises in tenure and publishing, and even less than the other indirect matter of relevancy (above). But needless to say, the situation is discouraging enough to have prompted a special MLA inquiry and a report, which admitted in February 2009 that "today's students are less likely to choose language and literary study as majors than they were thirty-five or even fifteen years ago" ("Report" 1).

The U.S. Department of Education-commissioned 2006 Digest of Education Statistics reports that in 1970 almost eight percent of all undergraduate degrees conferred were in English. In 2004, English BA's accounted for less than four percent of all degrees conferred (Table 261). This decline seems considerably more significant in light of the 101 percent increase in college enrollments over the same period (Fast Facts). Bear in mind, these numbers are influenced by the emergence of new departments and programs such as African American Studies, Communications, Cultural Studies, Women's Studies, and Writing Studies, all of which draw on faculty, students, funding, and other resources heretofore the purview of English. A 2003 report of the ADE Ad

Hoc Committee on the English Major, "The Undergraduate English Major," finds that there may be something to the assertion that some students who would have previously majored in English are now choosing interdisciplinary programs in, say, cultural studies. Thus the major may not be declining so much as transforming (Schramm et al 71). But no matter how one chooses to interpret the decline, there is a significant decline in the number of undergraduate English majors, nonetheless, and this naturally affects the job market and professional conditions of nontenured English PhDs especially.

Moreover, enrollment in post-secondary institutions continues to rise, irrespective of the crises in English. The nearly 5,000 college campuses in the United States now enroll more than fourteen million undergraduates, with projected increases at least through the year 2014. The Bureau of Labor Statistics projects that through 2016 the need for post-secondary teachers will increase twenty-three percent. Although English majors are down, nearly all of the rising number of students will be required to take English composition classes and in many cases a literature survey elective, as well. But since tenure in English is simultaneously in decline, the number of contingent faculty will most likely continue to increase in the humanities, despite the efforts of unions and professional organizations to

counteract this trend. So one can easily see how the *numbers* of English teachers might remain steady while their professional status will change considerably. Harvard University English professor Louis Menand states the problem in blunt terms:

PhDs have trouble getting tenure-track jobs because fewer students major in English, and therefore the demand for English literature specialists has declined. But although students spend less time in literature classes today than they did twenty years ago, the number 1 subject in higher education, measured by the credit hours students devote to it, has remained the same. That subject is composition. Which explains why the system continues to accommodate all those [teaching assistant English] graduate students. (13)

This explains why the crisis in question facing English studies needs to be understood in terms of declining *majors* not in terms of *enrollment*<sup>15</sup>. Great numbers of students continue to pass through English departments and writing programs, but they do not tend to stay with us for more than a semester or two. The difference as it affects nontenured English PhDs is that

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<sup>15</sup> It also suggests what chapter two argues, that literature and composition should be put to better collaborative use together.

universities do not award many tenure-track jobs in composition, and—let's be honest—significant numbers of them are not likely to be awarded in the future. No matter how differently many scholars may feel about the work of English, Scholes reminds us of the tendency to view the "traditional English major" as a course "designed for young people entering the loop of English teaching, in which English teachers teach future English teachers of future English teachers" (Rise and Fall 86). With the business of English in as bad shape as it is, and with the rising interest in material payoff for the considerable financial investment required for an undergraduate education, there should be little wonder that fewer numbers of students seek to enter this "loop." In fact, many of their English teachers would be the first ones to tell them not to do so for their own good.

So it seems apparent that our profession is changing dramatically: English is no longer as popular a major as it once was; jobs are not nearly as stable; and the relevance of our scholarship can no longer be assumed, even by some of those producing that very same scholarship. Yet amid all these changes, we still seem to be expecting, measuring, and rewarding publication as if the discipline were still in the post-World War II Golden Age. In fact, the 2007 "MLA Task Force Report"

confirms that standards for tenure have only been *raised* in recent years, despite concurrent reports that sales and readership of monographs are in decline (c.f., Crewe, Guillory, Levine, Stanton). It is obvious, then, that English studies is in dire need of reform.

### **Proposed Reforms**

A number of prominent and lesser-known scholars have proposed many worthwhile responses to the crises facing English, including some especially creative—if not always realistic—calls for reform. A huge variety of scholarship seeking professional improvement exists; however, I will focus here exclusively on proposals for improving the two primary issues facing English studies examined above: (1) the comparatively discrete matter of the tenuring process, and (2) the more abstract (and ultimately related) matter of scholarship and publishing. Bousquet and many others have repeatedly sought reform for contingent faculty by means of structural change—that is, for example, through one's union, faculty senate, or professional organization. However, the fairly long history of this good and necessary work reveals such efforts to be only marginally effective in gaining small, local improvements in working conditions (e.g., contract benefits, office space, class size), but not especially successful in achieving substantial reforms on the large scale,

like the reconsideration of tenure standards and publication procedures. Substantial reform in these areas requires more than just activism; professional practices will have to be altered, too. Along these lines, the recommendations summarized below that pertain to tenure focus on administrative solutions. Those which address publishing are suggesting conceptual shifts be made to humanities scholarship itself. This chapter section reviews recent mainstream work published in both categories of solutions. The following, final chapter section comments on the viability of these solutions.

*Reforms in Tenuring*

This first category of reform proposals foregrounds the importance of improving the situation of junior faculty, namely the tenuring process, a subject area that bears a wide variety of specific suggestions, including a number of urgent calls from faculty at all levels in the field. As something of a starting point, Greenblatt muses in his letter perhaps too demurely for an MLA president rallying support for an urgent initiative, that “[w]e could try to persuade departments and universities to change their expectations for tenure reviews.[...] We could rethink what we need to conduct responsible evaluations of junior faculty members.” Yet since that point in 2002 many scholars have bolstered Greenblatt’s call, particularly in MLA

publications, with more forceful and specific proposals along the same lines, including: reconsidering and relaxing publication standards for tenure (Lewis "The Publishing Crisis", Stanton); foregrounding publications' quality over their quantity (Guillory, Harris), or over their perceived status (Scholes "Whither," Tumbleson); and rethinking our basic assumptions about research, teaching, and service (Coussons-Read and Stone, Guillory).

A number of sources on the subject seek to remind readers that a teaching college need not aspire to publication standards of a research one institution, and, in fact, that some colleges should (continue to) choose to value teaching and service equitably with publication. A case of institutional "status envy" has apparently afflicted many of the nation's postsecondary institutions, whereby schools of lower standing on institutional rating systems seek to emulate aspects of research one institutions, including by raising their standards for tenure, especially regarding publication of the monograph. Hall memorably portrays this trend as fetishistic, as a "creep of publication requirements throughout the Carnegie system," and as a betrayal the notion that scholarly expectations be consistent with the unique missions of individual institutions (85). It is both cause and effect of the monograph's tyrannical reign over

the field. As difficult as the trend may be to resist, its genesis is not difficult to understand, given the increasingly corporatized climate in higher education (see above) and the institutional culture of continuous and competitive measurement, such as by US News and World Report rankings<sup>16</sup>. The 2007 MLA task force report makes the goal of combating status envy one of its central missions, as have many of its respondents.

However, one respondent, John Ulrich, questions why the task force report expresses such a high degree of concern over the spread of the monograph requirement to teaching institutions, when the report's own evidence indicates that this may not particularly be a threat (119). The consternation he finds associated with this issue may be attributable to something else: not necessarily (only) envy on the part of lower-ranked schools, but (also) perhaps a kind of status *insecurity*, whereby research universities fear losing their prestige to and "one of [their] key borders" with teaching colleges, whose faculty now "mimic" the kind of scholarship that previously only doctoral institution faculty laid claim to. Ulrich strengthens his case

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<sup>16</sup> Institutional ranking is a complex and constantly debated subject. But for a recent, telling example of just how important such measures continue to be, one may turn to the spring 2009 report of Clemson University's manipulative efforts to claim a top *US News* score, in which one administrator admits "It [the ranking] is the thing around which almost everything revolves for the president's office" (qtd. in Lederman).

by aptly noting that all seven members of the MLA task force are employed by research one institutions (119). But meanwhile, as tenured hiring/promotion committee members struggle with their various brands of envy or insecurity, nontenured English PhDs continue to struggle with tenure-related issues that should have long since been resolved.

Most notably, as many reformers have argued for some time, the tenuring process should be made more transparent. Institutions or departments should develop stronger mentoring programs for all nontenured faculty members. Diana Fuss offers an especially reasonable and practical suggestion along these lines, that assistant professors be issued detailed, frequently updated junior faculty handbooks upon their initial appointment. Fuss regards this step as the central aspect of a greater "cross-rank collaboration" and communication that needs to exist between tenured and nontenured faculty, not as an act of generosity but as a "professional responsibility" (111). Fuss offers a detailed account and example of what should be included in junior faculty handbooks. Teresa Mangum has also spoken specifically and eloquently about such handbooks ("Preparing") and offers one such text from her own department on her website ([University](#)).

Paul Hanstedt and others would like this kind of improved support for emerging PhDs to begin even earlier than upon their hiring. Graduate students, he argues, should be better prepared for the realities of the job market. Such preparation includes improved understanding of the diverse appointments available, from the research one to the community college, and the various corresponding job requirements. Hanstedt also considers the development of such awareness to be a potential means of preserving the institutional diversity that some fear is eroding nationwide. Another benefit of better job market savvy on the part of graduate students might be a healthy, and some would say overdue, reconsideration of the nature of the doctoral dissertation.

Catharine Stimpson ("A Dean's View") and Wendell Harris separately recommend that graduate humanities programs come to consider the dissertation alternatively than basically a monograph in process. Toward this end, Stimpson, who is dean of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences at New York University and a past president of the MLA, wants increased significance to be given to journal publication by tenure committees—since she is no doubt aware that such reform will occur either top down or not all. In terms of alternative scholarship to the gold standard of the monograph, Stimpson asks: "Why not the essay, or

a series of linked essays? Why not other forms of scholarly achievement? And why must the dissertation be a 'proto-book'? Why indeed? Is there any other form the dissertation might take?" (74). Writing about the "present problem" of tenure criteria, Harris claims that English scholars try to publish too early, too often, and too theoretically for anyone to keep up, or want to keep up with what is produced. This pattern negatively influences dissertation writing which, according to him, tends to be uninteresting, padded, and prone to trendiness (48). Clearly nostalgic for past days of more gradual and, in his view, more authentic scholarship, Harris asks seriously: "How much of the increased production of literary criticism and theory is relevant to anything other than the need for tenure and promotion?" (48-9).

Former MLA president Domna Stanton has also proposed a number of reforms on tenure and the state of the junior faculty member. She advocates for start-up funds or "publishing subventions" for junior faculty in the humanities, similar to those already awarded today in the sciences. Others before her have made such a call, including Greenblatt and Cathy Davidson, the latter of whom may have been the first to propose a figure—\$5,000–\$7,000—to a national audience (in The Chronicle of Higher Education). Stanton upped the proposed sum to \$20,000, arguing that "any

college or university that cannot afford to subsidize book publication should not demand book publication for tenure, especially in fields where even an outstanding book cannot hope to break even" (36). Meanwhile, she recommends that junior faculty should be especially active in seeking advisement from mentors not only on the development of manuscripts but also on understanding and negotiating the ever-changing terrain of publication in light of the current crises (38-9).

*Reforms in Publishing*

The second, and somewhat more abstract or dispersed, category of reforms foregrounds the need to reconsider the nature of our published scholarship. The most prevalent of the many recommendations in this area calls on tenure and promotion committees to adopt a more "capacious conception of scholarship," as the 2007 "MLA Task Force Report" puts it (11). That is, above all else, reformers seem to be urging the field to increase the professional value assigned to scholarship other than the tyrannical monograph, such as the journal essay, edited collections, textbooks, bibliographical scholarship, and the substantive book review. This argument, which might be called the "more capacious view," in fact, originates in an earlier effort sponsored by the MLA: the 2002 MLA Ad Hoc Committee on the Future of Scholarly Publishing. This committee dedicated

itself to raising awareness among departments and universities about the current troubled state of publishing and to accordingly bring tenure requirements in line with this reality. It issued such recommendations as widening the scope of acceptable scholarship beyond the monograph, valuing quality over quantity of publications, and improving the production and evaluation of web-based work.

In addition to the more capacious view, various other proposals for improving the field's publishing practices have been offered. Among the many noteworthy ideas are: more publishing support for junior faculty members, such as improved release time and better mentoring (MLA Task Force); accepting less and later publishing for tenure (Harris, Waters "Tenure"); increasing the influence of disciplinary societies, such as the MLA and AHA (Harris, Katz); reducing the number and size of English PhD programs (Harris); and ceasing or curbing our perennial competition with the sciences (Waters "Tenure," Scholes "Whither," Harris).

These significant and ambitious recommendations not discounted, the most viable current proposal for improving publishing practices seems to be the promotion of digital scholarship, if only for its relative ease—some might say its inevitability—in

comparison with the other proposals, which are neither easy nor hardly inevitable. One of the many advantages of newly emerging technologies would be the opportunity for the field to take control of peer review from the presses, or as Caroline Levine calls for in her 2007 article "Rethinking Peer Review and the Fate of the Monograph," the necessary act of "detach[ing] evaluation from the mechanics of publication" (102). According to Levine's plan, panels of scholars would peer review manuscripts without consideration of how or whether they are published after this crucial evaluation stage, so that "we would no longer tie tenure decisions to the exigencies of profit-driven businesses" (103), and would in effect become "our own professionally certified agents" (103). Given what we know about the current state of academic publishing, Levine warns that "[a]s long as university presses continue to tie their profits to the production of printed books, peer review of monographs will be bound up with the crisis in academic publishing" (102). In a highly practical tone, she adds that "it is certainly time to rethink book publication in an era of shrinking book consumption and rising digital distribution" (105).

Levine offers useful details in her article, something which can be surprisingly rare in literature on reforming the crises.

Every several years, she imagines, a new panel of anonymous experts in every field—who are unaffiliated with any presses—would be created to review submitted manuscripts. Their motivation would be a high level of prestige and distinction attached to the position as well as possibly an income generated by those who are submitting texts. She recommends a \$500 “pay-as-you-go model,” which would discourage “idle submissions” of manuscripts (104), and which is less than the cost of traveling to conventions for similar purposes. Some institutions are already providing junior faculty with publishing subventions (c.f. Davidson, Greenblatt, Stanton), and Levine predicts that this money would become a regular part of hiring packages if her proposal were adopted. Submitted manuscripts could be approved, returned for revision, or rejected (and potentially resubmitted in the future to new panels). Approval would ensure the relevant reward of peer review, and then authors could pursue various means of publishing the text (but without the usual, debilitating pressure), including traditional methods, electronic publication, and self and local publication.

Levine lists five advantages to her idea: (1) traditional presses would no longer be connected with (or bogged down by) the peer review process; (2) scholars would have better control over their publications, including design, marketing, and

keeping texts in print; (3) some might opt to make their publications downloadable for free; (4) related tenure decisions would no longer be contingent upon the economics of publishing houses; (5) publishers themselves might in turn "come to us" with new publishing and marketing ideas (102-03). She also acknowledges several challenges and problems with her proposal, perhaps the most significant of which is that: "for now, electronic texts provoke anxiety and uncertainty. They look less serious and less reliably rigorous than conventional print publications" (101). But presumably this attitude would change for the better if Levine's idea could be taken up by departments and universities on a large scale.

Other scholars and groups that have recently endorsed the call for better attention to digital scholarship include Hall, Katz, Sayre, Stanton, Stimpson ("A Dean's View"), Waters, the 2002 MLA Ad Hoc committee and the 2007 MLA Task Force. Douglas J. Amy, professor of politics at Mount Holyoke College, testifies in a June 2009 article that his most recent manuscript—which he published online himself—has been read by considerably more readers than his previous three (hard copy) books *combined*. There is even good reason to believe that digital scholarship is a burgeoning reality no matter what degree of endorsement it receives from academics, since the presses themselves are

leading the change. The University of Michigan Press, for instance, announced in spring 2009 that within two years a large majority of its monographs will be published exclusively as digital texts, a move that apparently many university presses are now considering. Phil Pochoda, director of the press, explains this move: "I have been increasingly convinced that the business model based on printed monograph was not merely failing but broken. [...] Scholarly presses will be primarily digital in a decade. Why not seize the opportunity to do it now?" (qtd. in Jaschik "Farewell").

Of course, many will still resist the change to digital for various reasons that, over time, will be more difficult to distinguish from mere nostalgia. For example, professional writer and board member of the Authors Guild James Gleick notes in his November 2008 New York Times opinion piece that although digital media are drastically changing the book publishing industry, there is still "a chance for new life" for the printed book, which, like the hammer he claims, "will never go obsolete." He does not offer the usual quaint defense that muses sentimentally on sensory pleasures of the object of a book; rather, he co-opts the language of its challenger, claiming that "the book is *technology* that works" (my emphasis). He argues that readers value certain genres that did not exist

until the codex (presumably implying that there is still a necessary connection). Novels, biographies, and narrative nonfiction provide "deep immersion in constructed textual worlds," so as to comprise the "books that possess one and the books one wants to possess." Gleick acknowledges that of course some genres are dead in book form, for example the encyclopedia. But even as Google has already digitized over seven million titles, one effect of this has been to revive out-of-print but still copyrighted texts from out of a "limbo," by earning from them advertising and licensing fees that hitherto would not have earned rights-holders anything by sitting in libraries and used book shops. So perhaps digitization does not mean the obsolescence of the book, as some would fear, so much as its evolution. Gleick is hopeful about this, declaring "a new beginning - a vast trove of books restored to the marketplace," or in grander terms: "a gift of unlimited longevity." This would sound hopeful for the type of books scholars write, which quite often recede quickly into limbo after publication, but we must note that new media do not account for (which is to say, do not improve any scholarly text's) *readability* and *relevance*. Along these lines, then, Gleick's advice to traditional book publishers (who can't compete with the speed and low cost of new media) might well be taken up by books' authors as well: make a

book "a thing of beauty. Make it as well as you can. People want to cherish it."

Gleick's optimism is certainly welcome but may not be neatly applicable to academe, ironically particularly in the humanities, where even established insiders appear to be giving up on the traditional book, and where scholarship seldom achieves "thing of beauty" status. Sayre, for one, critiques the field's current attitude toward book publication as "primitive," "fetishistic," and "nostalgic" (53), recommending—among other things—that the humanities follow the lead of some scientists by making our work not only digital but also open-access (57).

Meanwhile, other branches of publishing reform proposals quietly continue to assert themselves, for instance the call to make our scholarly work directly a function of our teaching. Scholes has been a leader in this effort ("Whither"), and Harris and Marshall Gregory have also submitted entreaties along these lines. This move, they contend, would have the added benefit of better explaining in and outside of the university what we do, why we do it, and why that is important. Many scholars have issued similar calls to "go public" (cf. Giroux, Mortensen, Scholes "Wither," Stimpson "The Public Duties"), but Gabriel

Paquette offers a unique angle on this familiar argument in his January 2009 article "The Relevance of the Humanities." He wants to broaden and improve our public reception particularly by collaborating with the government in mutually beneficial (and presumably better funded) projects. Our scholarship, the argument goes, should exhibit better civic engagement, and may be "justified to the wider public through substantive contributions to today's most pressing policy questions."

Paquette offers few details, and does not elaborate on how to improve teaching, focusing instead on general areas to pursue in light of his argument. He invokes, for example: "government-university collaboration on a wide range of crucial issues, including public transport infrastructure, early childhood education, green design, civil war mediation, food security, ethnic strife, poverty alleviation, city planning, and immigration reform," as well as "environmental degradation, foreign aid effectiveness, health care delivery, math and sciences achievement in secondary schools, and drug policy."

Paquette uses commonsense rhetoric (e.g., "benefits outweigh the risks," "baby should not be thrown out with the bathwater") to sidestep opposing arguments, including (1) objections to utilitarian critiques of the humanities: that evaluation mechanisms could corrupt the quality of research, and that the

university should be a check and balance against the “encroaching, nefarious influence of the state,” and (2) objections to militarizing scholarship: that our work could be co-opted in service of war, and that it could be “compromised” or “ideologically distorted.” He explains how we can reform current collaborative efforts with the government by making significant improvements in our communication, and he calls for three forms of university-government collaboration: building on current linkages, including expanding their budgets and scopes; better and more direct application of academic scholarship to policy production; and increasing incentive for academics to engage in federal initiatives, including the development of “promotion criteria modified to reward such interaction.”

Still other forms of publishing reforms exist, further at the margins of the discussion. Psychology professor Gary Lewandowski, for one, offers a consoling response to the publishing crisis, assuring his academic readers to just be themselves and perform well at the work they love (e.g., for “the intrinsic joy of your calling”), which will either constitute enough to get them tenured—which, as he points out, will always be a mystifying process, no matter how much one tries to clarify it—or it won’t be. Not fatalistic but inspired, ultimately Lewandowski sees this ethic as a way of

attaining a job that one truly values and in which one is truly valued. He adds that the "anxiety" and "stress" of obsessing about tenure can actually make one less effective at doing the very things that gets one tenure.<sup>17</sup>

Along similar lines but perhaps more fatalistically than Lewandowski, Kevin Brown reminds readers in his summer 2008 Academe article, "Writing What I Want in a Publish-or-Perish World," that not every scholar needs to publish at the rate required by many current tenure standards, adding that the alternative is not necessarily perishing. Brown's position is that the reductive, old "publish or perish" dichotomy does not account for the whole truth, especially now, given the somewhat increased attention paid to publication opportunities in alternative media. In fact, he argues, most professors do not publish nearly as much as we imagine they do. For support, he turns to a 2007 Chronicle of Higher Education report on a study called the "Faculty Scholarly Productivity Index," which demonstrates that even at the top ranked English program in 2005, Harvard, "only 13 percent of the professors in the field had journal publications, and only 37 percent had book publications" (Brown 62).

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<sup>17</sup> See also Rockquemore on this.

Brown's position that we need to alert (presumably graduate) students to the wider variety of professional options available to them resembles that of the MLA Task Force and some of its respondents, though he does not acknowledge this, opting to narratively describe the pros and cons of his position at a teaching institution. His call to action is earnest if somewhat limited:

we need to show our students that there are other models.[...] Instead of limiting our students' views of academia, let's expand them and show them a world where they do not have to fear perishing if they choose to write what they want. We can show them possibilities they have never thought of before, and we can live them out ourselves. (63)

Brown's and all of these other scholars' earnest intentions and thoughtful recommendations not discounted, a big problem nevertheless remains: that each of the ideas explained above are still only reform *proposals*, not *solutions* per se. The important difference is that a proposal remains merely theoretical until it is practically applied as a solution. And where do we see any widespread application of these proposals today? Unfortunately, there are any number of limitations in

the current state of the academy that restrict English studies' ability to resolve its publishing and tenuring problems, not least of which is what Katz characterizes as a pervasive "Not on my campus" attitude toward instituting reform, a symptom of so-called status envy and its outdated star system (89). The next, and last, chapter section examines some of these limitations.

### **Some Limitations**

All of the reform proposals discussed above have their place and are certainly worthy of as much consideration as they can garner. But these proposals also have a number of substantial limitations to be overcome before they will generate enough attention as to develop into actual solutions. To begin, one may speculate about the basic question of whether or not, or the extent to which, the various crises and their proposed reforms are known and considered sufficiently urgent to the powers that be to prompt decisive action. But even putting aside this probably immeasurable contingency, one cannot discount the extremely significant influence of institutional history and context in anticipating (the difficulty of) implementing any reform.

A proposal such as formalizing cross-rank mentorships, for instance, may work well in one department setting but not in

another. Furthermore, in many cases it would likely be beneficial to defer to quantity over quality of publication in future tenure decisions, but this policy recommendation stands very little chance of being adopted by institutions seeking to improve their rankings, say, in US News and World Report, which for better or worse appears to be a large majority of institutions. Sayre, for one, contends that “[a]n administrator will be leery of revising tenure standards or accepting articles in place of the ‘tenure book’ lest his or her department or institution suffer a decline in prestige” (54). While it is true that individual departments remain largely autonomous bodies, tenure and promotion are also institutional matters, after all. For this reason, presidents, provosts, deans, or interdisciplinary personnel committees may unwittingly sideline quality in favor of quantity no matter what a particular collegial faculty may determine to be their own standards. Moreover, e-books, online journals, and other digital venues are likely to increasingly expand the possibilities for scholarly publication, but even as Levine herself points out, e-publishing is not necessarily cheaper than paper publishing. Yet the state of the crisis in publishing is mainly determined by financial considerations not, unfortunately, according to which moves would most benefit nontenured faculty members. So the notable difference between a proposal and a solution should be

acknowledged in these discussions, and the limitations contributing to that difference must be examined in earnest before the situation is likely to improve much.

Many of the reform proposals that make good sense in theory and which offer the most promising results are also so vast or abstract as to be far beyond the power of a single department, institution, or professional society, let alone any individual, to execute. Take, for example, two of Taylor's major 2009 recommendations: that departments be abolished in favor of "problem-focused programs," and that the curriculum be restructured as a "cross-disciplinary and cross-cultural" entity, "like a web or complex adaptive network" dealing with what he calls "zones of inquiry." These are sound recommendations, with strong supporting evidence, but we have also heard such ideas before. Fifteen years ago, in 1994, Patricia Bizzell argued that traditional areas in English studies should be restructured according to "contact zones," a phrase coined by Mary Louise Pratt in 1991 to describe sites of unequal power relations and instances in which different cultures interact and clash. It doesn't seem likely that Taylor's zones of inquiry will be any more influential than were Bizzell and Pratt's contact zones in effecting dramatic

curricular, departmental, or institutional restructuring. In short, who can or will institute such monumental changes?

In addition to the problem of the inability to implement reform there is the matter of motivation to do so (not to mention the grey area where these two overlap). The delicate question of motivation must be fairly considered. For instance, the very difficult objective of changing tenure and publication standards may not always (perhaps not even commonly) be regarded as a top priority to faculty members who have already met these standards or to administrators with the bottom-line and a host of other legitimate concerns already constantly at stake. If the system in place does not register to these parties as sufficiently broken, then their corresponding reasoning might well be to ask why it must be fixed, especially when the remedy requires large scale restructuring. Acknowledging this point of view does not necessarily endorse the growing stereotype that administrators and senior faculty are uncaring toward junior colleagues, but rather recognizes the reality that tenured faculty and administrators are often understandably preoccupied with other important responsibilities. In fact, it has often been noted while simultaneously documenting the rise in contingent labor that the postsecondary "staffing crisis" (Porter, "An Agenda" 2) also regrettably puts greater strain on shrinking tenured

faculties to serve on committees, offer advisement, perform oversight, etc. And administrators naturally have the best interest of the institution in mind, even when their decisions conflict with or seem to ignore the interests of some of the institution's membership. Nevertheless, as many scholars have demonstrated with considerable evidence, there still remains a deplorable lack of support for and attention to nontenured faculty, comprising what is an indisputably tiered system—or a form of professional discrimination—perhaps especially as concerns English and composition studies.

Some scholars argue that the current state of the profession exhibits a widespread renunciation of an "ethical obligation" (Hall 88) to the future of new PhDs. If so, then this occurs in part by curtailing the apprenticeship model of faculty development that has typically justified the extreme difficulty and expense of graduate training. Donna Strickland characterizes this situation as the discipline's "managerial unconscious," whereby the professional status of (assuredly well-meaning) department administrators exists, and thrives, at the expense of junior colleagues whose contingent employment hinges precariously on factors ranging from enrollment fluctuations to legislative caprice. Such administrators and their senior colleagues are nonetheless, but understandably,

inclined to mentor junior faculty and advise PhD candidates in terms that are complicit with sustaining the current system, if only because that system—flawed as it may be—must carry on. Additionally, this system is the one that they have mastered; it's what they are trained for and practiced in; and it has done very well for them. No doubt, these individuals hope for the same to eventually be true of their nontenured colleagues, but today's professional reality unfortunately does not bear out this hope in most cases.

The problem is obviously not a lack of good reform proposals but, as has just been suggested, often an inability and sometimes an unwillingness to implement the proposals effectively. The focus, then, should be not only what to do about the crises but also *how* to do it. This is where theory meets practice and where English studies appears to be at something of a standstill. No matter what happens (or doesn't happen), change will likely only occur if it may come about gradually and carefully. After all, revising tenure or publishing expectations, and restructuring entire curricula or departments, are not only extremely difficult reforms to implement but also very clearly points of potential resentment and resistance, as we are beginning to see. The small minority of faculty with the power to stand any chance of instituting

policy changes may not only have little *direct* stake in doing so, but some of these same people also resist the notion of making such "reforms" in the first place. Their reasoning might combine with and compound the managerial unconscious as such: "Generations of scholars have had to pass through the same rigors of tenure review, so why should today's junior faculty be granted an exception to that? A bad job market should not compromise our expectations." What's more likely, however, than this deliberate brand of meditation on what would be a controllable situation is a partly unwitting approach to running a largely uncontrollable flawed system as best as one can manage. Unfortunately, the fact that the MLA has issued repeated calls for reform obviously does not mean that a department chair or program director has the means, or will ever have the means, to implement them.

For an example of just how limited the powers of even such significant calls to reform are, and how change comes slowly or even not at all, consider the testimony offered in December 2008 by Cheryl Glenn, former chair of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) and of the MLA Division on the History and Theory of Rhetoric and Composition. Glenn compared the 2007 MLA task force report to a very similar call for improved professional conditions in 1989 by the CCCC known

as the "Statement of Principles and Standards for the Postsecondary Teaching of Writing" (CCCC "Statement"<sup>18</sup>). She expresses her sadness over how little reform had been made on the same subject in eighteen years, and she also notes how poorly timed the movement to institute reform is today, stating: "It's really a bleak day economically. [...] Faculty searches are being canceled all over the nation. Chances are the employment picture won't change any time soon" (qtd. in Jaschik "Adjunctification").

Cary Nelson, a highly respected English studies labor theorist, goes much further than lamenting the MLA's redundancy and bad timing, like Glenn does. He accuses the MLA outright of deliberately ignoring the past twenty years of the "adjunctification of English." Nelson dismisses the 2007 task force report as a "symbolic and self-satisfied" symptom of the MLA's exploitive "corporate style" lip service ("BELATED"). Richard Haswell agrees, writing in direct response to Nelson's comments: "Big surprise. Once again the Modern Language Association and the Association of Departments of English recommend expediency and the status quo. The report should be read for its data, not for its recommendations."

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<sup>18</sup> See chapter two for a fuller account of the CCCC "Statement."

Stimpson places a lot of the blame for the current situation on tenured faculty, asserting that: "self-interested, faculty-controlled graduate programs are still too reluctant to limit admissions, still suspicious about doing regional coordination of graduate curricula and courses, and still petitioning for [...] more students to teach," facts which she considers to reveal "how much easier it is to act on behalf of one's self" than on behalf of "the well-being of potential graduate students and of the profession as a whole" ("A Dean's View" 73).

As for the publishing crisis, in particular, both Harris and Fuss point out the considerable limitations of the very proposed reforms they advocate in their articles. Harris admits that he doesn't expect his proposals to be implemented, but offers a prediction that already appears to be coming true: publishing will become increasingly difficult, some forms of electronic scholarship and perhaps articles will gain in stature, and English departments will continue to experience declines in tenure lines and majors. He adds that the "root of the problem" will "continue to be ignored," which is that publishing in the humanities does not have the same purpose and position as it does in the sciences, though it does not need to. He concludes on a cynical note, anticipating that English studies will

continue to proclaim its essential status while it becomes another example of what Matthew Arnold called: "the grand name without the grand thing" (qtd. in Harris 50).

Fuss disclaims that her proposed junior faculty handbook reform proposal will not "solve all the problems that beset a department's present or threaten its future" (110). Along the lines of the problem of lacking motivation, she acknowledges "academia's deep-seated preference, in matters of governance, for precedent over procedure" (109). This may be especially true of such a labor-intensive project as assembling and composing a junior faculty handbook, which "must be revisited regularly," and which she admits "may necessitate, for most departments, having discussions that many would prefer to avoid" (112). Perhaps even more significant an obstacle to the junior faculty handbook lies in its legal ramifications, especially in the eyes of administrators. Fuss concedes that the idea "is likely to meet with initial resistance from university officers, who are charged not only with securing the integrity of promotion reviews but also with protecting the school from lawsuits" (110).

While many of the proposed solutions listed above carry some promise for improvement, albeit limited, very few are empowering

to nontenured English PhDs *themselves*, because—as has been shown—these reforms require action at the senior faculty, departmental, or administrative levels. Such action is vital, and long overdue but not likely to happen quickly or, in some cases, at all. In the meantime, junior faculty are coming up for tenure now, and many nontenure-track faculty are wondering if they will ever find a stable, let alone suitable job. Therefore, circumstances surrounding the crises in tenure, publication, relevancy, and the English major suggest that it comes to the two thirds of new English PhDs—that is, the majority who does not earn tenure, for whom publishing is still linked to potential perishing—to act upon their own interests. After all, if the current, system does not reward the majority of these scholars, then they do not stand to lose much by imagining new possibilities for their work. So it seems there may be an alternative to the infamous binary “publish or perish.” Some new English PhDs can, and must, *pioneer*.

Chapter two introduces the case for an additional avenue for reform not (yet) receiving sufficient attention, indeed a so-called effort to pioneer. Although it will take all levels of faculty as well as administrators, trustees, and politicians to adequately respond to the various crises afflicting higher education, perhaps the primary driving force behind this

movement will have to be those without traditional stakes in the system's current state, which is to say, contingent faculty, and perhaps most notably nontenured PhDs.

## Chapter Two

### O Pioneers? Nontenured English PhDs, Collaboration, and Bridging the Literature/Composition Divide

#### **Abstract**

In the discourse of proposed solutions to the various crises outlined in chapter one, the role of nontenured faculty has been downplayed, and collaboration hardly gets mentioned at all. The second chapter links these two neglected subjects by suggesting a means for disenfranchised scholars to act on their own behalf and, in doing so, to potentially advance reforms to the field itself. In advocating on behalf of the growing population of nontenured English PhDs and their variously contingent colleagues of all levels<sup>19</sup>—who I believe should seek to pioneer new professional possibilities—chapter two calls for more attention to scholarly collaboration, especially for innovative reinterpretations and practices thereof. One such innovation—a collaboration of literature and composition theory called “literaturing composition”—is proposed in the contexts of audience theory and scholarship on felt sense. (Chapters three and four develop this case with examples.) After an

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<sup>19</sup> As of December 2008, nontenured faculty staffed a fraction less than seventy percent of all course sections in English (Modern Language Association).

introduction, chapter two includes the following sections: *O Pioneers: The Rise of the Nontenured PhD, In Favor of Collaboration, The Literature/Composition Divide, and Literaturing Composition: The Indeterminate Audience and Felt Sense.*

### **Introduction**

Since published work in English studies apparently has fewer readers and venues than it used to enjoy—and this situation appears unlikely to improve under the current system, as chapter one demonstrates—then it makes sense for English scholars to seek supplements and alternatives to what have been traditional professional practices in the field. For instance, we might consider expecting fewer but perhaps better-quality publications from junior faculty, and promoting alternative modes of scholarship for English PhDs off the tenure track. No matter how sensible these and other proposals are, however, it has already been seen above that solutions to the contemporary crises in higher education stand relatively little chance of timely implementation from the top down. So this chapter proposes that scholars who are further down the professional hierarchy, such as nontenured PhDs—even particularly those who are unlikely to ever earn tenure—ought to seriously consider stimulating their own change in the system. If they do not wish

to do so for benefiting a field that trained them for nonexistent positions, which is understandable, then perhaps they may pioneer changes in order to forge more satisfying professional options for themselves other than what little the margins of the status quo currently yield them. In other words, at very least scholarly innovation may be preferable to the alternatives of either doing no work or of doing the same work as usual but without the same reward.

If there is—and there should be—any reason for nontenured PhDs to conduct scholarship other than to earn themselves tenure, then that reason will almost certainly survive the tenure and publishing crises, since no necessary correlation exists there. Also because of this lacking correlation, such work may likely take on new forms and purposes. That is, being more or less exempt from the limiting constraints of tenure and publishing requirements, this scholarship would potentially be freer than traditional scholarship is to explore new possibilities, or to *pioneer*, as it were. In other words, if they are already resigned to the status of being nontenured, then pioneering contingents who are not seeking tenure<sup>20</sup> could contribute worthwhile alternative scholarship within reasonable variation

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<sup>20</sup> (or at least not seeking tenure under the usual, fading model)

from professional routines and without threat of potentially dire consequences. For instance, unlike their tenure-track colleagues, nontenure-track PhDs are not beholden to such usual constraints as particular subject matter, media, genres, rhetoric, style, length, individual authorship, status and venue of publication, and so on. Some of the products of this newfound freedom might even eventually serve to somewhat counteract the crises of relevancy and declining majors. After all, an English PhD is above all else a trained scholar—a researcher and writer—regardless of having, seeking, or not having or not seeking tenure. So given their relatively greater freedom to innovate, nontenured English PhDs, to some extent, may ironically be well-positioned to reinvigorate the field's output with publications (variously understood) that break new ground.

So what will be the nature of this work done by the rising numbers of trained scholars off the tenure track, and what

effect will that have on the field's relevance?<sup>21</sup> Collaboration, as this chapter will variously consider it, is one of a number of scholarly methods that may be pursued more freely by nontenured PhDs than by their tenure-track colleagues. Often collaboration is conflated with coauthorship (i.e., to be distinguished from single authorship), which is a practice this chapter certainly endorses—in passing—as a somewhat “alternative” option for contingents to take up. Yet other conceptions of collaboration also merit the attention of scholars, especially under current professional circumstances in English studies. We are all familiar with interdisciplinary collaboration (usually in the form of writing across the curriculum or writing in the disciplines<sup>22</sup> programs), and this burgeoning movement should certainly continue to be developed. But an unfortunately missed cooperative opportunity exists in many cases right beneath our noses in English departments, one which conveniently does not rely on the involvement of institutional administration like WAC and WID do, and which

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<sup>21</sup> In anticipation of charges of anachronistic Pollyannaism, I submit two disclaimers. First, my position would not be prudent or possible without the preexistence of excellent work being done to raise awareness to the troubled professional state of contingent faculty (too abundant to cite), to which I have contributed, incidentally. Second, its supplemental status having been acknowledged, the present position remains preferable to common alternatives such as merely waiting for change or repeatedly lamenting matters or, worse, blaming or demanding of ineffectual parties. Whether it is fair or not, nontenured faculty must make their own cases now, given the inherited circumstances, and I contend that in doing so they should take advantage of their creativity.

<sup>22</sup> WAC and WID, respectively.

extends beyond curricular application into theoretical scholarship as well. That is, the potential for greater intellectual collaboration between literary and composition studies as fields of theoretical inquiry (as opposed to pedagogical categories, e.g.).

Since the origins of modern higher education in the nineteenth century, the study of literature has consistently enjoyed (until recently) an especially high degree of prestige, whereas the less-esteemed practice of English composition has at least consistently maintained a high degree of demand. That is to say, while students (and the metonymic public from which they come and return) respectfully receive the belles-lettres, they in fact invest more time and practical capital in the act of composing<sup>23</sup>. However, these sister disciplines are each troubled today, for different reasons: in short, literature is falling from favor (see above), and composition suffers a serious labor crisis (see below). For this, a pooling of resources, as it were, is proposed toward potential mutual benefit in these respects, not nearly a cure-all but a step disempowered English

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<sup>23</sup> Recall Menand's statistic from chapter one, identifying composition classes as top among all others in credit hours spent by postsecondary students. And consider the common-sensical ethic we might hear from any concerned parents counseling their college-matriculated children: you *have to* know how to write in order to succeed. For all the utmost respect he is rightly ascribed, not even Shakespeare commands that kind of presumed relevance in the public eye.

PhDs can take toward improving their own lot. This chapter recommends a tactic called *literaturing composition*—which can be regarded as a collaboration of literature and composition theory, such that each may become more generally accessible and relevant. To offer a reductive view by way of introduction, one might think of it as using literature as a heuristic for instruction in rhetoric, a coupling, as it were, of the respective prestige and relevance mentioned above.

This proposition follows the urgent call of many well-regarded scholars to reconsider the purpose of our scholarship as a mode of teaching (cf. Gregory, Guillory, Hall, Harris, Katz, Scholes). In warning that English studies as we know it risks withering away otherwise, Robert Scholes recommends in 2005 in no uncertain terms that “we should think of our publications as another mode of teaching” (8). Marshall Gregory contends that scholars should focus on teaching as a subject to unify the contentious discipline of English studies: “For [our students’] sake, if not our own, we need a fund of disciplinary agreement that is as operationally functional as theoretically negotiable” (42). Although it can be overstated in some cases, there is still some validity to the culture wars-era charge that the hyper-specialization (or esotericism if you prefer) of much contemporary English scholarship strays from the ideal of

teaching. It is not proposed here to replace one kind of scholarship with the other but rather to develop and perhaps foreground the pedagogical element of more of our published work by means of a unique kind of collaboration: literaturing composition. For compositionists, who largely remain a teaching faculty, this strategy foregrounds our pedagogical strength and experience. For literature scholars, it provides a practical boost for our subject during the current period of widespread dubiousness.

This chapter seeks to introduce and explain why the tactic of literaturing composition would be employed to better instruct students and the public about the theoretical but highly relevant example subjects of audience and felt sense. The same might be done for any number of other rhetorical issues. For the most part, the current state of our scholarship does not seek to bring wide exposure to such seemingly specialized subjects, a fact which most likely contributes to the field's various crises and which underestimates the cultural relevance of our scholarship on rhetoric. It will be argued that by means of strategic collaboration, nontenured PhDs might be in an especially effective position to foster positive change in this regard (among other things that must be done by all involved parties), precisely because of their potential lack of the usual

careerist motivation to publish. Ironically, this possibility could eventually improve their own lot and incidentally the state of the discipline, especially given recent calls to reinterpret the nature of our scholarship and publishing (see chapter one).

### **O Pioneers: The Rise of the Nontenured PhD**

There are of course numerous regrettable aspects to being one of the many nontenured English PhDs in academe (e.g., overworked, underpaid, lacking job security), but this is neither new information anymore nor a problem that will resolve satisfactorily soon, if ever. For these reasons, merely further pointing out to ourselves the now obvious professional reality and hoping ambiguously or calling for change seems to be an insufficient response to the crisis. By now, even the general public has been well informed of the situation by some recent general readership books and many popular periodical articles abounding on the subject. So a question should inevitably occur to the many of us currently in or approaching the position of being a nontenured English PhD: *What else to do, then?*

Faced with this dilemma, some emerging PhDs decide to seek employment elsewhere (e.g., non-profits, government, or publishing), yet most naturally wish to remain in academe.

After all, graduate students in English prostrate themselves to earning the doctorate for a median time of 9.3 years ("TABLE 18"), often accumulating considerable debt in the process,<sup>24</sup> deliberately in order to be English scholars *per se*. As we have seen in the previous chapter, while doctoral graduation rates have remained relatively constant over the years, tenure continues to decline recently, meaning that the fate of increasingly more English PhDs will almost certainly be some form of contingent employment. In other words, the nontenured English PhD seems to be here to stay and likely in large numbers. Although the discipline has always furtively relied to some degree on contingent labor since its emergence from philology and rhetoric in the mid-nineteenth century, this matter has now become a stark generational reality, and one that increasingly affects a more credentialed population than ever before. So the previous question might be expanded for emphasis: What else to do, then, *as contingent PhDs*?

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<sup>24</sup> The American Academy of Arts and Sciences reported in 2005, for example, that about a quarter of humanities PhDs graduated with at least \$30,000 in debt.

Most published responses<sup>25</sup> to this matter focus on contingents' labor conditions and teaching far more than on their scholarly practices (except as these incidentally overlap). And few texts address particularly what nontenured PhDs themselves can do in the latter regard, one likely reason being that such individuals appear as if they can manage little better than either to survive or to transcend their circumstances by traditional means. These two choices, to the degree to which they can be accomplished, are of course sensible provisional responses to adverse labor conditions. But this chapter intends to broaden the scope of this discourse by attending more substantively to the *intellectual* culture of sustained contingency in particular. Whether individual or collective, the state of being contingent is an abiding institutional reality for English studies that needs to be further acknowledged in detail as such. So the question under consideration bears expanding yet again: What else to do, then, as contingent PhDs, *other than just survive as is or compete ever more viciously to transcend insecure appointments?*

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<sup>25</sup> There are too many to cite comprehensively, but for recent landmark points of reference, consider Peter C. Herman's Day Late, Dollar Short: The Next Generation and the New Academy and Eileen Schell and Patricia Lambert Stock's Moving a Mountain: Transforming the Role of Contingent Faculty in Composition Studies and Higher Education.

The discipline's shift toward contingent labor has hardly gone unnoticed, with many special publications and advocacy groups emerging in recent years. Even the current MLA president Catherine Porter has admirably dedicated much of her highly exposed editorial opportunities to acknowledging the issue. But these efforts have yielded only minor improvements in labor conditions, and have done even less to influence the state of contingents' status as scholars. Even with best intentions almost certainly in mind, Porter reveals an unrelenting bias against contingents as valid scholars. In calling unequivocally for bold new conceptions of scholarly productivity, Porter dismisses nontenure-track faculty as mere teachers, as if to imply that you are your contract and nothing more: "We can define [scholarly] productivity more thoughtfully and more broadly. For non-tenure-track faculty members, productivity by and large means effective teaching (since teaching is typically the contingent faculty member's only contractual obligation)" ("(Re)Defining" 2). After this single sentence on contingents, she goes on to dedicate many subsequent sentences to how tenured faculty and the work and the curricula that they manage should "be realigned to reflect shifting priorities in the field, nontraditional forms of scholarship, and an altered array of career paths" (3). Why has Porter excluded from these recommendations the one demographic (i.e., contingents) most

likely to want to pursue these alternatives, except because of a traditionalistic bias that refuses to regard contingents as legitimate scholars, ironically, even as she complains that "scholarly activity [is] still defined in narrowly traditional terms" (2). Why should narrow traditionalism be at all surprising if traditional parties are the ones defining the terms?

A common, unfortunate byproduct of the overreliance on contingent labor is what has become well-known as the "two-tier" system, in which an expanding majority of nontenured faculty are managed by a shrinking minority of tenured colleagues. Many theories exist (all of them viable) on the obviously multiple causes of this trend, including: increased enrollment, funding cuts, non-renewal of tenure lines after senior faculty retirements, de facto permanence of presumably temporary lines, the greater need for faculty in non-traditional fields, accommodating low teaching loads for star professors or junior faculty research support, and the considerably cheaper cost of adjuncts with regard to all of the above considerations. Each of these causes might be traceable to the need for administrators to save money, and this is at least a partly accurate assumption, as many have made. But in their 2009 book Off-Track Profs: Nontenured Teachers in Higher Education John

Cross and Edie Goldenberg encourage readers to resist such an outright scapegoating. They claim that the institutional trend toward contingency has occurred to some degree unwittingly at the administrative level—rather than deliberately, even insidiously—as many assume. These researchers (who are also postsecondary administrators, it should be noted) conducted a study of elite institutions, the results of which show that for various reasons senior administrative bodies had seldom been certain or aware of such information as ratios of tenured to nontenured faculty. Given the massive bureaucracy endemic to such institutions and the often ad hoc nature of some English department staffing decisions, this is not impossible to believe. But regardless of who shares in the blame, the fact nevertheless remains that English studies continues to trend toward a two-tiered system of faculty appointments, which yields a number of negative professional consequences.

Among other ill effects of this stratification in English departments is that it often discourages and impairs faculty solidarity, which should be obvious, and it even breeds divisiveness in unions. Jack Longmate, vice-president of Olympic College's National Education Associated local chapter, notes one insidious consequence of the two-tier faculty system along these lines. He observes a tendency whereby "workers who

perceive little commitment from either their employer or their union cannot be committed to either." He elaborates on the severity of the issue: "Contingents are the majority faculty in U.S. higher education; the absence of a strong contingent presence in faculty unions deprives contingents and weakens unions." Longmate attributes the problem in part to something of a catch-22: because most nontenured faculty do not join their unions, these unions are less likely to argue for contingent-related causes, which in turn creates a perceived lack of support, which gives nontenure-track faculty further reason not to join their unions.

Catharine Stimpson, a dean at NYU and past president of the MLA, addresses this issue in her mild rebuke of the 2007 MLA Task Force Report for being "less radical than it might be in imagining the role of full-time, non-tenured scholars within an institution." She disapprovingly cites the report's implicit recommendation that nontenured faculty be excluded from service and governance, advisement, upper-level and graduate teaching, dissertation directing, and building of the intellectual community. Stimpson adds: "But surely a qualified nontenured faculty member should be able to be a significant academic citizen. Surely the report does not mean to construct such a hierarchy of faculty members with the tenure-track faculty as

the philosopher kings and queens and the non-tenure-track professors as credentialed drones" (75-6). Even here, however, the scope of Stimpson's analysis does not extend specifically to the question of *scholarship* done by contingent faculty. Yet—to linger on her analogy of royal rule—we can surmise that it likely won't be kings or queens who overthrow the tyrannical monograph, but the menial laborers outside the walls of the ivory tower, as it were. The fact that Stimpson's well-intended advocacy envisions service duties but not research or publishing under contingents' purview reveals a (no-doubt unwitting) potential bias against nontenured academics as possessing lesser scholarly status. But if all things are equal except for being on or off the tenure track, then a PhD is still a PhD—that is to say, a trained, certified, and likely motivated researcher and writer in one's field.

The suggestions of thirty-year veteran contingent Steve Street reflect the most consistently prominent recommendations for nontenured faculty to act on their own behalf. These are: raising awareness and activism. He recommends ways of individually contacting the federal government for support but, in the same breath, acknowledges the limited potential of this response. Invoking a comparison to arbitration, Street also encourages participation in contingent advocacy groups and

relevant union efforts. He argues that it will take “non-academics to bail us out, not with money but with laws to make our employers establish equivalency in pay, security, benefits, and opportunity for professional development.” But here, again, the limitations that come with awaiting change from above seem considerable: “We who have never had more than a contract term’s worth of security anyway now [with the recession] have even less time to *await* changes to the status quo, and some of us have no time left at all” (my emphasis). To make matters worse, as Street notes, many nontenured faculty members hesitate to raise concerns over unfair working conditions for fear of retribution for perceived ingratitude. The nontenure-track job may in fact condescend to one’s level of qualifications, but lacking a better alternative, it is nevertheless a job that one wants to keep, especially given the bleak current statistics<sup>26</sup>.

Despite their limited powers, the strategies of activism and raising awareness are no doubt advisable endeavors and ones that all contingent faculty should endorse and enact. But for the most part, these advocacy methods still do not address the lingering question of what kind of *scholarship* nontenured

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<sup>26</sup> For one indicator, the MLA reports in the winter of 2009 that positions advertised through their Job Information List in 2008-09 declined in number and percentage by the largest amount in the history of such records being kept (thirty-four years) (“Report on the MLA”).

faculty will take up<sup>27</sup>. For example, the newly formed advocacy group New Faculty Majority: The National Coalition for Adjunct and Contingent Equity lists as its priorities: compensation, job security, academic freedom, faculty governance, professional advancement (i.e., salary increase and development opportunities), benefits, and unemployment insurance ("Goals"). Similarly, the Coalition of Contingent Academic Labor focuses most of its admirable efforts on matters of employment, not on scholarship ("Montreal Declaration"). But I contend that if we are to be successful in securing better compensation and job security, let alone in improving the institutional circumstances contextualizing our work, then we should additionally seek to make scholarship relevant to the contemporary state of English in and outside of the academy, which is to suggest that we might seek alternatives to the usual practices that have, in part<sup>28</sup>, led the field to its currently troubled state.

I have assigned the label "pioneer" to individuals who choose to forge such alternative paths, a fitting term for its well-known meaning as a person who is first to explore a new area, as well

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<sup>27</sup> Of course there is the exception of scholarship *about* advocacy, but we certainly should not become a generation of scholars writing predominantly on the subject of our own professional circumstances.

<sup>28</sup> I do not go as far as some—on both sides of the culture wars—to imply a direct causation between the field's hyper-specialization and its decline in perceived relevance. But nor do I deny something of a correlation here (among other causal factors).

as for its subtler etymological associations. *Pioneer* derives from the Old French *peonier*, meaning foot soldier, notably, an infantry member who goes ahead to dig trenches and clear and repair territory before the arrival of a main body of troops. Also, in ecological terms, a *pioneer* is a species that, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, "is the first to colonize an unoccupied area, esp[ecially] a plant that establishes itself on bare or disturbed ground." It is not difficult to understand the analogy in these associations to nontenured English faculty members, who do the ditch-digging-style work of teaching composition and lower-level courses, and whose professional foundation may rightly be characterized as "disturbed ground." The scholarship that this work is calling on nontenured PhDs to consider, for reasons stated above, might correspondingly lead the way, then, to new or repaired territories for the rest of the field to arrive at later. Those who are already comfortably established in the current system are understandably less likely to take up this call. Pioneering seems better suited for the hungry, the homeless, and the otherwise helpless.

Turning to Menand again, we can see why pioneering could help the field think alternatively about routines that cause and sustain the crises facing English. He argues that the hyper-

competitive reward system of tenure and long-established paths through graduate study "don't exactly encourage iconoclasm. Time to degree, job placement, and the tenure rate virtually guarantee a culture of conformity. The profession is not reproducing itself so much as cloning itself" (13). In the present context, that is to say, if a field in crisis repeatedly clones itself, then it is most likely also cloning the crisis, even perhaps building the crisis unwittingly into its genetic fabric, as it were. The current hyper-competitive model will of course remain, but given the decline in available tenured positions, this competition stands both to become even fiercer and to benefit a shrinking number of PhDs. So those who lose or abstain from the constricted competition for tenure have an opportunity (or, alternatively, a need) to pursue alternatives—albeit for less reward than tenure, but certainly not without any reward. This matter does not merely apply to notably lesser scholars, as may have been the case in the past, but to many legitimate PhDs who in previous generations would have secured greater numbers of tenure-track lines after completing their degree. In fact, the call to pioneer new avenues of professional survival even pertains to some of those who are on the tenure-track currently, if we recall Greenblatt's ominous letter to the MLA, which was published *prior* to the nation's economic collapse:

Some junior faculty members [...] face a challenge—under inflexible time constraints and with very high stakes—that many of them may be unable to meet successfully, no matter how strong or serious their scholarly achievement, because academic presses simply cannot afford to publish their books.

One suitable alternative model to contrast with hyper-competition is cooperation. It should be noted again that *pioneer* not only signifies a soldier (i.e., a combative entity), but also a natural organism. Relevant to the present context, this meaning suggests an organically evolving species, or something that adapts cooperatively to survive in an adverse environment. So the question (no doubt rhetorical by this point) arises whether we as an emerging generation of scholars can evolve to be more cooperative and less competitive than were our predecessors. This notion of collegial cooperation is not without precedent in English studies. Since the 1980s, for example, Andrea Lunsford and Lisa Ede have been calling for “more cooperative, less combative ways of exploring differences” in English scholarship (“Collaboration and Concepts” 362). Most

figures espousing alternative models for our work, however, are less well-known as Ede and Lunsford<sup>29</sup>.

Several recent articles by a lesser-known and not surprisingly newer generation of scholars suggest an emerging discourse of alternatives to the anachronously dualistic "publish or perish" model. Recall the arguments from Kevin Brown, Gary Lewandowski, and Paul Hanstedt in chapter one for less frequency and less careerism in publishing. Hanstedt, in fact, singles out several advantages enjoyed at institutions where faculty publishing is not emphasized. These advantages are perhaps not coincidentally all collaborative in nature: "repeated interactions with students (even those outside our majors) over the course of their four years; our ability to teach, research, and do other work with faculty members from across campus; and our ability to accommodate the needs of students who would simply disappear at larger schools" (126).

Along this line of reasoning, Mary Coussons-Read and Tammy Stone examine the typically unacknowledged integrated nature of the "big 3," publishing, service, and teaching. They note that the

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<sup>29</sup> Incidentally, for all their advocacy and success as a team, they hardly inspired a collaborative scholarly movement. In fact, there are relatively few other, *long-term* scholarly collaborative teams relevant to English and composition studies. E.g., Elbow and Belanoff, Gilbert and Gubar, Knoblauch and Brannon, Deleuze and Guattari, Enos and Brown.

kind of "blend[ed]" work often going under-appreciated in tenure committees namely includes collaboration and integrated research and teaching, precisely the kind of work this dissertation seeks to make a case for. These coauthors argue that recent technological advances, however, have made integrated work and collaboration much less risky for nontenured faculty. In the past, there was considerable lag time before such work might find an audience, if at all. Today, however, technology makes it easier and quicker to collaborate, and the product thereof potentially more accessible to audiences. Likewise, work that integrates teaching and research finds its way to the classroom more quickly than it used to. All of these are hopeful signs for the kind of pioneering that the burgeoning body of nontenured PhDs may come to develop.

Similar to Scholes and Gregory, cited above, Wendell Harris contends that humanities departments like English function best when they "[encourage] undergraduates to read literature, to enjoy encountering new ideas, to appreciate inspired (or merely interesting) uses of language, and to gain perspectives to aid in assimilating and evaluating the experiences they encounter" (48-9). Our scholarship, Harris argues, should support these functions more directly than is commonly the case. Here, then, is the beginning of an argument for a type of humanities

scholarship that accounts for a purpose beyond attaining tenure and reaching an audience beyond a small coterie of like-minded experts (including the wider public, it should be added). The development and implementation of this argument would require a reconsideration of the reasons and of the ways we put our expertise into print. We might begin this process by expanding our notion of the English scholar at work, that is, the stereotypically solitary thinker, who may be a social activist, and may even be very social in his or her own right, but whose scholarship is almost always individually authored. In fact the field's tenure and promotion processes deliberately reward the solitary scholar for writing alone. But as has been shown in chapter one, these processes are considerably flawed, so the model that favors solitary work might be reassessed and expanded so as to possibly contribute less to the many problems facing our field.

As shall be seen below, coauthorship is certainly one meaning of the term *collaborate*, in fact, the predominant one. And this kind of compositional teaming up may well be an advisable avenue for some nontenured PhDs to take, for instance in order to share responsibilities that may be overwhelming without a sabbatical. The present work proposes, however, that *collaborate* might also be thought of as transitive verb, meaning an act that puts two

or more subjects into collaboration with each other—as in *to collaborate literature and composition*. A shortened version of this transitive neologism that will be used throughout is: *to literature composition*. This technique puts literature into direct cooperation with composition theory and pedagogy in order to potentially improve instruction in rhetoric, for one thing. The idea somewhat resembles Menand's more controversially phrased call for colonizing the other disciplines, only in the present case the two disciplines in question are usually just across the hall from each other:

what [English departments] need to do is hunt down the disciplines whose subject matter they covet and bring them into their own realm. To the extent that programs—and particularly graduate programs—consist of a guided tour of the *Norton Anthology*, literature programs are perpetuating their own isolation.[...] This seems a minor curricular point, but it goes to the fear academics have that their fields will be dumbed down if they stray from their traditional boundaries. It's the boundaries themselves that are dumbing us down. (14)

The present work contends that literary and composition studies should better bring each other into their own realms—or better, pioneer beyond their boundaries together—through the tactic of

literaturing composition. This tactic represents something of an opposite method of guided tours through literature: in fact, it uses literature as a guide through rhetorical subjects.

Why might this be a job primarily for nontenured English PhDs? As we have seen above, these scholars have better reason to change a system that keeps them on the outside than do tenured faculty who have already achieved relative complacency within the current model. It is true that tenured faculty have far more power to effect the kind of change that Menand recommends, and that for a number of reasons nontenured faculty may be at a comparative disadvantage in trying to do so. But we need not dwell on this regrettable irony. A field that prizes diversity as highly as ours does would hopefully welcome a new proposal that allows both for the traditional, competitive, solitary model and its reasons for scholarship, and for an innovative, cooperative, collaborative model with its own set of reasons. In order to make a case for the latter model, a brief overview of the various types of collaboration as well as a review of the most significant scholarship on collaboration will be beneficial.

### **In Favor of Collaboration**

Most of the field's scholarship that applies collaboration as its main tenet focuses on either pedagogy, such as collaborative learning techniques, or on the curriculum, such as WAC/WID initiatives. This chapter endorses these interpretations, but it mainly focuses on collaboration in an alternative context, that is, as a mode of scholarship in itself, regardless of the number of authors in question, including just one. The intention is to pioneer a theory and pedagogy about rhetoric that benefits from literature's prestige and heuristic appeal as well as from composition's practical relevance. The most promising potential for developing this technique perhaps comes out of contingents' relative freedom from the scholarly routines associated with tenure and promotion.

Our own postmodern theories better support collaborative and interactive models than do our standards for tenure and promotion and the corresponding work done to earn these. Lunsford and Ede acknowledge this phenomenon: "scholars in English studies [...] are often more comfortable theorizing about subjectivity, agency, and authorship than we are [at] attempting to enact alternatives to conventional assumptions and practices" ("Collaboration and Concepts" 356). To extend their point, it seems that our theories sometimes fall short of practical application, and partly for this reason so many people question

the relevance of our publications, as has been demonstrated above. Yet, at the level of praxis, collaboration works. Which must be why Porter's main recommendation to contemporary graduate students is "to relate their scholarly pursuits to the broader educational context and to appreciate the collaborative work they will pursue with colleagues from multiple fields" ("(Re)Defining" 3). First, Internet-based technologies continually advance collaborative models: blogs and discussion boards assume collaboration, and wikis and web-based word processors encourage and facilitate coauthorship across time and space, for example. Second, composition classes have long embraced methods such as group work, peer revising, inkshedding, and a host of practices that disrupt the image of a Romantic, solitary genius at work. As shall be seen, however, there are many viable forms of cooperative work that fall under the generic banner of collaboration. And an overview of the most significant theoretical work on collaboration from the past twenty-five or so years (which follows below) suggests that the subject has not been capitalized upon significantly enough.

It will be helpful to more precisely classify types of cooperative work relevant to the field. In doing so, one finds that collaboration is in fact fairly prevalent in academe (though not appropriately rewarded in the humanities), and

therefore may at least not be so foreign a concept as may at first seem. One tends to speak in generalities and absolutes about collaborative scholarship when discussing its unfortunately seemingly default response: who gets credit for what work? There is often a presumption of primacy and subordination here, such that one is inclined to ask whether the credit divides 50/50, 60/40, or 70/30, etc.<sup>30</sup> This attitude—which is very much institutionally constructed—perceives collaboration as nothing different than consensual co-writing, that is, as a method for composing a single text from separate ideas with someone else, an act which presumably may be quantified to some degree. Distinct from this is collaboration understood as a rhetorical framework, that is, as a way of cooperatively making, sharing, and shaping meaning together with others, which may not be quantified nearly as accurately, if at all. An example of such collaboration could be a semester's worth of knowledge accumulated through in-class discussion, which is certainly cooperatively and organically generated, but hardly quantifiable, and not at all what one would consider to be coauthorship. Yet it is undeniably collaborative.

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<sup>30</sup> For example, years ago I served on a hiring committee that was considering a candidate whose CV listed a coauthored publication. The committee chair phoned both contributors with the question (and corresponding assumption): "Who is the first author?"

So the distinction between coauthorship and collaboration seems clear enough. The former poses a viable professional option for nontenured English PhDs who, for instance, do not receive release time from teaching in order to produce scholarship. The latter (which is also viable in its own right), needs further clarification, since we find it occurring in so many different varieties and degrees. For instance, collaboration can be unwitting, as in the case of plagiarism (e.g., the Kavya Viswanathan scandal). Or in the slightly but significantly different case of posthumous coauthoring, such as Stoppard's reinterpretation of Hamlet in Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead; Seth Grahame-Smith's best selling recast of Austen's Pride and Prejudice as a zombie thriller; or even Strunk and White's respective contributions to Elements of Style, which were separated by thirty-eight years. There also exists a kind of collaboration that ordinarily would not be acknowledged explicitly as such, for example that which occurs during the process of peer-review, or as some reader-response theory argues, simply between any reader and writer of a text. The pedagogical equivalent includes teachers' responses to student writing, classroom workshopping activities, and tutoring done in writing centers. The service equivalent includes, for instance, departmental assessment procedures, cross-rank apprenticeships, and laboratory teamwork. There are also new media-based modes

of collaboration, such as Wikis, Google docs, and open source software.

Of course collaboration sometimes works and sometimes does not work. Obviously not every person or team of persons is suited to the process, and this work is certainly not suggesting that collaboration become a new kind of standard<sup>31</sup>. Sometimes single authorship is preferable, for instance in writing a love letter or, more in line with the current context, a statement of teaching philosophy. However, as we have begun to see above and will further see below, many institutional occasions in higher education favor some degree of collaboration as a necessary—if not as the default—practice, for example personnel committees, WAC/WID teams, linked or clustered teaching, bridge from high school to college programs, and writing labs and other such learning centers. So it seems reasonable to ask why our standards for scholarship have to be considerably different in their consideration of collaboration.

It should be noted that for the sake of time and space and the limited range of subject matter at hand, this work must regrettably bypass more abstractly theoretical positions on the

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<sup>31</sup> In fact, the present analysis hopes to effectively imply that there need not be such a “standard” or even a necessarily dualistic understanding of singular or collaborative authorship.

politics of authorship itself<sup>32</sup> in favor of a comparatively more applied approach to the subject. Even a number of important works that do assume such a "conventional" view of authorship must also be sidestepped here for their peripheral relation to the present aims, including those by Nancy Allen, et al (technical writing); Susanna Ashton (fiction); Robert Carringer (film studies); Irene Clark (portfolio evaluation); Juliet Fleming (graffiti); Muriel Harris (writing centers); George Held and Warren Rosenberg (students and faculty); Heather Hirschfeld (renaissance texts); Susan Hunter (peer review); Wayne Koestenbaum (male homoerotics); Mary Lay and William M. Karis (professional writing); Bette London (women writers); James Reither and Douglas Vipond (classroom culture); and Ronald Schleifer (sciences vs. humanities).

The case for collaboration that so far most closely resembles this chapter's position comes from Sander Gilman, distinguished professor of liberal arts and medicine at University of Illinois Chicago, who observes how during the various current crises a senior-level "retrograde" attitude, characterized by scholarly individualism, prevents much needed disciplinary reform in the way of collaboration (variously interpreted). In his 2004

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<sup>32</sup> See Foucault and Barthes (Image) for entry into this important body of theory.

article, Gilman's position resembles Menand's complaint (above) that the field is perpetually cloning itself: "Demanding that the successes of the past be the goals of the future is not only wrong-headed but also self-defeating. Let us plan for a new future," Gilman adds, "because of the anxiety-filled realities of today" (388). Similar to what has been argued above in this chapter, Gilman also contends that traditional professional protocols, like the tenuring process, tend to promote more of the same, such that some in the field will want to pioneer new directions. Because there are fewer jobs and increasing expectations for the jobs that remain, junior faculty do whatever they must to survive the fierce competition along "old, well-worn" lines, and in effect "bury their heads in the sand and seek solace that this too shall pass" (388). If they are lucky, the ordeal may eventually pass for them individually, but even if it does, the field becomes only more deeply entrenched in its collective crises. Gilman's hope for collaboration as something of a salvational new direction includes cooperation not only among individuals, but also among disciplines and types of media, which is notable given the context of the present argument:

From websites to exhibitions, from radio shows to innovative long-distance pedagogical projects, from popular books to films, we now can reach well beyond

the ever more circumscribed audience of the scholarly book. (And perhaps even generate new interest in scholarly books while we do this!) This is not a charge to water down or prostitute one's academic credentials. It is a charge to work in a team with other scholars and media specialists who can help shape one's scholarly work for a different, broader, or more critical audience. The 'death' of theory seems to have been paralleled by the 'death' of the book. But the reality is that theory has not died but has metamorphosed into different projects and forms; so too must we imagine the future for alternative forms for the dissemination of humanistic knowledge. (387)

Gilman's advice in the end closely resembles what this dissertation has been promoting as collaborative pioneering:

Times of stress should enable us to rethink in ways that times of excess do not. Here the role of the humanities must be paramount. We have models for the humanities that can change the way the university functions. We have the ability to use times of intense confrontation to provide new and exciting experiments. Even if the motivation is a challenged economy, we can use this as a wellspring for positive

and forward looking undertakings. Thus communities may well need to think of the university as part of a world of education and the production of knowledge that is better integrated with other such institutions such as museums, adult education structures, public television and radio, and so on. Here the impetus may be cost cutting, but collaboration across traditional boundaries is the direct result. The boundaries between the older models that divided the world into separate spheres for the creation and dissemination of knowledge will begin to alter. (389)

It seems fair to say that any analysis of scholarship about collaboration in English studies must not only consider but also foreground the substantial work on the subject done by Ede and Lunsford. These prolific and self-reflexive collaborators have dedicated more energy than anyone else to legitimizing the practice of scholarly collaboration in English. Although their efforts have not effectively converted the discipline to sufficiently accept collaborative scholarship's legitimacy, they have quite usefully contributed some of our basic terminology and fundamental concepts for addressing the subject. In their landmark 1983 essay "Why Write . . . Together?" Lunsford and Ede (whose name ordering deliberately alternates from publication to

publication) introduce the beginnings of their more resolved subsequent classification of coauthorship types: first, when writers compose separately and join their work late; second, the kind of advisor/apprentice collaboration that occurs between professor and student; and third, group writing (151). This article investigates the nature and limits of coauthorship; its effect on assumptions about rhetor and audience; and relevant key factors such as technology, ethics, and pedagogical implications. Three years later, Ede and Lunsford published an update on this work, based on their grant-funded study of 1,200 respondents from six professional scholarly organizations. They found, at this stage, that while collaboration was common among the constituency of these organizations, members' conception of authorship still regarded it as a solitary act. The study reveals a paradox in which the majority of scholarly writing is composed alone (i.e., separately), even in cases where collaboration was common (e.g., a committee report) ("Research Update" 73). Lunsford and Ede also note a significant gap between the more collaborative types of writing students will do after graduation (e.g., group based projects) and the more singular work that they compose for school (e.g., term papers) (72).

In 1990, Ede and Lunsford compiled and expanded their thinking on collaboration in the seminal book on the subject: Singular Texts/Plural Authors. Here, they offer a simple classification of collaborative writing modes: the hierarchal and the dialogic. The former mode is goal-oriented and, for that, highly structured, for instance by means of clearly defined authorial roles. In this mode, "multiple voices and shifting authority are seen as difficulties to be overcome or resolved." The latter mode is "loosely structured" and "fluid." Shifting roles and multiple voices are part of a "creative tension" that is sought and valued (133). The strong impact of Lunsford and Ede's book was such that only a year later they published a follow-up article declaring that the field had finally acknowledged at least the theoretical viability of problematizing the idea of the author. However, they decry the practical reality of singular authorship's dominance in professional considerations, a fact that they trace to the origins of capitalism, Western rationalism, and patriarchy<sup>33</sup>. Invoking Foucault and others—and much like Gilman's linkage between the death of the book and the death of theory—Ede and Lunsford doubt it is a *coincidence* that the death of the author was celebrated at the same time "women and scholars of color

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<sup>33</sup> For perhaps their most explicit casting of collaboration as a feminized practice, see the 1990 article "Rhetoric in a New Key: Women and Collaboration."

were beginning to publish" with much greater frequency than ever before in the field (355).

Especially significant to the context of this chapter is Lunsford and Ede's inclusion of PhD students and nontenured PhDs among the ones marginalized by the field's implicit bias against collaboration. For instance, although they consider the dissertation to be "inherently collaborative" in nature, Ede and Lunsford find nowhere any documented forbiddance of collaborative dissertations, noting (by way of Clifford Geertz), however, that the deepest taboos usually go unwritten, like "common sense assumptions" (357). They ask what would be so wrong if dissertations were occasionally composed collaboratively, and why the single-author book must be the tenure and promotion criterion, given what our theory tells us about "the author construct."<sup>34</sup> They attribute this insistence to an inherent "agonism central to patriarchy, an agonism requiring that the accomplishment of one scholar (or generation) can most easily win recognition by overturning the work of another scholar (or generation)" (358)<sup>35</sup>. Lunsford and Ede

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<sup>34</sup> With this argument in mind, consider Kathleen Blake Yancey and Michael Spooner: "Our ways of handing out grades, or promotion and tenure, are not informed by our best thinking on writerly collaboration. And this may be only a little less true for publishing scholars than it is for students" (46).

<sup>35</sup> The distinction between agonistic and cooperative rhetoric will be instrumental to the next two chapters' interpretations of literary texts.

acknowledge at numerous points how difficult it is to institute real change in the discipline's and in an institution's established practices, and they also point out some logistical challenges that come with collaboration, asking, "Who, for example, has had a collaborative sabbatical?" Of course the answer is *nobody*. In fact fewer tenured scholars these days and none of their nontenured colleagues receive sabbaticals at all. But nontenured PhDs do not stand to lose their jobs for a lack of publishing, so as the matter of release time and research goes, they can afford to take longer than, say, a semester or two to collaborate on a worthwhile project without any necessary correlation to their professional status. In simpler terms, without the pressure of tenure or promotion, nontenured PhDs can work together gradually to produce better quality—rather than higher quantity—publications. Simpler, still: sometimes *less* and *slower* can be *enough* and *as good*.

Of course collaborative authorship is only one of myriad alternative directions to be considered by new generations of English PhDs, and many advocates of collaboration have disclaimed that they do not seek to replace usual practices, only to supplement them. Collaboration also carries a number of considerable challenges. If it is to play a greater role in the work of next generation English scholars, then at least the

three following challenges to collaborative scholarship will need to be addressed. First and foremost, for those on the tenure track, is the question of evaluation. Tenure and promotion are awarded to individuals not to collaborative teams, after all. So one naturally asks: how to effectively assess who has done what in a collaborative composition, and how to properly reward that? Such an issue is not insurmountable, as the 2007 MLA Task Force acknowledges, noting that the sciences and social sciences, with which we compete for prestige and funding, have long since implemented effective methods of evaluating collaborative efforts (56-7). Second, as regards the publishing crisis, presses will not publish collaborative work any more readily than they publish individually authored texts. While this may be true, there is no reason to believe that a team of collaborative PhDs would strive any less than singular scholars for utmost quality and marketability. But there may be some reason to believe that a team's strength in numbers could possibly increase these qualities in their work. For example, before manuscripts ever reach editors, conscientious collaborative scholars might be more effective than singularly composing scholars are in weeding out weaker material, if only because a submission carries joint accountability. In this way, dialectical peer review is already ongoing and for collaborative teams, happening at both the level of composition and, as usual,

after submission of a document to a journal or press. Third, collaboration runs contrary to the contemporary corporatized academic ethic of survival of the fittest, or to recall Bill Readings' critique, our culture of measurable "excellence." But there is no reason that the singular persona must always be the best model, especially in academe. In fact, the collaborative method may at times better attend to disciplinary goals, the advancement of the field, institutional mission statements, students' best interest, and even the pursuit of truth, than does the individual survival mode, in which one's own professional advancement may sometimes distract one's scholarship from reaching these presumed higher callings of our work.

David Bleich raises some useful concerns about collaboration, and then offers a solution. He focuses on pedagogy in his 1995 article, but the case he makes carries over easily to the related subject of collaborative scholarship. Bleich notes the pragmatic difficulties of learning to work together (one might add particularly in a field that has never favored this model). Many people are unclear about what collaborative work actually looks like, and why it should not be considered an overly sentimental or time-consuming activity. He adds: "the institutionally governed machineries of testing and grading

block the stronger effects of most collaborative practices: there is no way for the results of the difficult work of collaboration to 'count.'" Somewhat paralleling this dissertation's recommendation to make scholarship more accessible and relevant, Bleich's solution is a "pedagogy of disclosure" (especially self-disclosure) that involves revealing "how each of us is involved and implicated in knowing, teaching, and understanding and [...] how each of us as members of particular constituencies is implicated in the collective interests of other groups, of other parts of society" (44). Bleich considers collaboration and self-disclosure to be "fully implicated in one another" (46) such that the binary of individual/collective might be broken down and we may come to understand the one within the other and vice versa.

Bill Karis perceives a negative reflex to compromise in collaborative work, especially among students. He offers a fair warning against this potential danger, which applies to English scholars as well. He prefers the term "dialectic" to "cooperation," and argues that "to the extent that this privileging of compromise effectively limits free and open dialogue among collaborators, this inclination toward compromise is damaging.[...] If we see the collaborative situation as a drama in which collaborators use language to interact in various

ways and with various motives (and that would seem to be one admissible description), we may also see more clearly the damaging effects privileging compromise may have on the collaborative process" (114). In other words, collaboration becomes a liability when it is uncritical or when it results in a default compromise position. Karis's point appears obvious here in abstraction, but collaborators would be well advised to remember his warning throughout their compositional processes. As has been disclaimed above and by others, collaboration, of course, is by no means a panacea; it is but an alternative means of "knowledge making" (as Reither and Vipond put it) for some to consider under measured circumstances. The degree of measure in these cases should include Karis's reminders that sometimes collaborators need to fight for the truth, and that sometimes they need to go off on their own to find it. Seemingly anticipating Graff (see below) by twelve or so years, Karis argues that students especially, but presumably also we scholars, need to be made more aware of the role and value of substantive conflict to the collaborative process. Further, they must be made aware that the value of this conflict stems precisely from the agonistic and dialectical nature of rhetoric. Collaborators need to be willing to employ the entire range of tools at their disposal and not be co-opted by calls or directives privileging cooperation and unity (124). Karis, in

turn, might be reminded, however, that he risks insinuating false dichotomies between collaboration/cooperation and dialectic/argument. That is to say, collaborators do not necessarily avoid conflict, and as Karis reminds us, they should not do so.

Conflict is certainly not unfamiliar to the relationship between the institutionalized disciplines of English and composition. As has already been suggested above, these sister disciplines have experienced a considerable divide in both status and purpose since the formation of composition programs out of English departments in the nineteenth century. Divided as such during today's era of crises, English and composition suffer reduced ability to advocate for their own causes.

### **The Literature/Composition Divide<sup>36</sup>**

The history of the divide between literature and composition is long and troubled, with a number of well-known large-scale divisions as well as innumerable small-scale conflicts. But the relationship between these two disciplines remains at least functional enough to carry on seemingly indefinitely as part-joined and part-separated entities. Most English departments

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<sup>36</sup> Some of the ideas in this section have been previously and differently addressed by Gaughan and Khost ("On Collaborating" and "Reading"), and are developed here with permission.

still house their institution's writing program without any real threat of revolution, and despite the increasing growth in graduate study of composition as its own discipline, many if not most writing instructors still are or were literature specialists. However, given the crises at hand, the general states of English and composition studies, as well as their joint status in most cases, have perhaps never been as tenuous as they are today, which the previous chapter has demonstrated. Stephen North, the great chronicler of this history from the composition point of view, argues that the field is divided in itself by ideological and class wars, wherein English's superior institutional and cultural status always threatens composition as being low or non-status, or as being more practical rather than scholarly in nature. North writes in The Making of Knowledge in Composition that: "composition faces a peculiar methodological paradox: its communities cannot get along well enough to live with one another, and yet they seem unlikely to survive [...] without one another" (369).<sup>37</sup>

The major relevant division here stems from and contributes to considerable labor inequities in the field. Composition classes (and also lower-level literature classes) tend to be staffed by

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<sup>37</sup> For other excellent histories of this kind, see Berlin (Writing), Brereton, Connors, Crowley, Graff (Professing), and Horner.

those at the bottom of the academic hierarchy—their poor treatment caused, in part, by the perception that writing and basic instruction is remedial (even though nobody is likely to say so explicitly in these terms). A vast majority of the instructors of these classes are nontenured and not even on the tenure track; their job is not to conduct research or to advance a discipline, but to teach what students failed to learn in secondary school, and to prepare them for the serious work required in upper-level classes. Their paychecks are small, teaching loads high, class sizes large, commutes often multiple and hectic, offices crowded or nonexistent, supporting resources scarce, and chances of securing better employment minimal. What makes matters worse is the fact that many of the above problems compound themselves in ways that often go un(der-)acknowledged, except by their victims. For instance, teaching overpopulated writing classes, sometimes at multiple campuses, inhibits research, impedes committee participation and collegial exchange, and may result in poor teaching evaluations—all of which hinder one's chances for reappointment and promotion, never mind for professional development.

This matter is undoubtedly one of the major issues of the day. Signs already clearly exist that the burgeoning presence of nontenured faculty in these roles is garnering considerable

attention.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, what might well prevent this issue from fading away anytime soon—as fads tend to do in academe—are the very real material stakes involved. In other words, the situation of contingency being a professional reality and not merely a theoretical notion, it likely won't just eventually go away on its own like, say, the field's one-time fascination with deconstruction more or less disappeared. Street elaborates on the difference, claiming that the widespread "serious attention" that the contingent faculty crisis has recently drawn marks the tolling of "the same bell that's been ringing for the last three decades *but with a new note of urgency*" (my emphasis).

The generally poor labor conditions in question are somewhat directly proportional to composition's inferior institutional power, which may forebode a continued decline in the general status of English studies, given the discipline's current relevancy crisis. Sharon Crowley reminds us that composition did not begin its (in my opinion still unfulfilled) quest for full disciplinary status until the field developed a substantive research agenda. This came about with the "process" movement of

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<sup>38</sup> The MLA, CCCC, AAUP, AFT, Coalition on the Academic Workforce, Adjunct Nation, and many other major organizations have formed special task forces; published studies; sponsored equity projects; and offered recommendations, conferences, and support kits on the subject. New Faculty Majority, which seeks to become a national advocacy association for contingents, has also recently been established.

the sixties and seventies that examined how students produce texts, and which yielded significant pedagogical improvements. Not coincidentally, as Crowley observes, process pedagogy also eased the burden on the mainly contingent faculty responsible for teaching composition. Methods such as peer-revising, small group work, and low-stakes writing made contingent positions slightly more manageable (191), which, along with subsequent steady enrollment increases, more or less ensured the permanence of these faculty lines in postsecondary institutions across the country.

Despite some notable efforts to improve the state of the profession for contingent faculty, their working conditions still remain generally poor. For example, the since well-known 1986 Wyoming Conference on English resolved to change the professional conditions of composition faculty by developing standards for equitable employment and corresponding enforcement mechanisms. A year later, the post-conference "Wyoming Resolution" was published in College English, calling more specifically for: (1) "professional standards and expectations for salary levels and working conditions of post-secondary teachers of writing," (2) "a procedure for hearing grievances" and (3) "a procedure for acting on non-compliance" (Robertson, Crowley, and Lentricchia 279). In 1989, the Conference on

College Composition and Communication (CCCC) responded to the Resolution with the "Statement of Principles and Standards for the Postsecondary Teaching of Writing," which formally declared the discipline to be in a state of professional "crisis." The CCCC Statement contended that if composition were ever to be fully recognized as a discipline on par with English—let alone with the social and physical sciences—then the problem of over-reliance on contingent faculty (not to mention their mistreatment) would have to be sufficiently addressed. The argument, in brief, called on institutions to invest in tenure lines for composition faculty. In the statement's own words: "the academy's most serious mission, helping students develop their critical powers as readers and writers, should be vested in *tenure-line faculty*. *That is the standard to which every institution should aspire*" (my emphasis 330).

But anyone with an honest grasp on the contemporary state of English studies knows that most departments do not possess and never will possess anywhere near the amount of funding it would take to staff composition and lower-level classes with tenured faculty, no matter how well-qualified the backlog of candidates for these positions may be. This is especially so today, amidst the nation's financial crisis, which—as we have seen in chapter one—has very badly affected universities' budgets. James Sledd,

a leading advocate for the original Resolution, has since decried what he regards to be CCCC's "emasculated" response to Wyoming, castigating "administrators, literati, and eminent compositionists" for being more motivated by self-interest than by a desire to reform. Like Bérubé, Sledd observes that a majority of exploited laborers in composition seems to be a "prerequisite to the existence of a professoriate glorying in autotelic research and unread publication" (269-70). He critiques a kind of hypocrisy whereby the field, which copiously theorizes about social justice and equality, continues to mistreat (or at least allow the mistreatment of) those in its own ranks. Much like other arguments we have seen in chapter one's section entitled *Limitations*, he claims that individuals with the actual power to correct labor inequities derive too many benefits from the inequitable system to want to institute significant change. Of course this tendency does not necessarily incriminate tenured faculty as unethical, but it does suggest an understandable complacency that enables and favors work on other matters (with exceptions, of course). Sledd poses an argument that resembles the present call for pioneering: that if those who are marginalized by the current system's practices:

risk really militant action, they might together do what generations of professors have failed to do.

Should the example of their action prove contagious, the abuse of contingent labor in other academic departments might also be checked, and our universities might improve—far more so than by the mutterings of businessmen and bureaucrats. (279-80)

Sledd's impassioned call, however, has not inspired much in the way of "really militant action," perhaps mainly because of the conformity that Menand claims is endemic to the culture of English departments. But with tenure's continuing decline, the contemporary state of the profession may become increasingly conducive to such action, after all. In this regard, it seems worth mentioning that Sledd's choice of the adjective "militant" can rightly be seen as subsumed under my preferred alternative term, "pioneering," such as in a *pioneering action*. Whether one thinks of them as foot soldiers or as plant species, pioneers are called pioneers for exploring new territories.

Not very long after the fallout from the initial Statement, the labor issue continued to generate attention on a grand scale with a 1991 "Progress Report" from CCCC's Committee on Professional Standards. This document measures the severity of inequities facing the profession, noting that composition has become "almost universally associated" with exploitive labor practices, such that "we are forced to conclude that there is a

connection, perhaps not always articulated, between the institutional status of writing instruction and the hiring practices condemned in the statement" (336). Later, the Progress Report even more explicitly acknowledges the effect of this situation on the literature/composition divide, remarking that there seems to be a "fear that increased employment of full-time tenure-line faculty in writing will upset the numerical balance which now obtains between tenure-line literature and composition faculty in most English departments" (337). A statement of this nature from composition studies' overseeing disciplinary society effectively rules out the possibility of the literature/composition divide being mere speculation or exaggeration, as does the fact that dozens of the field's top scholars have written on the subject.

Joseph Harris, for one, offered a more moderate reflection on the labor crisis in 2000, in which he acknowledges Sledd's reasoning attempts to move forward realistically. Rather than dwelling on the impossible goal of tenure equity, a more realistic goal, Harris reasons, should be establishing a firmer "collective identity" organized around good teaching, from which to develop "fairer" working conditions (45-47). Here, one emerging model has been full-time nontenure-track appointments, with such improved working conditions as increased pay, health

benefits, and better contracts. This “practitioner model” or “humane lectureship” expects good teaching and, often, current knowledge of the field’s literature, but not research and publication (though the latter two are not forbidden or discounted).

Now a commonplace level of employment in today’s English departments and writing programs, the lectureship in truth neither eradicates the two-tier system nor closes the literature and composition divide (though perhaps it narrows that somewhat)<sup>39</sup>. Yet there is a chance that it could help to pave the way for nontenured PhDs to contribute pioneering scholarship to English studies, if at a lesser scale and slower rate than their tenured colleagues do. But here could be an instance of less being enough and slower being as good (see above). Some lectureships carry implicit or even explicit presumption of renewal, and most of these positions involve a more reasonable teaching load than adjuncting does. For this, the scholarly work of PhD lecturers might stand to advance the field in ways that seemingly neither adjuncts can do nor tenured faculty want to do. Adjuncts are usually too busy, and tenured faculty may

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<sup>39</sup> It should be noted that a small and short-lived wave of new interest in the literature/composition divide occurred in 2006-07 with several coincidentally contemporaneous books (Anderson and Farris, Bergmann and Baker, Mailloux, and Gaughan and Khost). But this work attracted relatively little attention at the disciplinary level.

generally be too specialized or uninterested for this kind of work, for which lecturers may be well positioned.

Hyper-specialization—a trait of the tenured—potentially threatens our discipline by way of isolation, as we have seen in chapter one's section on the relevancy crisis. A good deal of scholarship in English studies carries little or no explicit teaching function, which is of course completely acceptable for its own sake but potentially dangerous to the profession on the whole. English studies suffers a relevancy crisis not because our work is in fact irrelevant (which, of course, is not true) but because our work is *perceived* to be irrelevant to most people outside of the field, who mainly expect us to be teachers. Today there is so little agreement about what English can and should do that it is difficult for academics to represent teaching in ways that will be valued, or even understood, by the media, legislators, parents, students, administrators, and even fellow colleagues. Our theoretical discourse often excludes or repels the general public. It matters little if this effect is witting or unwitting. The fact of the matter is that our work often has this effect for various reasons.

For this, the act of literaturing composition, as described below and enacted in chapters three and four, seeks productive means of combining the theoretical and pedagogical aspects of work in English—particularly concerning rhetoric—in ways that are both true to the insights of our scholarship and more widely accessible than is often the case. Other, general arguments for making our work more publically accessible have met with some degree of resistance, usually by established scholars. For instance, Menand forcefully declares that:

[t]he last premise academic humanists should be accepting is that the value of their views is measured by the correspondence of those views to common sense and the common culture. Being an intellectual and thinking theoretically are going outside the parameters of a common culture and common sense.

("Dangers" 16)

Here and later in the same article, Menand raises some valuable points of caution. In his line of reasoning, going public may mean watering down rigorous scholarship merely to please a generally disinterested public and its status quo values. But then again, none of us would agree to this, and the distinction implied here between academic and public might be somewhat exaggerated. After all, there are nearly 5,000 college campuses

in the United States, enrolling more than 14 million students, with enrollments projected to increase for some years to come. In this light, the matter of "going public" has already largely been settled: academic work is already deeply situated in the public realm. Quite to the contrary of Menand's position, Gerald Graff goes so far as to claim in 2003 that the university:

is itself popular culture—what else should we call an institution that serves millions if not an agent of mass popularization. But the university still behaves as if it were unpopular culture, and the anachronistic opposition of academia and journalism [the public cousin of English scholarship] continues to provide academics with an iron clad excuse for communicative ineptitude. (21)

Debate will likely always accompany the concept of going public with our scholarship, but it is hard to deny that the option should appeal to nontenured PhDs whose work will not be sufficiently rewarded *within* the academy. In other words, perhaps they can find more appreciation of their work outside the ivory tower. One way to begin in this direction, then, is to combine the arguably most esteemed element of our profession, which is literature, with arguably its most valued function,

which is teaching writing. In other words, the goal is to propose literature as a heuristic for teaching writing and rhetoric, not in the usual sense of being just a fixed text to write about, but as a dynamic medium to be manipulated for compositional purposes regardless of their original narrative, poetic, or dramatic function. In other words, as examples of rhetorical occasions outside the scope of the parameters of the text's conventional meaning, including, possibly, space and time.

**Literaturing Composition: The Indeterminate Audience and Felt Sense**

In order to improve the general understanding and broaden the relevancy of scholarship in English studies, scholars in the field may want—among other things—to pursue more accessible representations of their theory and pedagogy, as explained above. The tactic of literaturing composition may be well-suited to increasing accessibility and attention to rhetoric and composition theories, and incidentally to bringing new light to literary texts. The phrase *literaturing composition* was coined in 2007 by Gaughan and Khost in order to represent “a reciprocal to *composing literature* [...] so that one reads not to analyze an artifact so much as to imagine and enact new compositional possibilities” (“On Collaborating” 10, my emphasis). This idea

derives from Robert Scholes' insightful distinction in Textual Power between the consumption of literature (i.e., what we teach in English) and the production of literature (i.e., what we don't teach, except perhaps as marginalized "creative writing"). Scholes notes that the academy does not possess an appropriate term for identifying a person who produces literature, like we call one who consumes it: a *reader*, and he guesses at tongue-in-cheek neologisms to emphasize the point: "'literators' or 'literatists'" (12). So although we are familiar with the logical formulation of the phrase *composing literature*, there is not yet an established reciprocal formulation, which might be called *literaturing composition*, following Scholes' lead in expanding the usage range of the noun *literature* to include transitive verbal properties.<sup>40</sup> *Literaturing*, as such, with composition as its direct object, variously entails a creative written response to a text, and in the present case, with rhetorical and pedagogical implications.

As a pioneering prototype, this admittedly inexact practice is less a definitive than an experimental technique. In introducing the idea, Gaughan and Khost evoke Louise Rosenblatt's notion of

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<sup>40</sup> Sondra Perl writes in a somewhat similar vein, and also with a neologized transitive noun, of our "language-ing ability," referring to a creative agency with "which we are free to play," being "not only constructed by language and culture but also creators of new language and new cultures" (Felt Sense xvi). See below for more on Perl's contribution in this regard.

"living through" literature, as a means of suggesting the dynamic and phenomenological nature of the act. Another key point of reference from Rosenblatt in clarifying the nature of literaturing composition is her somewhat parallel account of a transactional reading of a text, which "permits emphasis on the to-and-fro, spiraling, nonlinear, continuously reciprocal influence of reader and text in the making of meaning" (xvi). With its origins clearly in reader-response criticism, broadly conceived, the technique also brings to mind Roland Barthes' alternative characterization of reading:

Has it never happened, as you were reading a book, that you kept stopping as you read, not because you weren't interested, but because you were: because of a flow of ideas, stimuli, associations? In a word, haven't you ever happened *to read while looking up from your book?* ("Writing" 29)

Literaturing composition can be thought of as teaching from and to those moments of looking up from a piece of literature in order to better understand rhetorical concepts that might well belong to different contexts as the text itself, such as the reader's lived experience, for instance. That is to say, the rhetoric under consideration in using this method may have little or nothing to do with the original text's or its author's techniques as is usually the case in rhetorical analysis (e.g.,

read a poem and observe the rhyme scheme). Rather, it is more a matter of the reader's approach to the text (e.g., read a poem and observe how an element informs a pattern in your own life or some other context). One might describe literaturing composition as retro-allegorizing or re-symbolizing an extant text to correspond somehow with a distinct set of purposes or values, in the present case, to prompt and enhance rhetorical instruction.

Described in general as such, literaturing composition may not strike one as something particularly avant-garde. In fact, it might be likened to using literature as a heuristic, which it certainly does but does not only do. But the most notable aspect of the technique may not be that literature functions heuristically, but what it functions as a heuristic for, and how. Nor does being avant-garde matter here nearly as much as the technique's significance in the context of pedagogy, about which pioneering academics today may want to address a wider audience than just fellow scholars. Such is the case in Gaughan and Khost's original use of the tactic, wherein J.D. Salinger's Franny and Zooey is retro-allegorized to serve as a device for introducing key ideas in their anthology's introductory chapter, which otherwise has nothing to do with Salinger's work ("On Collaborating"). So the practice of literaturing composition

does not necessarily involve analyzing the original text's rhetoric but rather using that text to teach an abstract lesson in rhetoric, which may or may not be incidental to the original text itself.

As a collaboration of practices that are often otherwise segregated to respective fields, then, literaturizing composition makes a disciplinary application of what Peter Elbow describes in another context as "the energy that occurs when people are successful in playing the believing game," which is a method that favors flexibility and cooperation—as opposed to the doubting game, which develops from the opposite (Writing 178-79, 81). Now is a good time for emerging scholars in English and composition studies to become flexible, not rigid, to believe in rather than doubt new possibilities. For as we have seen, these two disciplines need energizing and legitimizing, respectively, and it may be left to the field's pioneers to do so. The tactic of literaturizing composition considers the literary text as not only an inert, created object, but also as a dynamic opportunity for further creative action by the reader. And by drawing on literature, it stands to bring more esteem and retention to rhetorical instruction. With the sample cases in the following chapters, the technique employs literary texts as opportunities for instruction about rhetorical issues somewhat (but not

altogether) exclusive of the original texts themselves. As such, this application of literaturing composition may be said to blur conventional boundaries between writer and reader, text and audience, even reasoning and feeling.

*The Writer's Audience: A Dissensus of Theories*

Debates about audience in the context of rhetoric have existed since at least the ancient Greeks, and the subject remains one of the major topics in composition theory today. This chapter section could not possibly offer a comprehensive overview of these debates, because of space constraints and because many reliable sources have already surveyed this vast material.<sup>41</sup> Instead, a main point of the present argument is evoked from the body of this work in summary: that after thousands of years of scholarship on the subject, we apparently still cannot definitively say who the audience is in rhetorical contexts. Furthermore, it appears unlikely that a formula for conclusively determining the nature of audiences will ever be reached. It is suggested, then, that learners of rhetoric may benefit from

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<sup>41</sup> See, for example, Ede, Hillocks, Keene and Barnes-Ostrander, Kirsch and Roen, Kroll, Porter, Wagner, Young. In disciplines such as linguistics, philosophy, psychology, and sociology, the subject of audience and related issues of otherness and indeterminacy have been the focus of much attention (cf. Austin, Bakhtin, Davidson, Derrida, Heidegger, Kent, Lacan, Levinas, Saussure, Searle, Vygotsky, etc.). While this material is extremely worthwhile in its own right, it is too far beyond the scope of the present work to examine herein. However, the spirit of these and other such thinkers is certainly alive in the document.

becoming aware of and accepting audience indeterminacy, among other things. Since rhetorical audiences possess such anonymous and mercurial properties, we can see how developing a keener attention to one's felt sense would be advisable, since this process offers a productive, linguistic means of approaching what is unknown to conventional consciousness.

A key presumption here, based a fundamental tenet of rhetorical instruction, is that the character of one's writing—if it is to be successful—should strategically correspond with the character of one's audience. For example, if a given readership appears inclined toward logical reasoning, then one does well to appeal to them with logical evidence, or if the moment seems right for generating sympathy or outrage or laughter, then one does well to appeal to their emotions, and so on, as student writers are taught every semester. In this way, decisions about the content and style of a given composition arguably depend largely on the particular occasion for writing, namely on the nature of the others who will be reading the text. However, a considerable problem exists in this simple formulation. Much of the theory on this subject matter directly or indirectly suggests that the audience is elusive, changeable, constructed, heterogeneous, or one way or another unstable or unknowable to some degree. That is to say, rhetorical audiences are at least somewhat

*indeterminate* in nature, which presents a challenge to one's rhetorical approach to them.

Probably hundreds of contemporary scholars have written about the nature and role of the rhetorical audience, as an aggregate inconclusively inquiring into whether the figure on the other end of a composition is real or fictional, singular or multiple, active or passive, collaborative or antagonistic, and so on. A brief sampling of notable recent works reveals that perhaps the best that can be offered in the way of a constructive common denominator of these distinct theories of audience is that writers can and do make educated guesses about their readership. Walter Ong famously argues that the audience to whom one writes is always fictional, that readers generally play a passive role constructed or projected for them by authors, so long as it's a convincing projection. Picking up from Ong, Susan Miller specifies that teachers in particular are fictional audiences because of reading differently than others do on account of their paradoxically dual roles as creator and deconstructor of student writing. Ede and Lunsford further complicate the issue by claiming that writers address what they know of real audiences outside of the text *and* invoke roles for imagined ones within it *and* incidentally establish themselves as readers in revising their own texts ("Audience Addressed"). Similarly in

part, Barbara Tomlinson conceives of general audiences as abstractions from experiences of individual, real readers. Yet Joseph Petraglia critiques composition pedagogy for creating "pseudo"-realistic writing contexts, where texts do not participate in authentic discourse and therefore do not genuinely persuade anyone, for example. Conversely, Elbow advocates for disregarding audiences or for imagining deliberately supportive ones in the early stages of composing, so as to avoid blockage and to promote experimentation ("Closing"). Douglass Park also tries to divert the discussion to more productive ends by arguing that whether the audience be real or fictional, its nature is too complex to determine and, for this, makes a less useful matter to pursue than do various form- and context-based conventions. Also seeking to move beyond traditional framing of the debate, James Porter advocates for a variously collaborative or communal conception of the writer/audience relationship, very much in the poststructural line of thinking, whereby the "discourse community" should subsume previous constructions of audience such as those suggested above ("Audience").

In a review essay, Chris Anson has insightfully argued that the vast body of audience theory has created a "needlessly eclectic" debate, "in part because of invented terms that artificially

divide clearly related concepts (such as the 'discourse community,' audiences 'addressed or invoked,' 'fictional vs. nonfictional' audiences, and 'dialogic vs. non-dialogic approaches')" (94). Following suit with this assessment, the point of this chapter's raising audience problems is not to bemoan the difficulties inherent to communication or to intentionally further complicate things, but to identify an aspect of rhetorical learning that can be improved upon by connecting felt sense and audience theories (among other possibilities).

By now it seems at least a common occurrence that writers compose and submit their work without any good sense of whom they are addressing or invoking (or both or neither, as it were). But often this issue goes under-acknowledged or altogether unspoken in writing instruction. Again, compare Petraglia, who chides composition instructors for dodging the audience issue, with Elbow, who happily admits to ignoring it (at times). In either case the matter goes un(der-)analyzed, and that which often suffices instead in practice suffers for this. To repeat, in many instances in order to manage the audience issue, writers fabricate placeholders or reader heuristics, such as the teacher or hypothetical opponents or even specific but un-actualized respondents (e.g., other

students, politicians, a scientific community).<sup>42</sup> But these provisional audience constructs tend to lack realistic cultural and contextual attributes, and the inherent differences and dynamics that engender non-hypothetical communicative transactions can easily be glossed over here.

In this regard, peer-revision plays something of a counteractive role in composition classes, for example. But such practices are also limited by their artificial arrangement, poorly motivated participation, and time constraints, or by the influences of grading, teacher oversight, and other considerations. In other words, one's peers in peer-revising are quite often randomly assigned strangers whose reading of one's draft may suffer such influences as superficiality (e.g., "The draft is good"), prescription (e.g., teachers' guidelines for responding), or worse (e.g., apathy, distraction, and even deception<sup>43</sup>). The concept of teacher as audience merits fuller exploration than this section can undertake,<sup>44</sup> but it may

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<sup>42</sup> In my writing program, for example, the ominous "final portfolio reader" is constantly evoked as a warning in sections of the required writing course, often with very little or no explanation and discussion.

<sup>43</sup> It is not inconceivable that complete strangers forced to respond to each other in an environment perceived to be competitive (i.e., for grades) may take the opportunity of peer-revising to weaken, or at least not particularly strengthen, the work of their supposed competitors. For more in general on ethics in composition and peer revising, see for example: Bruffee, Cooper ("Really"), Fontaine and Hunter, Friend, Grimm, Kahn, Porter "Developing," and Spigelman.

<sup>44</sup> See especially Miller on this point.

nevertheless be said with relative confidence that the contentious relationship of teacher to learner cannot provide nearly a rich enough experience to comprehensively represent to writing students the full spectrum of audience possibilities. Besides, a great deal of rhetorical learning in life happens outside the classroom without the presence of official teachers at all.

As we can see, theories about audience, even despite best intentions, can be extremely abstract (admittedly including the present one), and for that, they do not always effectively attend to the fact that the theoretical issue of audience for scholars is an applied circumstance for learners of rhetoric. In other words, though it provides scholars rich material for theorizing and publishing, the problem of audience directly affects students' ability to practically function in class and beyond school. So for practical purposes, we can posit the audience as a variously problematic site or function in or outside the text (or both), either wholly indeterminate (i.e., a thoroughly unknown identity) or at least partially so (e.g., a reader's uncertain receptiveness, presence, response, etc.). Nevertheless, audience plays a significant role in the composing process, sometimes leaving writers confused or incapable of resolving the above issues. This has various consequences,

including writer's block, faulty assumptions, and perhaps an overemphasis on persuasion. Among the options available to support writers who are facing audience indeterminacy is attending to their felt sense, which in this context would aspire to generating an intuition for the reader's volatility, anonymity, presence, or absence, as well as for getting in better touch with one's own state of being and the shared rhetorical context.

*Felt Sense: Dwelling on Feeling*

*Felt sense* is a term that psychologist and philosopher Eugene Gendlin coined to refer to a bodily sense of meaning that is variously incidental to or separate from language. As this theory goes, at least some knowledge exists within one's body in the form of feelings and sensations before or otherwise than one's conscious and linguistic perception of it. Gendlin takes care to specify that "felt sense is not a mental experience but a physical one. *Physical*. A bodily awareness of a situation or person or event" (Focusing 32). A number of handy examples can be given to clarify what the terms means, for instance: the feeling of a blocked word or name on the tip of your tongue, or a lingering sensation that you have forgotten something until the unknown content finally emerges, or knowing that you have used an incorrect word but not knowing how to explain why it

isn't the best choice. "It's just a feeling," one usually says of the phenomenon.<sup>45</sup> In each of these cases, one knows without a doubt that one possesses the knowledge in question, yet one cannot reasonably account for that knowledge. Again, it's just a feeling.

This felt experience may be deliberately brought forth into consciousness by means of a process Gendlin calls *focusing*:

Focusing is a mode of inward **bodily** attention that most people don't know about yet. It is more than being in touch with your feelings and different from body work.

Focusing occurs exactly at the interface of body-mind. It consists of specific steps for getting a body sense of how you are in a particular life situation. The **body sense** is unclear and vague at first, but if you pay attention it will open up into words or images and you experience a **felt shift** in your body.

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<sup>45</sup> Other examples that haven't seemed to appear in the literature but which might merit exploration include reports from immigrants about a feeling of erosion of their mother-tongue as they speak a foreign language continuously over the course of years. Or the act of rereading a composition after one has already submitted it, say to a teacher or a to journal. One reason to do such a thing—it being too late for revision, after all—is to plumb the mystery of the other's impression of the text, that is, to try to sense it from the reader's point of view, to feel out their feelings of the text.

In the process of Focusing, one experiences a physical change in the way that the issue is being lived in the body. We learn to live in a deeper place than just thoughts or feelings. The whole issue looks different and new solutions arise. (Fact Sheet)

Early in his career Gendlin explains the idea of arriving at a "that" in addressing a problem; this is an identifiable point of reference, or "a grip on" one's felt meaning that allows one to begin focusing (Experiencing 74). Later, the idea of "that" becomes symbolized graphically as ".....," which indicates "a space that is open but not blank," which contains "all that awaits implicitly before words come" (Perl Felt Sense 50-1).

In the 1980s, Sondra Perl began adapting Gendlin's focusing questions to the purposes of written composition in what have since become her well-known "Guidelines for Composing" exercise, eventually published and audio recorded in 2004 for classroom and individual use. Most knowledge and application of felt sense in the field of composition studies today is attributable to Perl's adaptation of the concept from Gendlin. Perl's exercise consists of a series of guiding questions focusing on felt sense, meant to help writers in various stages of the composition process, such as generating ideas, developing a subject matter, or generally getting in touch with the feelings

at the edge of one's thought. In summarizing the estimated stages of the Guidelines exercise, Perl notes first that "[f]elt sense occurs—is located in—our bodies," then that we can "dispel" this sensation's murkiness by paying attention, and then that the process culminates in words "that will help us express" the developing feeling and put us "on the right track" (Felt Sense 4-5).

Perl and others who have commented on the process also speak of a relieving "A ha" moment when one's felt sense comes to a head in the form of language, for instance, upon remembering a forgotten name or finding the right word that had previously been eluding one's conscious perception. As concerns the rhetorical audience, however, the present work stipulates that this relieving "A ha" experience or the achievement of a stable ..... (i.e., "that") might not be achieved in a permanent sense, because of the reader's ultimate indeterminacy. That is to say, this open space constantly remains open in one way or another. Yet language must continue to come forth into the space of the audience, unless communication is to cease. So the present work asserts that *sustaining* contact with one's felt sense—which is to say not abandoning the deep connection once words come into awareness—would be advisable to learners of rhetoric who seek to

maintain abiding, non-appropriative relationships with audiences. Indeed, Gendlin's and Perl's theorizations of felt sense recommend focusing as an ongoing process. So when Gendlin writes, "[t]here is simply no question that [conceptualizing a feeling in language] does make the feeling more intense, more clear, more real, and more capable of being handled," (Experiencing 80) it might be added that the *handling* of rhetorical audiences may well be an indefinite process. If so, then this would call for recursive attention to one's developing feelings and continuous revisions of one's corresponding language for them. Again, Gendlin's psychological use of focusing is very explicit about it being an ongoing process.

But the idea of recursiveness may not always get its due in pedagogical applications of felt sense theory (which, in their defense, don't often necessarily have to do with audience, *per se*). Compositionists have tended to use the concept primarily as a method for eliciting conscious knowledge out of unconscious embodied experience—in other words, for deriving language from feeling. For example, we employ our felt meanings to help generate topics for writing, or to overcome writer's block, or to find that elusive perfect word for saying just what we mean to say. In these and many similar cases, the intention each time is to eventually arrive at language, specifically. Or at

least that's the usual outcome, as well as the point at which writing takes over and focusing on feeling subsides. There is much to be admired about this application of felt sense, of course, and many individuals have benefited from it, especially students and teachers.<sup>46</sup> This view of felt sense does not require much more elaboration here, as it has been well accounted for by Perl (on graduate and undergraduate levels), Elizabeth Sargent (undergraduate), Steve Sherwood (writing centers), and others, as well as at scholarly conferences, in teacher training workshops, by word of mouth, and throughout classrooms across the country.

Instead, the present work—especially in chapters three and four—hopes to slightly expand this usual application of felt sense. The approach here is neither scientific nor philosophical like Gendlin's is, and it also varies somewhat from most pedagogical uses. It belongs nearby but at a different point than these on the apparent spectrum of uses for felt sense. Perhaps this understanding may be called rhetorical, which doesn't discount it from pedagogical classification as well. This view appreciates that the major pedagogical application of felt sense

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<sup>46</sup> I am included in both categories. Like many other composition instructors, I use Perl's "Guidelines" every semester in my teaching, consistently to good effect, and my first experience of the exercise was as a graduate student in Professor Perl's class.

theory seeks to arrive at language where previously only bodily sensations were experienced, or else presumably nothing at all. But it also acknowledges that the process need not be limited to such sequencing as: first one experiences a feeling, then one focuses on it, and then one arrives at language and moves on. The relationship of feeling and language here may also operate in the reverse order, or by a different ordering, or by means other than linear sequencing altogether. For instance, in focusing on felt sense, the experience of feelings and language may coexist in balance simultaneously; or emphases may oscillate between them; or their nature may change in process, thereby prompting a different but related direction. In other words, felt meanings and the language generated from/for them by focusing do not necessarily correspond to an orderly process of evocation, and in some cases there may be considerable back and forth<sup>47</sup> before arriving at a resolution. For that matter, in plenty of circumstances, ambivalent feelings never achieve resolution in language, such as for example, in some compositional encounters with audiences, in which no amount or quality of language will likely settle the matter of readers' indeterminacy with finality.

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<sup>47</sup> Insert here any preferred metaphor: loops, spirals, tangents, fractals, etc.

But probably few felt sense practitioners would admit to seeking such an orderly process of focusing on feeling as that described just above. In fact, a noted<sup>48</sup> early description of felt sense by Perl characterizes the phenomenon as prone to “break apart, shift, unravel, and become something else” (“Understanding” 365). Yet for all its potential chaos, felt sense still seems to be celebrated by writing teachers mainly as a stepping stone toward achieving a more orderly subsequent state, namely, some form of sensible linguistic expression. In other words, focusing on felt sense is often seen as a temporary condition, a means to an end, something one does rather than is as a writer. Elbow calls it “a kind of blueprint for a precise meaning” (“Foreword” ix), which is different than the structure that the blueprint plans out. Sargent calls it one of the “tools” in her student “writers’ tool bag” (57), which is different than the thing that is built with the tool. Sherwood calls it a “faculty” used “to cultivate and finetune [a student’s] mind’s ear” (12), which is different than the mind’s ear itself.<sup>49</sup> Many accounts of classroom usage of the Guidelines for Composing

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<sup>48</sup> Both Jeffrey Carroll (66) and William Strong (25) quote this passage in their essays.

<sup>49</sup> It must be clear these characterizations somewhat stray from Perl’s understanding of her Guidelines exercise, which she defends against the mechanistic angle of critique: “[s]een from this angle, the Guidelines are another tool[...]. But when they are connected to felt sense, they offer us a way to examine larger issues of composing” (Felt Sense xvi). More important to this work than the mechanistic question is that of the presumed sequence and linguistic end point of focusing.

suggest that achieving functional written language is indeed the desired end product of this process that begins in one's feelings. This seems to confirm the notion of a presumed sequence as described above: feel first, write second. Note, for example, the directional emphasis on order in Sargent's subtitle: "Felt Sense in the Composition Classroom: *Getting the Butterflies to Fly in Formation*" (my emphasis). This is clever and alliterative, and we well know what she means to suggest by the metaphor. But still it must be noted that butterflies, especially, do not fly in formation, a fact that surely accounts for some of the beauty of literal butterflies and for much of the excitement of figurative ones. If people convert their emotional butterflies into something orderly, then these converted feelings lose the status of butterflies, just as insect butterflies lose much of their appeal when they're pinned and mounted. Certainly, calmed visceral butterflies and mounted insect butterflies possess useful properties in one regard, but they also lack the liveliness that make them special to experience in another regard. Luckily, perhaps as far as feeling and writing goes, it does not have to be an either/or choice.

By no means does any of this analysis intend to disparage the practice of focusing on felt sense to achieve linguistic

outcomes. Quite the opposite. This is a wonderful benefit, and the Guidelines must be continued, developed, and admired for as long as people compose written texts. The intention here, rather, is to suggest that the great value achieved by attending to one's felt sense exists in both the written product of this process (as most practitioners already acknowledge) and in the experienced feelings themselves (which perhaps too often go un[der-]acknowledged after serving to prompt the former). In other words, the language produced by focusing on felt sense is only one of the benefits of engaging in the practice. Another functional product is gaining a deeper sense of one's feelings for their own sake, as well as perhaps developing a corresponding non-linguistic fluency by repeated attention to one's felt sense. This can be thought of as sort of fluency in embodied rhetoric. If this is true, then such a benefit would be especially desirable where the indeterminate audience is concerned, since this aporia is arguably irresolvable and inevitable, yet one often needs to respond to it nonetheless. So if other people are always in some respect *other* (i.e., different), and no amount or quality of language can fully bridge this gap (i.e., make them same), but one still constantly communicates with these others, then one may wish to develop a comfortable sense of audience relationality. Another way to say this is: it would be advisable to generate an explicit awareness

and acceptance of the fact of indeterminacy, which likely involves at least as much of an embodied as a linguistic fluency, so to speak.

To rephrase the point one more time, at least insofar as the present argument concerning audience indeterminacy is concerned, keeping alert to one's feelings over the full course of a rhetorical exchange seems preferable to just attending to them at first and then downplaying or disregarding one's feelings once language has begun to flow from them. The nature of audiences and of one's perception thereof will often shift during communication—including while addressing even hypothetical readers—and therefore so will one's feelings and one's corresponding language. So writers should remember that focusing on felt sense helps them to achieve both linguistic and embodied knowledge, and therefore that the value of felt experience lies not only in how it helps them to find a right word or to begin composing, etc., but also in literally experiencing with their body the continuous sense of something beyond conventional conscious awareness. This is an experience that is partly separate from language, even if it eventually yields (to) language. Both Gendlin and Perl attend to this aspect of felt experience in terms of the "edge" of meaning, where something inside which is unknown may come into

articulation. Gendlin calls this coming to words from the edge of meaning "carrying forward." The present work only adds to this excellent concept that, upon facing uncertain audiences in particular, one constantly returns to one's feelings such that the direction of one's "carrying" might be considered "forward" only in terms of revolutions in a circle.<sup>50</sup>

To emphasize the specifically simultaneous dual nature of this felt and linguistic phenomenon, the present work will replace the usual term *focusing* (i.e., on felt sense), which perhaps highlights the endpoint of the process in cognition, with the term *dwelling*, which hopes to insinuate the sustained returning to physicality here.<sup>51</sup> These are nearly identical notions, except for the matter of emphasis. *Dwelling* suggests a spatiality that is appropriate for emphasizing continued feeling; the nounal usage of "dwelling," for instance, is especially perceived as an indefinite thing. This is distinguished from *focusing*, which seems to signal a final point in reasoning; once something comes into focus, one stops focusing. Both of these experiences and their respective descriptors are necessary, to be sure, but the indefinite experience of feeling deserves its due compared with the greater

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<sup>50</sup> Again, or loop, spiral, tangent, fractal, etc., metaphorically speaking.

<sup>51</sup> For the somewhat related notion of "indwelling," see Polanyi.

attention paid to rational linguistic outcomes of felt sense exercises. In short, the interest here is in keeping the focus on feeling as well as on "language-ing," so as to draw attention to the recursive rhetorical relationship prompted by audience indeterminacy.

Toward this end, the phrase *come to terms with* will be instrumental in making example cases throughout the next two chapters. This term conveniently maintains a concurrent dual interpretation, as just specified above: one literal, "come to terms" as in *to arrive at language* (presumably after an interim or process), and one figurative, "come to terms" as in *to accept*. The former of these interpretations suggests the linguistic product of dwelling on felt sense, that is, conceiving of words after working through an experience of speechlessness. The latter interpretation suggests the physical product of dwelling, that is, an embodied fluency. Chapters three and four will interpret two literary examples of speakers struggling to come to terms with audience indeterminacy. Their respective rhetorical circumstances arise from having been displaced from conventional assumptions about rhetoric and audience. Specifically, each of these characters finds himself stiflingly uncertain about his auditor's receptiveness, nature, and even presence, thus complicating the matter of choosing a

suitable approach to engaging this audience. The first case is that of Orpheus, which teaches learners of rhetoric to aspire to an awareness of audience indeterminacy. The second case is that of Chaucer's Narrator in the Book of the Duchess, which promotes acceptance of this same fact.

### Chapter Three

#### Audience and Awareness:

#### Felt Sense in Virgil's Orpheus

#### **Abstract**

Comprising an extended example of *literaturing composition*, this chapter interprets the figure of Orpheus as a rhetorical agent or, analogously, as a writer (student, scholar, or otherwise) whose method of engaging audiences unfortunately favors certainty over ambiguity, appropriation over collaboration, and singularity over plurality. This emphasis is likened to the rhetorical context of the ubiquitous persuasive essay. Using the Orpheus myth to illuminate and explore related theories of audience and felt sense, this chapter seeks to expand the exposure, range, and perceived significance of such difficult concepts, including by making them more widely appealing and pertinent to readers. Virgil's casting of the Orpheus story provides an especially good opportunity for rhetorical analysis in the present case since his Orpheus is well-known as the world's greatest poet, who nevertheless ultimately fails to fully *come to terms with* his situation. Chapter three proposes the idea that in such cases as Orpheus's regrettable insistence and reliance on certainty, to dwell on one's felt sense of an

audience's indeterminacy can sometimes be a preferable alternative or supplemental framework for writers. By considering the myth from this perspective this chapter hopes to memorably teach the lessons that not every expressive occasion calls for the same rhetorical approach (such as is often the case with the standard persuasive essay), and that a greater awareness of one's feelings than is usually sought might help to negotiate the uncertainty inherent to rhetorical occasions. This position establishes the grounds upon which chapter four will make the point—also by means of literaturing composition—that acceptance of audience indeterminacy should follow awareness of such. After an introduction, chapter three includes the following sections: *The Allegory of the Save*, *Virgil's Orpheus*, *Rhetoric and The Turn*, and *Felt Sense and Awareness of Indeterminacy*.

### **Introduction**

For literally thousands of years the figure of Orpheus has been adopted for widely varying, even totally opposite, purposes. To offer a selective inventory: Orpheus has been conversely admired and criticized for his extreme grief; cast as heterosexual archetype and pederastic lover; regarded as a Dionysian as well as Apollonian ideal; symbolized as pagan shaman and Christ-like savior; noted for his savage passion and civilizing reason; and

recognized as the patron saint of poets as well as a failed rhetor, by this chapter's account. Some of the greatest writers who have contributed over the millennia to the immense Orphic canon include Aeschylus, Euripides, Plato, Horace, Ovid, Seneca, Shakespeare, Milton, Mallarmé, and Rilke, as well as Virgil of course, whose version (perhaps the best known today) will be examined in detail below. Renowned classicist M. Owen Lee neatly accounts for readers' endless and paradoxical fascination with the character: "Orpheus is an index to the spirit of each successive age, but we are never likely to know who he is, or was" ("Rev. of Orpheus" 380). The eminent Orpheus scholar Charles Segal echoes this sentiment with a thematic inventory of the hero's timelessness:

Orpheus spans life and death; order and emotionality; animate and inanimate forms; fertility and sterility; man's control over nature and sympathetic fusion with nature; the power of art over death and its futility before death; the malleability of the world to language and the inability of the poet to deal with reality; harmony with natural processes and hopeless protest against the most basic law of existence; the transience of human creation and the yearning for participation in eternal forms. (34)

It is no wonder, then, that this adaptable character should lend himself well to such rhetorical analysis as will be employed here. Taking up the long tradition of troping on the famous myth, this chapter examines Orpheus as a language user ultimately confronting an indeterminate audience. Orpheus's external and internal conflicts in and around Hades may be retro-allegorized to suggest the condition of many composition students (or any writers), whose communicative intentions are mainly or only predicated on persuasion or appropriation of the audience. In the myth, whenever his rhetorical task is certain, appropriative, and singular in nature (i.e., convincing others to yield to his will), then Orpheus's persuasive powers remain utterly dominant. But when the context for engagement suddenly becomes uncertain, collaborative, and pluralistic (i.e., reconciling doubts about his wife's presence), then the great poet's language tragically fails him, not to mention his wife. This distinction offers an opportunity for exploration and instruction on the nature of audience, the significance of felt sense, and the corresponding aims of composition.

The most common version of the myth goes as follows: After his young wife, Eurydice, dies by a snake bite, Orpheus—son of Calliope, the muse of poetry—uses enchanting verses to charm his way into the underworld with the intention of recovering her

from death. Against all odds, he convinces the underworld gods to release Eurydice from their cold grip, but they set one condition on the deal: that Orpheus cannot look back during the ascension from hell. Near the surface, Orpheus experiences a moment of doubt about his wife's presence and does look back, only to see his wife—who had been there the whole time—fade away into Hades for ever. After this point, Orpheus' rhetoric does not persuade as well as it had done before, and eventually it fails him altogether: he can neither charm his way back into hell for another rescue or out of his final conflict above ground. Spurning a throng of Dionysus worshipers by rejecting their advances, he is overpowered, killed, and dismembered by these women.<sup>52</sup> His severed head continues to sing for some time afterward until Apollo finally quiets it.

Like the Orpheus myth, debates in rhetoric about the nature and role of audience are also thousands of years old, and as we have seen in the previous chapter, they remain unresolved in today's composition theory. For this, the practice of literaturing composition will be employed here to examine some limitations in uncritical constructions of audience and to propose one among various potential responses to that. The aim certainly is not

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<sup>52</sup> This hostile group is variously known as maenads, Ciconian women, Bacchantes, etc., but I will employ Virgil's name for them, "Thracian women."

to settle these debates once and for all but at least to make the case for an alternative or supplement to conventional argumentative postures toward audiences, by recommending a keen awareness of felt sense in relationships with them. Of course, the viability of this idea will vary to whatever degree its application may or may not work within a given curriculum or context, and at least for now the matter remains predominantly theoretical. Nevertheless, promoting felt sense of the indeterminate audience—and doing so in such a way as is presented below—hopefully represents an important precedent in scholarly “pioneering,” of which chapters one and two have already established the relevance.

For the sake of repeating and reducing, we can characterize literaturizing composition as an act of retro-allegorizing literary texts to prompt and enhance rhetorical instruction. Currently, many composition students (and other writers) are inclined to somewhat narrowly consider the power and purpose of rhetoric only in terms of attaining some preconceived and discrete objective of one’s own, usually of a persuasive or appropriative nature (e.g., convincing readers to agree with your opinion). This attitude maintains that the primary use of rhetoric is to secure oneself a discrete, intended outcome—like Orpheus uses his poetry for in the myth—even if that outcome is

only the hypothetical agreement from a primarily unidentified readership (i.e., "convincing readers"), and even if that outcome is perceived to benefit the interlocutors themselves. Like many writing assignments ask students to pretend they are doing, Orpheus demonstrates a mastery of his craft by persuading his audience to acquiesce to his intention, even, famously, Pluto and Proserpina.<sup>53</sup> However, with the highest stakes on the line—his wife's life—his usual, appropriative take on the rhetorical situation yields the opposite outcome of what Orpheus intends. As shall be seen below, he is too preoccupied with overcoming the audience's indeterminacy to learn to be aware of and accept its irresolvable inevitability, instead. But clearly Orpheus might have done well to dwell on his felt sense in this moment of crisis. Students, scholars, and the general public stand to benefit from knowledge of this fictional missed opportunity, so as to apply the lesson learned to their real life rhetorical encounters. There is, of course, nothing wrong with writing in order to persuade someone or to possess something, but these appropriative rhetorical objectives are also not the sole aims of writing, nor—as composition scholars well know—are they so easily attained as just by stating one's case clearly and assuming that the audience automatically

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<sup>53</sup> These are the Greco-Roman gods of Hades, the underworld or realm of the dead. The name "Hades" is interchangeable with Pluto, but to avoid confusion I will employ the term Hades here only to refer the underworld itself.

acquiesces to one's expression. To recall Lunsford and Ede's distinction from the previous chapter, sometimes in communicating it is preferable to cooperate with the differences that one faces than it is to combat them in aiming for sameness. This lesson may be learned from the tragic outcome of Orpheus's oversight.

### **The Allegory of the Save**

The western literary canon maintains a long and ingrained history of conflating or at least associating rhetoric with rescue. Many of our celebrated intellectual protagonists have been cast in salvational conflicts concerning their own or another's destiny. Think of Odysseus, Antigone, Lysistrata, Dante, Gawain, Hamlet, Moll Flanders, Childe Harold, Frankenstein, Uncle Tom, Huck Finn, Holden Caulfield, the invisible man, and Atticus Finch, for example. Each of these characters famously pits their rhetorical fortitude against great adversity—often in subterranean, supernatural, or existential contexts (Orpheus struggles amidst all three). Most often, the aim of such rescuing is genuinely charitable, even admirably so, but the gesture also assumes a preexisting and definite knowledge of a clearly recognized beneficiary's needs, which is not often the case in real life rhetorical encounters.

The reference in the subheading for this section, "The Allegory of the *Save*," is a homonymic allusion to Plato's famous allegory of the *cave*, from book seven of The Republic. This extremely influential passage involving what can be considered a rhetorical rescue, introduces the intellectual heroes of Plato's ideal society, the philosophers. It also contains some of Plato's clearest claims about the aim of higher education: in short, indoctrinating knowledge of "the Good." A very complicated idea that deliberately defies explanation in the original Greek, let alone in English translation, the Good may be provisionally understood here to suggest the highest form of reason or ethical rightness, which is the source of justice (also a fairly obscure concept). Despite the ambiguity, there can be no doubt that these ideals at very least "make our relations with others central to the moral life," as Julia Annas states in her introduction to The Republic (13). The Good, therefore, can by no means be restricted to an isolated attribute; rather it is a social phenomenon of engagement with an audience, even an act of love (e.g., of reason, which guides the ruler, who leads the state that governs the citizenry).

In Plato's allegory, the kind of individual best suited to leading the society—and incidentally the only citizen eligible

for education in rhetoric—is he<sup>54</sup> who gains release from the subterranean life of illusion and ascends above ground into an unfamiliar realm of pure philosophy, or reason. There, eventually and with great difficulty, this individual acquires a knowledge of things as they truly are (the Good), as distinct from the illusions mistaken for truth back in the cave. The task of his leadership—and the test of his rhetoric—begins when this “Philosopher Ruler” returns to the subterranean realm and tries to lead the people’s lives according to what is truly just. This obligation to resume a relationship with the others after having achieved one’s own insight into the truth, may be thought of as an ethical charge to “save” them (essentially from misinformation) in the name of the Good. This endeavor entails engagement with an audience who Plato notes will most certainly be doubtful; therefore, it can be considered a persuasive gesture, namely to win over others to one’s own position or opinion.

Thus we have an archetypal persuasive rhetorical encounter, in which the speaker addresses a dubious, if not outright resistant, audience with the aim of changing their opinion to his own, believed-to-be-right opinion. This resembles the

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<sup>54</sup> For Plato, these philosophers were necessarily male.

familiar intention behind many writing assignments and the other writing tasks: to convince the reader of one's opinion. Even if it be for the audience's own good, as is the case in Plato's allegory (and most writing assignments are generally as benign), the linguistic encounter here tends to be charged primarily by conversion or, in other words, appropriation of a reluctant audience, which is to say at least: not necessarily through cooperation. But in practice beyond the hypothetical realm of writing for school, rhetorical exchanges are seldom so easy, and the results hardly ever as neat as this. For this, I contend that attention to felt sense can be an asset to language users engaged in such applied rhetorical contexts. When addressing an audience with or without a particular outcome in mind, it should prove useful to develop an awareness of one's own and even these others' unspoken feelings and the exchange thereof, given the inherently uncertain nature of engaging any auditor, let alone a resistant one. This might be understood in terms of becoming sensitive to the ever-shifting dynamics of a communicative context<sup>55</sup>.

Even older than Plato's Philosopher Ruler, and perhaps as influential in dramatizing rhetorical proficiency (if not in

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<sup>55</sup> As disclaimed in the previous chapter, it is beyond the scope of this work to examine "high theory" on this subject, especially considering the present interest in making the subject more widely accessible and compelling.

symbolizing the struggle toward moral reasoning), is Orpheus, who also famously embarks on a subterranean quest to "save" another, namely his wife, Eurydice. Unlike the philosopher, Orpheus bears no responsibility to justice in the process of his rescue. In fact, he employs any means necessary in order to have his deceased wife returned to him. This distinction bears significantly on the contrasting rhetorical postures of the two heroes. Plato's protagonist is a philosopher, whose task in rescuing others lies in discerning the truth and leading his people accordingly. By contrast<sup>56</sup>, Orpheus is the world's greatest poet<sup>57</sup>—who uses his verse to manipulate nature and charm animals, humans, and even the gods themselves, as we see in his journey through the depths of the underworld—strictly for the purpose of securing his desired outcome (which is to emphasize: regardless of his audience's will).

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<sup>56</sup> The implied binary here of truth-seeking vs. persuasion is of course deconstructable and should not always be neatly assumed. Neo-Platonic characteristics, for instance, have been associated with the expressivist school of composition pedagogy (which hardly seeks to promote singularity of truth). See for example James Berlin (771-73) or, more recently, Thomas Kent.

<sup>57</sup> Orpheus is often referred to as a musician instead of a poet since he sang his poetry to the music of his lyre, but this distinction (which would not have been drawn in the cultures that originated the myth) does not interfere with my and many other analysts' characterization of him as a poet. I assign him the latter title in this document to emphasize the linguistic, rather than musical properties of his poetry. However, many theorists have examined Orpheus with the opposite emphasis. See, for example, Havelock (especially 6-8) on the musicality of Virgil's Orpheus; Sternfeld on the same of Ovid's (176-178); Irwin on Orpheus and Christian song; and Kerman (18-38) and McGee on operatic adaptations of the myth.

But despite these differences in purpose and approach, each figure is still similarly charged with the rhetorical task of convincing his audience to change their position on a significant matter. For this, the characters may be considered incidental symbolic prototypes for the English composition student, who is usually charged with a very similar task in any one of a number of standard writing assignments, such as convincing a reader in an opinion-driven paper. Interestingly, none of these figures—the writing student included—technically succeeds in persuading anyone with their rhetoric. The philosopher's encounter never transcends the hypothetical; neither does the student's in most cases; and Orpheus ultimately achieves the very opposite of his intentions. These outcomes beg the question of how to determine the quality of such rhetorical encounters, if not by the fulfillment of their supposed purposes—in which case each could more or less be considered a failure. It is an ethical question, to be sure: if not (solely) by the outcome, measured in terms of the rhetor's intention, then how to determine the quality of a linguistic encounter? Of course the effectiveness of written communication, especially in educational contexts, does not need to be determined by its effect on real audiences (considering that the teacher as reader is not quite a "real" audience in

many respects). Yet, rhetoric is often taught and evaluated as if this were the case.

According to my application of the literaturing composition technique here, the symbolic context of the "save" and its corresponding methodologies closely parallels the construct of the contemporary curricular teleology and its pedagogical functions. So if convincing an audience were metaphorically equivalent to saving them from misconception, yet few readers are indeed convinced by the communication, then the writer has technically failed in the rhetorical/salvational effort (though the value of the gesture, if only a matter of practice, may not be totally lost). With this in mind, recall that Plato's Academy, founded around 387BCE partly on ideals personified in the figure of the Philosopher Ruler, served to some extent as a model for the development of the modern university. The pursuit and preservation of truth has long since been a predominant rationale for higher education, just as Orphic-levels of persuasion might be equated with the aims of language instruction therein. To be extremely reductive for the sake of spatial constraints, this has been true of educational institutions in the west from antiquity's training of aristocratic politicians, to medieval Europe's indoctrination of Christian clergy, to the twentieth century's development of

democratic citizenry. The general purpose of higher education in each of these cases has been to instill and support the dominant culture's fundamental values (truth), and rhetorical instruction has served the associated purpose of advocating right thought (persuasion). In these cases, respectively, the trained rhetor seeks to save one's contemporaries from false rule, from false belief, or from false civic behavior.

However, as chapter one demonstrates, the value of such a purely humanistic rationale for higher learning, perhaps especially concerning English studies, has become dubious in today's academic culture, which is suffering something of an identity crisis. Even putting aside charges of corporatization or irrelevance, many contemporary academics still question the viability of objective truth and subsequently the possibility of a corresponding singularly right rhetoric, such as that which would indubitably pronounce the purpose of higher education. This applies at least in so far as supposed truths may sanction dominant discourses, as demonstrated, for example, by recent debates about the scope of the literary canon or skepticism about the existence of essential subjective identity. In characteristically accessible style, Terry Eagleton reveals the potentially high stakes involved in such poststructural debates about truth, or meaning making, which still considerably

influence our conception of language or, in Eagleton's words, signs:

[M]eaning is not immediately *present* in a sign. Since the meaning of a sign is a matter of what the sign is *not*, its meaning is always in some sense absent from it too.[...] If this is so, then it strikes a serious blow at certain traditional theories of meaning.[...] [I]t is an illusion for me to believe that I can ever be fully present to you in what I say or write, because to use signs at all entails that my meaning is always somehow dispersed, divided and never quite one with itself. Not only my meaning, indeed, but *me*: since language is something I am made out of, rather than merely a convenient tool I use, the whole idea that I am a stable unified entity must also be a fiction.[...] That any such transcendental meaning is a fiction—though perhaps a necessary fiction—is one consequence of [poststructural theory]. There is no concept which is not embroiled in an open-ended play of signification, shot through with the traces and fragments of other ideas. (128-31)

With this in mind, then, we can see that the expression of truth—or in the present case, rhetorical salvation (i.e.,

persuasion against misinformation)—may not simply be a matter of using the right words for the right occasion. For it seems not only do occasions shift, as Aristotle famously suggested, but even the nature of a given occasion, itself, shifts constantly. For this reason, Orpheus—better than the Philosopher Ruler—might be evoked to personify the (post)modern rhetor in action, since his adaptable rhetoric does not necessarily correspond to any universal truth. In assigning Orpheus such representational status, this chapter will nonetheless come to scrutinize his rhetoric for its overlooked arguably ethical shortcoming. People well remember Orpheus as a great poet and as a tragic hero, but they do not often trace that tragedy to his own linguistic failure: an inability to adjust his rhetoric—despite the freedom to do so—according to the shifting nature of the occasion and audience.

Orpheus is clearly an accomplished persuasive rhetor.<sup>58</sup> Until the point of his failure, he always succeeds in using language to achieve his desired results (e.g., generating attention to his interests, gaining entry to forbidden places, protecting himself). We know that his language works effectively, and by

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<sup>58</sup> To write credibly and critically about Orpheus requires that his infinite adaptability be acknowledged, given the innumerable precedents as well as the necessary limitations of a particular interpretation, and therefore to concede—as I do here—any presumption of a definitive reading of the myth.

extension that Orpheus is the world's greatest poet, because he leaves behind him a trail of enchanted and compliant auditors. In other words, his songs achieve the highest level of "outcomes" (to borrow from composition jargon) respective to the situation: variously charming stones, trees, animals, humans, and gods to succumb to his will. But this is only so long as the situation calls for persuasive rhetoric. The quality of the above results is measured in terms of appropriative intentions: that is to say, they are meritorious achievements because *he gets what he wants*.

According to this Orphic model of rhetoric, a writer would have a clear preconceived idea of what she wants to be the result of a particular expression; she would choose the most persuasive language for it; and she would achieve the intended outcome, acknowledgeable by measure of the audience's level of persuasion. Indeed the Orphic rhetor equates well with the consummate argumentative writer, whose thesis is always clear, evidence always persuasive, and mission always accomplished. The prevalence of this ideal in academe, even if unwitting,

suggests a lingering argumentative and positivistic<sup>59</sup> bias in university writing curricula maintained by high stakes assessment mechanisms, like entrance and exit essays and their scoring rubrics that favor clarity, organization, and persuasion.

However, eventually Orpheus famously encounters a situation that confounds his usual method, just as student writers inevitably encounter rhetorical contexts that require of them other kinds of writing than the usual persuasive essay they've been trained to write in school. This situation calls for different and deeper awareness of the nature of the communicative act than has previously been required of Orpheus. As we shall see, this situation, in fact, is primarily characterized by doubt, plurality, and a general sense of indeterminacy about the audience, which render his singular intentionality and appropriative devices fatally ineffectual. We certainly do not want the same to be true of real world writers for the sake of insufficient rhetorical education, which is what the present application of literaturing composition hopes to preempt.

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<sup>59</sup> Ann Berthoff memorably analogizes linguistic positivism as "a set of muffin tins into which the batter of thought is poured" (744). Victor Villanueva claims that "Positivism has been the dominant paradigm for Western society for nearly four centuries" (391).

### **Virgil's Orpheus**

Orpheus is an ancient character, long predating Virgil's telling of his story. Throughout history, dozens, if not hundreds, of versions have been told in poetry, prose, visual art, opera, and film. The Greeks believed he had been a real person. As early as the sixth century BCE he finds mention in a poetic fragment, already identifiable as "famous Orpheus." He is said to have been a crewmember of Jason's Argo, onto whose deck he could charm fish to leap from the sea. Some also believe him to be the founder of a religious sect known as Orphism, and the author of its sacred texts. Because of lacking evidence, many of his attributions still remain open to inquiry today. However, most contemporary Orpheus scholars are willing to put aside the unresolved questions of his real (historical) existence and the nature of his connection to Orphism<sup>60</sup> in order to focus on his literary, especially his metaphorical, implications.

The great Roman poet Virgil contributed the earliest extant account of what is now arguably the best-known version of the Orpheus story, namely the one in which the character loses his wife for a second time at the end. Virgil's Orpheus appeared in

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<sup>60</sup> For examples of exceptions see Guthrie, Parker.

roughly 35BCE in a seventy-five line epyllion<sup>61</sup> in the fourth and last book of the nearly 2,200-word didactic poem Georgics, which roughly means "points of agriculture."<sup>62</sup> The poem reads on one level as an instruction manual for farming and husbandry, and was in its time something of a secular update of Hesiod's Works and Days. However, Dryden did not come to hail this work as "the best Poem of the best Poet," and Montaigne did not award it his highest praise, for merely its extensive agricultural insights<sup>63</sup>, but rather for its exquisite construction and its deep and complex examination of universal themes in human existence. Segal summarizes the latter as including:

the alternation between creativeness and destructiveness, gentleness and force in the world, the pessimistic sense of human sinfulness and the hope for regeneration, the possibilities, positive and negative, for human civilization against the flawed backdrop of human history and the elemental violence of nature's powers. ("Orpheus and the Fourth Georgic" 307)

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<sup>61</sup> An epyllion is a mini-epic, or myth-within-a-myth.

<sup>62</sup> There are a number of good English versions of this text. In order to evoke a comparative sense of the rich interpretive possibilities in the material, I have chosen to use two considerably different translations here: Janet Lembke's 2005 American English vernacular version, and esteemed Latinist W.S. Anderson's more literal 1981 translations from his commentary on the text. The numbers after references to the story indicate line numbers in Virgil's original poem, which remain constant across translations and, therefore, will not be doubly cited.

<sup>63</sup> Nor did Dante choose Virgil as his underworld guide for having written purely literal poems.

It is easy, and not unprecedented, to conjecture a political reading of the Georgics, as it was written over seven years during an extremely tumultuous and bloody time in the Roman Republic's history, what Lee calls "among the most troubled years in human history" (Virgil as Orpheus 19). This period included widespread civil war, class conflict, struggles over land rights and citizenship, the rise and assassination of Julius Caesar, and the eventual succession of the teenaged emperor Octavian<sup>64</sup>. The reasonable possibility that Georgics was intended to counsel young Octavian (later known as Augustus Caesar) in restoring peace and unity has inspired much scholarship on the subject. Lee dedicates an entire book, Virgil as Orpheus, to exploring this theory, positing an analogical configuration in Georgics of Virgil as Orpheus and Octavian as Aristaeus (a main character in the epyllion; see below). Recognizing that the vast applicability of the myth must be read selectively, other theorists are less compelled to pursue such a reading, preferring to downplay political Orpheus (like historical and religious Orpheus are often put aside). Lembke, for one, argues in the introduction to her translation that "The poem is not in any sense [...] a political polemic"

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<sup>64</sup> Georgics is in fact dedicated to one of Octavian's chief councilors, Maecenas, who was Virgil's patron at the time.

(xvi), though she nevertheless outlines Virgil's political predilections and connections, conceding—as do most astute readers—that Virgil's intentions are far more complex and accomplished than any simple formulation of them can account for.

Most literary scholars and artists—for what should be an obvious and forgivable bias—prefer to interpret Orpheus as more literally embodying the power of language and the inclination to explore the unknown, especially death. Indeed, he is well-known for being the world's greatest poet, whose verses have the power to persuade any audience to concede to his intentions. However, despite his successes along the way, Orpheus ultimately does not achieve the intended outcome of his expressive journey. That is to say, although skillful rhetorical maneuvering wins him every argument he takes to auditors who are certain (i.e., knowable) to him throughout the story, language fatally fails Orpheus on the one occasion requiring collaboration with an indeterminate interlocutor (i.e., who is ambiguous in nature). This fatal moment will be examined further in the next section below, as “the point of the turn.” Though Virgil's is the first extant account of Orpheus' *failure* to rescue Eurydice, there is good reason to believe that this version was familiar by the time the

Roman poet put it to his hexameter<sup>65</sup>. Some even speculate that the failed recovery story dates as early as five centuries before Georgics was published. Regardless, Virgil was most certainly the first to establish a connection between Orpheus and Aristaeus, the latter being the real protagonist of the fourth book of the Georgics.<sup>66</sup>

In Virgil's version, Eurydice dies from a poisonous snakebite while fleeing from Aristaeus, a beekeeper, who had tried to rape her. It is important to the present interpretation to note that this plot originates in an interpersonal act that is purely appropriative and indisputably ethically corrupt in nature (i.e., the attempted rape). Correspondingly, this plot's climax is reached by means of a similarly possessive gesture in Orpheus's looking back, which may not be corrupt but is certainly ethically shortsighted. Notably, from the origin to the resolution of the conflict, the blame for undue self-interest shifts from Aristaeus (who eventually adjusts his

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<sup>65</sup> Some debate exists around this point because of a lack of definitive evidence. Lee is confident that no prior version tells of Proserpina's condition about not turning back (Virgil as Orpheus 9), but this point does not preclude Anderson's strong contention that Virgil "was working in a familiar Greco-Roman myth," in which Orpheus fails to rescue Eurydice (27), by decree of a condition or otherwise.

<sup>66</sup> There has been much debate about whether or not the Orpheus and Aristaeus story was a later addition to or revision of Georgics, though no one doubts that it was Virgil who added it, if so. As early as the fourth century CE, Servius advanced a theory about the passage's late addition, but modern scholars tend to discount the problem (e.g., Segal "Orpheus and the Fourth Georgic" 308).

approach to otherness) to Orpheus (who does not). After his attempt at rape, Aristaeus learns that his punishment will be the death of the entire swarm of bees he had been tending. Hopelessly distraught by his own loss, Aristaeus is instructed by the sea-god Proteus to atone for the great loss he caused Orpheus. Accepting this responsibility to attend to another's interest over his own by repenting, Aristaeus conducts an animal sacrifice on behalf of his crime's victims, which also unexpectedly yields the beekeeper a new swarm of bees. Thus by learning to shift his approach toward others, Aristaeus's loss is restored to him, unlike Orpheus's approach (which remains fixed) and his loss (which remains lost).

Seen through the lens of literaturing composition, the main plotline focusing on Aristaeus may be taken to offer the lesson that expanding one's rhetorical repertoire beyond insistent self-interest (to conciliation with others, for example, in this case) is an advisable communicative tactic. In this context, the Orpheus subplot clarifies, by example of his unchecked grief (i.e., insistent self-interest), a preferable way to respond to one's losses in life, which is represented by Aristaeus's adjustable conciliation. Orpheus succumbs entirely to his grief because of a singularity of intention that blinds him to his audience's needs, and therefore to the best rhetorical strategy,

whereas Aristaeus eventually recovers from his grief by accepting the need for collaboration and plural intentions, and accordingly chooses the better rhetorical approach. The didactic construct of contrasting the epyllion's two main characters as such delivers one of Virgil's main themes in Georgics, which is to work ever-diligently and not to be overcome by despair, even in the face of failure or loss. This section will further analyze the figures of this contrast for their rhetorical implications in order to consider the ethical shortcomings of defaulting to appropriative argumentation, as Orpheus does, when more appropriate alternative or supplemental options exist, such as dwelling on felt sense, for instance.

Just after Eurydice dies by the snakebite in Georgics, a passage follows in which Orpheus mourns his loss, which foreshadows the impending failure to recover her from Hades. Although the earlier of these two scenes bears less overall significance on the myth than its famous subsequent counterpart (examined below as "the turn"), both passages are significant to understanding Orpheus's rhetorical failure. Each passage illustrates the shortcomings of engaging audiences solely or primarily by means of persuasive rhetoric, and conceiving of them as necessarily certain and singular. When Eurydice dies, Orpheus addresses his deceased wife in the second person, with poignant poetic flair.

Anderson translates these lines as follows: "Orpheus, himself, attempting to console the agony of his love on the hollow shell of his lyre, sang of you, darling wife, of you on the lonely shore by himself, of you as the sun rose, of you as it set" (464-6). Lembke translates them as: "Orpheus, strumming his hollow-shell lyre to soothe his torn heart, / sang you, sweet wife, sang you to himself on the lonely shore, / day in, day out, sang you at sunrise, sang you at sunset." Anderson believes the word "attempting" here emphasizes the failure of the effort (28), which I recognize as a distinctly *rhetorical* failure to console<sup>67</sup> since, up to this point, Orpheus' poetry had consistently succeeded in fulfilling all of his other intentions. In other words, although previously Orpheus had easily persuaded audiences that are known certainly to him (e.g., trees, animals, gods) to act as he wished, he could neither convince himself in this case to be soothed, nor could he collaborate in his moment of crisis with his indeterminate wife to bring about the desired result. An important difference in the case of his failure seems to be the unique nature of the conflict. That is to say, rather than having to take on an opponent or an audience with whom he has no direct affiliation, as usual, Orpheus's rhetorical context in this case was deeply

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<sup>67</sup> See chapter four on consolation as acceptance achieved through felt sense.

intimate to him; it called for a different approach from his routine.

Also highly significant to my interpretation of the myth is the notable use in the above passage of second person address, which could have been the very rhetorical gesture to save Eurydice's life in the ascension from hell—if Orpheus had been aware enough of his feelings to use it. After Eurydice's initial death, he has no trouble addressing as "you" the fantasized certain, singular projection of his wife, because the effect of his language at that point is to draw attention to himself (which is one result of excessive mourning, intentional or not). Such self-directed rhetorical fluency appears again later, when even Orpheus's severed head continues to sadly mourn as it floats down the river Hebrus. But in their ascension from hell, when confronted with his real—rather than fantasized—wife, the husband for the first time cannot muster second person address. Indeed, he cannot speak *at all* on this occasion, most likely for a number of reasons: (1) the indeterminate rather than certain nature of his audience, (2) the sudden sharing of stakes in the outcome of the encounter, and (3) the potential plurality of voices rather than just his usual singular contribution to that outcome. In other words, this master of persuasion can neither persuade himself here nor break from his appropriative routine

to collaborate with his wife in communication. The context called for subtly of feeling, awareness, and engaging a discursive partner, but Orpheus's rhetorical mastery appears to be limited to ornamentation and opposition.

Anderson makes a convincing case for readers being able to detect how much significance Virgil attaches to which details of Georgics by examining the degree to which the Roman poet either accentuates or skims its different parts (27). Indeed, it seems reasonable that if Virgil's audience was (likely) already familiar with the story as he tells it, then any emphases in its narration could especially be taken as suggestions for how the author may want his readers to interpret the myth. For example, Virgil makes surprisingly quick work of the episode in hell, dedicating seventeen mostly general lines (only seven percent of the passage) to that action<sup>68</sup>. He provides no specifics about Orpheus' entreaty to Pluto and Proserpina, except that the underworld gods had "hearts that do not know how to be softened by the prayers of men" (470, Anderson) or "hearts impossible to soften with living prayers" (Lembke), yet they are "struck dumb and motionless" (482, Anderson) or "stunned" (Lembke) by the

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<sup>68</sup> Forty-three years later in Metamorphoses Ovid, by contrast, dedicates seventy-one extremely detailed lines (thirty-one percent of the passage) to Orpheus's episode in hell. And over the ages most accounts of the story, literary, operatic, and cinematic alike, tend to concentrate on the subterranean quest.

hero's entreaty to return his wife. This is a fine example of the typical effect that Orpheus's appropriative rhetoric has on oppositional auditors throughout the story.

So if we accept Anderson's contention and follow Virgil's suggestive lead, then we can see how Orpheus's charming of Pluto and Proserpina is less important an act than is his backward turn during the ascension from hell. No matter how impressive an accomplishment it may be, the rhetorical dominance of opponents—upon close consideration—is not the deed for which most people best remember Orpheus. On the contrary, Orpheus has been famous since Virgil primarily as a tragic figure, that is, for what turns out to be a rhetorical failure suffered not at the hands of an opponent but by his own doing and at the expense of his greatest ally, Eurydice. For all his power to coopt others to his own needs, Orpheus appears to be powerless to cooperate with the needs of others, which reveals a grave shortcoming in his rhetorical mastery and at least a partial incompatibility in regarding him as a great linguistic figure.

Although Aristaeus may not be nearly as well remembered through history, his adaptable rhetorical posture is ultimately preferable to Orpheus's approach. While Orpheus begins the story with superhuman persuasive powers and ends in all-too-

human despair at his double loss, Aristaeus inversely begins in despair and manages to negotiate the restoration of his loss through awareness and collaboration. Of course, in typical Virgilian complexity, neither figure simply represents a single characteristic or value. Aristaeus' attempted rape, for instance, is undoubtedly an instance of despicable behavior motivated by unchecked passions; however, he does go on in the narrative to atone for his crime and to be productive, in large part because of a dialogue he establishes with his nymph mother, Cyrene, and the sea god Proteus. This constructive openness to dialogue in his moment of despair directly contrasts with Orpheus' idle introversion and constant mourning.<sup>69</sup> Each character unintentionally kills Eurydice in a moment of possessive desire, but Orpheus ultimately seems the worse for his actions, given the intimacy he had previously shared with the victim and for his inability to respond productively to his error, as the other perpetrator has done. It could be said that

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<sup>69</sup> Segal wonders if Aristaeus ever fully "realizes" his crime, since he does not explicitly acknowledge the wrongdoing ("Orpheus and the Fourth Georgic" 312), but there is at least as much evidence supporting the opposite view. After all, Aristaeus immediately and completely carries out all necessary acts of atonement (448-458). Segal takes it as a sign of weakness that Aristaeus requires instructions from his mother and explanations from Proteus in order to atone, as compared with Orpheus, who "takes on [his problems] himself, alone" or "unaided." But most people would prefer aided accomplishment to unaided failure—and Aristaeus, a collaborator, represents a more realistic account of effective language use than does Orpheus, the solitary genius. Perhaps Segal's best point lies in reminding us that Virgil "is seeking not to define an ideal, but to state a basic reality," but if such an ideal is suggested, it exists as a balance between Aristaeus and Orpheus. Virgil does not want to fully resolve life's "dissonances" in his poem when they are unresolved in reality (320-21).

Orpheus consistently only speaks *at* his audience, or else not at all, whereas Aristaeus eventually learns how to communicate *with* his interlocutors.

The significance of this distinction can also be seen in the characters' respective entrances into subterranean realms as they endeavor to restore their losses. Orpheus *persuades* his way into hell against opposition by the gods; Aristaeus, by contrast, is *invited* into Cyrene's home beneath the Peneus River. Virgil even specifies in the latter case: "He's allowed to cross the threshold / of the gods" (Lembke 338-39). In isolation, this may seem to be a minor difference, but it correlates with the distinction in each character's rhetorical approach to his respective challenge and the corresponding results of his efforts. Though both characters are rightly distraught because of their losses, Orpheus clearly has the bigger grievance of the two, which should yield him the better rhetorical leverage; after all, he is a widower and the other is a would-be rapist. Yet it is Aristaeus who effectively speaks in terms that engage his well-chosen audience, calling upon his mother with a heart-felt interrogative rhetoric that seeks her collaboration. Orpheus does not inquire for such help from his

mother, even though she is the very muse of poetry<sup>70</sup>. Worse than this, nor does he simply ask his wife if she is there during the ascension or express his feelings to her. It does not occur to him to collaborate in his moment of crisis. In fact, Orpheus does not ask a single question of anyone throughout the entire story. By contrast, nearly half of Aristaeus' dialogue is interrogative<sup>71</sup>, including all of his first five lines in the poem. The effect of an interrogative rhetoric is to include others in the discourse as legitimate participants in the making of meaning, instead of merely as passive recipients of one's utterances. In so doing, to borrow from ethicist Emmanuel Levinas's phrasing, the other may be engaged as truly other, rather than merely as movable furnishings to be arranged in one's self-oriented worldview (Totality 193). By manifesting right speech paradoxically in his epyllion's beekeeper rather than in its poet, Virgil seems to suggest that Aristaeus' ethics should be a *natural* choice, as Anderson notes: "the farmer [is] the symbol of the compromised individual in a world of responsibility. He must act responsibly and intelligently and morally [...] subordinating the individual to the group" (35). The failure to subordinate his appropriative individuality to

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<sup>70</sup> Apollo is the father of both characters, though their being half-brothers seems relatively unimportant, given the typically complex and overlapping genealogy of Greek and Roman mythological figures, and the fact that scholars don't seem to have made anything of the point.

<sup>71</sup> Four of eleven sentences.

the collective good of the group (i.e., his marriage), as such, is what costs Orpheus his wife and ultimately leads to his own death.

### **Rhetoric and The Turn**

The most important part of the Orpheus myth to the present reading is what may be called the point of "the turn," which is the moment at which Orpheus looks back in the ascension from Hades—against the gods' injunction—and loses his wife forever. In a moment of unprecedented speechlessness, Orpheus famously turns around in doubt over his wife's presence, and in so doing, violates the one condition set by Pluto and Proserpina in permitting Eurydice to return to life. As the contract had stipulated, she is then taken back down to Hades never to return, leaving her husband mourning his double loss.

Debate will always exist over what motivated Orpheus to turn around and look back in this moment. To name only some of the more popular explanations, many have blamed the error on an excess of love or passion. Others believe it is traceable to uncertainty, forgetfulness, lack of faith, overeagerness, suspicion of deception, possessiveness, or even sexual desire. Virgil's narration goes as follows: "sudden madness possessed the heedless lover [...] his reason overcome" (Anderson 488-91).

Lembke chooses a translation that notably suggests marital dissolution and an act of negation: "a mindless act, his goal *annulled*. [...] his hard work emptied out" (491-92, my emphasis). Both translations, regardless of particular diction, emphasize the point that Orpheus temporarily loses his senses, or, as will be argued more particularly, loses his sense *of audience*.

It is not difficult to infer (or at least to project) at work behind this loss an accentuated possessiveness in Orpheus' regard for his wife. Virgil writes of the turn: "he looked back toward *his own* dear Eurydice." Then Eurydice, already fading away into the shadows, laments: "alas not *yours to have*" (Anderson 490, 498, my emphases). There is of course nothing unusual about a couple referring to each other in such terms as *one's own* or *yours to have* (e.g., "...and to hold"). But if taken for its allegorical implications and coupled with Orpheus's denial of Eurydice's agency (intended or not), the turn episode demonstrates at least an appropriative rather than collaborative emphasis in the exchange between spouses. For instance, a collaborative approach might have included an exchange of dialogue and the terms *our* and *ours*, instead. Anderson, also taking note of pronouns here, agrees: "Orpheus tried to make Eurydice 'his' rashly and prematurely; therefore, she has ceased to be 'his' forever" (30).

Helen Sword deserves credit for coining the phrase "the turn" in her 1989 article about D.H. Lawrence's and H.D.'s somewhat orphic relationship. She recognizes the mythological hero's "failure" as his "characteristic moment," noting that "Orpheus' transformation into the paradigmatic modern poet takes place only, so to speak, over Eurydice's dead body." Indeed, as Sword adds, until the twentieth century, Eurydice's "only obvious archetypal significance resides in a negative role: that of woman-as-Other" (408-09). Orpheus's famous error at the point of the turn denies Eurydice any chance to play a substantive, let alone equal (or for that matter, any) role in achieving her resurrection. In ethical terms, Orpheus has reduced his wife's significance to merely a negative role opposite himself, ironically even as he quests to rescue her from the negation of death. In terms of rhetoric, the turn represents the mistake of denying one's audience agency (or at least ignoring it) in a communicative exchange. In terms of Orpheus's own objectives, his act constitutes a failure. In terms of plot, the turn is often reduced to pure tragedy. And although tragedies are of course significant to their related parties and witnesses as well, the primary experience is suffered of course by the victim. So whereas the loss of his wife understandably causes Orpheus a great deal of sadness, what's far more pitiable than

this is Eurydice's fate: her literal death and her figurative objectification.<sup>72</sup> Eurydice's tragedy represents a misapprehension of otherness at the hands of an overemphasis on the self, which may not be all that uncommon in linguistic communication.

As previously stated, his ability to verbally charm nature and the gods themselves has made Orpheus something of a patron saint to writers. Indeed, he has appealed to artists and thinkers of every kind and generation for his first-hand knowledge of the mystery of death or, analogously, what lies beyond normal human perception.<sup>73</sup> However, such admiration conveniently ignores both Orpheus' fatal verbal failure at the turn and his incapacity to make any effective use of his penetration into the great beyond. After all, Orpheus behaves the same way before and after his descent into hell, by mourning constantly. Both the great potential and drama associated with Orpheus no doubt cast an alluring artistic light on him, but this doomed figure hardly

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<sup>72</sup> Perhaps the extremely influential Orpheus myth has played something of a role in establishing a sexism (or "phallogocentrism," as Derrida has it) in the western literary canon through such objectification of the feminized other as this. But the huge task of developing this claim is the work of another project and other scholars. See, for example, Alicia Suskin Ostriker's remarkable rereading of Biblical female characters, especially her chapter on Job's unnamed, unelaborated wife, whose husband's test of faith includes the slaying of her children and their subsequent replacement with other children. Just as Eurydice powerlessly suffers Orpheus's blunder, Job's wife must suffer her husband's ordeal without any say in the matter.

<sup>73</sup> Blanchot makes a good case for this.

demonstrates admirable qualities to language users who are interested in more than just tragedy and self-directed artistry. In other words, although the Orpheus character may rightly enjoy some celebrity in opera and poetry, he will fare comparatively very poorly among rhetoricians and compositionists.

It should be noted that although this interpretation maintains a strict criticism of Orpheus for his failure at the point of the turn, one must of course concede every human being the right to suffer irrational moments and corresponding poor judgment. No matter what we make of him, Orpheus seems to be genuinely motivated by a deep love, and his heroic effort deserves the wide praise and acknowledgment it has earned. But, we can nevertheless proceed in good conscience with a critical examination of his shortcomings if we recall the allegorical status he is assigned here in the context of literaturing composition. While the mythic figure's individual irrationality is forgivable to some extent, we must learn from this example, and thereby expect better from the figure that Orpheus allegorizes: the real life rhetorical communicator. This category includes students, scholars, and nonfiction writers in general.

Ever-moderate, Virgil is comparatively kind to the hero in his moment of folly, writing that "a sudden madness swept through the incautious lover, forgivable—if only the Dead knew how to forgive" (Lembke 488-89).<sup>74</sup> Anderson translates this as such: "when sudden madness possessed the heedless lover, surely pardonable if the powers below knew how to pardon." Furor is often the word associated in translation with Orpheus' turn in Virgil. A poet can perhaps afford to be furious, "incautious," or "heedless," if his composition is to be non-discursive (i.e., incidental to responses), as most poetry is. But rhetoricians are primarily concerned with engagement in responsive discourse. So in this context if Orpheus allegorizes the general communicator, then no matter how furious or well-intentioned the effort may be, the moment of the turn comes to represent something of a rhetorical deficiency, if not indeed an ethical shortcoming in the reflex to always or mainly seek to persuade. Interestingly, Segal interprets the doubtful furor behind the turn as prompted by a lack of "trust in the processes of nature," contrary to Aristaeus who, "still has perhaps something

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<sup>74</sup> Ovid is arguably crueler in his account of the turn by means of additional details about Orpheus' motivation: "here Orpheus, afraid / that she would fail him, and desiring / a glimpse of his beloved, turned to look" (75-77 Martin). Humphries translates this: "he, afraid that she might falter, eager to see her, / Looked back in love." It is especially clear in Ovid's Orpheus how the hero condemns his beloved to hell out of fear and selfishness—a point included here to demonstrate that the present interpretation of the turn applies to the myth in general, not by any means just to Virgil's take on it.

of this trust" and therefore "succeeds in his attempted 'rebirth' (the regeneration of the bees) as Orpheus fails in his (the revival of Eurydice)" ("Orpheus and the Fourth Georgic" 318). With his audience absent from sight, it is exactly trust that Orpheus lacks, literally trust in his wife's presence, and figuratively trust in his own powers aside from appropriation of visible opposition.

In keeping with Anderson's method (above) of determining emphases in the story, it is notable—given Georgics' pragmatic message to accept life's difficulties—that Virgil dedicates twenty-two comparatively specific lines to the moment of the turn, where perhaps surprisingly we find an emphasis on *Eurydice's* experience. Here, Eurydice speaks her only lines of dialogue in Virgil (494-499), all five of which are in direct address to Orpheus. In her speech she is also interrogative, intimate, and concerned with their relationship. Both her first lines and those of Aristaeus are questions, suggesting an openness to others in these characters that is notably absent in Orpheus, who greets his audiences either with charms or with demands. How else should one get in touch with one's feelings other than by inquiring into them, which is precisely what felt sense teaches us to do.

By contrast, Orpheus speaks at most four lines of direct dialogue in Virgil, and he never once uses the interrogative. Two of these lines have been quoted above, in which the bereaved husband mourns his loss; two more occur after the turn, above ground, when Orpheus sings sadly of an analogous nightingale whose eggs have been stolen from her. Notably in both cases, his speech focuses on his own loss. After the second loss of his wife, Orpheus goes on living for some seven months, during which time his linguistic powers weaken and then fail him. First, he fails to charm his way back into Hades while trying to re-rescue Eurydice, and second, he tries and fails to sing his way out of an attack by the angry throng of Thracian women. Anderson rebukes Orpheus for his self-indulgent behavior after the turn, arguing that he "is not merely a victim. He is a man with the capacity to make rational choices, to deal creatively with his grief, and not to go on indulging himself eternally in vain lamentation," which, Anderson continues, is "an inadequate response to the human situation" (32). Indeed, the human *discursive* situation inevitably involves losing grasp of one's audience, confronting the unknown, and struggling with a variety of doubts. It would be advisable, then, to develop diverse approaches to communication, which is to say, not to rely exclusively on persuasion.

This is where rhetoric and rhetorical instruction come in, and the allegorical application of Orpheus continues by playing on the notion of gates and gate keeping. Orpheus begins his rhetorical journey by passing through the gates of hell: "The jaws of a Spartan cavern, Death's towering gateway, / and the grove miasmic with black dread—he entered them / and came to the realm of the dead" (Lembke 467-69). Once there, he convinces his skeptical audience of his argument, and fairly quickly gets what he wanted. But in overeagerness to claim his prize, he fails to comprehend that the quality of what he has won—a relationship—may be realized better in terms of interaction than of acquisition. In other words, although Orpheus succeeds in every test of his persuasive powers, he still fails as a communicator by not talking to his wife. Even if her life had been restored, Orpheus would still never have possessed her certainly or singularly; he would only have earned opportunities to variously collaborate with her.

Similarly, almost all college students begin their journeys by passing the "gate-keeping" functions of English composition and other low-level curricular requirements. These courses test students with entrance and exit exams, assessment rubrics, and the ubiquitous argumentative essay, all of which seem to favor an orphic brand of persuasive rhetoric that gets what you want

(a passing grade), gets it efficiently (in fifteen weeks), and gets it quantifiably (with outcomes statistics to prove success). But do these students inherit a communicative myopia by virtue of limited views of audiences in these highest-stake moments of language learning? Of course we know most of our graduates to be competent writers and functional communicators. In this sense, Orpheus represents an exaggerated analogy. But we also know that there are many important rhetorical occasions in life that our curricula do not acknowledge, and with them, an ephemeral and ambiguous audience. In this sense, the Orpheus allegory provides a valuable warning: we would do well to remember the last description of Orpheus as his wife is taken away from him: "he grasped at the shadows / with much he still wanted to say" (Lembke 501-02).

### **Felt Sense and Awareness of Indeterminacy**

We can interpret the moment of the turn as an unfortunate missed opportunity for Orpheus to have dwelled on his felt sense in coming to terms with an indeterminate audience. In his moment of furor, this hero may have been more heroic to have paused; breathed; and become aware of his feelings, allowing them to exist, dwelling at their limits, and letting language emerge naturally from that source. Just before his fatal turning around, if Orpheus had only dwelled as such on what was

bothering him, on his felt sense of that moment and his intuitions, then he would likely have discovered a solution to the crisis that didn't include the need to actually look at his wife.

The problem causing his doubt in the first place is Eurydice's temporary invisibility. But even though the gods had forbidden Orpheus from seeing his wife, they did not deny his *hearing* her, for one thing. That is to say, Orpheus and Eurydice could have spoken to each other at any time and for any reason during the ascension, if he really required some sign of her presence. This is proven if only by the fact that she speaks clearly to him as she fades away into darkness after the turn. Yes, she still would have remained unknowable to him in some respects even if they had spoken during the ascension, but all audiences are unknowable to some degree and in one way or another, whether they be visible or imagined. A language user as accomplished as Orpheus should be aware of this. Yet Orpheus's panic at the point of the turn constitutes the very opposite of being aware. Attention to his felt sense, alone, could have soothed the husband's worrying considerably, or it could have reminded him to ask Eurydice a question, which would have had the same effect, or any number of other creative possibilities. But since the heroic poet's communicative experience until that

point had qualified him only to persuade generally mute auditors of his own intentions, he had not developed such a sense of his feelings when confronting audiences whose interests also mattered in an exchange's outcome. Eurydice, however, neither requires persuading at the point of the turn, nor is she necessarily mute. Indeed, as an allied interlocutor, she could certainly have assured him of her presence and even corroborated the difficult conditions of their ascension (or pointed out their temporary status), had the husband only invited his wife to collaborate with him as such. After all, he only needed to inform her of his feelings. How else would she have known of his doubt in order to alleviate it? But the opportunity unfortunately goes missed.

Orpheus's oversight (so to speak) could be analyzed to demonstrate an ethical shortcoming that many postmodern theorists have critiqued as "ocularcentrism," a primacy given to vision and the visible.<sup>75</sup> Evidence exists in Virgil to support the notion that visual and auditory elements are key factors in the significance of the turn, especially from a rhetorical point of view. The episode of the turn begins with Orpheus's response to a visual image and then the need to see his wife: "he

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<sup>75</sup> See Martin Jay for a good point of entry into the issue of ocularcentrism.

stopped, and by the first *light from above*, forgetting, alas, the conditions, his reason overcome, he *looked back*" (Anderson 488-90, my emphases). The poem then accentuates the visual element at least eight times in seven lines when Eurydice cries out just after the turn:

'Look! Again the merciless / Fates call me back, and sleep seals my eyes, swimming with tears. / Farewell. I am taken back now, *cloaked in the night*, and, oh, / reaching out to you with powerless hands that are no longer yours.' / She said this and *faded* that instant away / from his *sight* like *smoke* blending into thin air / and no longer saw him as he grasped at the *shadows*. (Lembke 495-501, my emphases)

Anderson also acknowledges the accentuation of visuals in this passage: "He [Orpheus] has looked back at her and caused her disaster, so Virgil appropriately stresses her loss in visual terms: she vanishes from his sight, and correspondingly she cannot see him" (30).

Yet before this litany of visual imagery, comes a clearly contrasting auditory reference in the form of thunder, which confirms that hearing is a sense also available to Orpheus at the point of crisis. Just two lines before the imagery quoted above, thunder crashes three times (493). In addition to this,

Eurydice's speaking voice here comprises an obviously significant auditory image, as suggested two paragraphs above. With her dying breaths, the wife manages to speak to her spouse, something that her husband never manages to do, despite his ability to sing of her loss for "seven months uninterrupted" after her death (507). While it may be nice to be eulogized in song, Eurydice would no doubt attest that it is better to be spoken to in life. But to a speaker like Orpheus, who is trained to objectify his audience for the sole sake of persuasion, this difference does not register.

Many contexts, one-to-one (like the one in question) and otherwise, call for rhetorical approaches other than persuasion of a singular and certainly known audience. The folly of Orpheus should teach us this and to learn how to identify such contexts, for example, by dwelling on our felt sense of the occasion. If seeing prompts believing, then in this context listening and feeling prompt openness to doubting, which it turns out may be as necessary an act in communication as believing is. One can listen, then, for the audience's ever-elusive qualities, and feel its otherness, thus potentially generating an awareness of the audience's indeterminacy.<sup>76</sup> From

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<sup>76</sup> Or, so to speak, an awareness of the indeterminacy!

such a state of awareness, we may come to accept the idea that we never, or at least seldom, turn and face a certain and singular audience once and for all, just as one never steps into the same river twice. Certitude and sameness in these contexts are always changing or fleeing from our grasp. Yet felt sense may help us to develop an ever-incipient relating to whatever we do know and intuit of an audience as our interchange with them develops.

As Gendlin would have it, what Orpheus needs in his moment of doubt is a "that," a developing point of reference that is not a meaning that is fully articulated in symbols but something which serves "as a grip on the felt meanings performing essential functions in the process of solving a problem" (Experiencing 74). Assuming a posture of openness which the development of a "that" requires would likely have offset the reflex toward the persuasive gesture that Orpheus resorts to in the turn. The problem of audience indeterminacy confronting him is persistent, not something dispensed with easily or possibly at all by convincing.

If Orpheus's true goal is to restore Eurydice to *her* being (which is necessarily other to him), rather than as a condition of his own being (a desire for sameness)—which is to say, if he

could attend to the collaborative rather than appropriative dimension of his engagement with her—then the uneasy feeling that he suffers at the moment of the turn would not be anything unusual, uncanny, or unbearable at all. If he had ever before dwelled in the felt sense of her otherness, then the experience at the point of the turn would have been not especially different than many prior encounters with his wife, in which there would often have been something of an inaccessibility about her simply because she is another person. But for all his love of Eurydice, it seems the husband did not perceive his wife as a dynamic collaborator, but only as a static auditor. The story certainly ends tragically, but it is perhaps as much a rhetorical tragedy as a tragedy of passion, at least in so far as lessons to be learned from Orpheus are concerned. It would of course be futile, in response to this, to urge young lovers to learn to behave other than passionately. But it seems reasonable to encourage them to not to take each other's uniqueness for granted out of a wish to achieve sameness, even if that urge is a beneficent—and indeed a passionate—one.

As for the allegorical implications for learners of rhetoric, one lesson to take away from the story concerns persuasive rhetoric. A possible overreliance on this one mode of written communication, especially in higher educational settings,

promotes the idea that the only or main function of rhetoric is to *get* you something definitive, for example, agreement from a reader of one's writing. Of course many times rhetoric does "get" us this, as well as other things, such as in an academic context: a passing grade, three credits, a degree, a later job. But in other important instances one's rhetoric yields unexpected results or even none at all, or results so incompatible with expectations that any mechanism for measuring anticipated success fails to account for them. For example, a pair of debaters may not succeed in convincing each other of each other's views, but in negotiating with one another, they may come to learn about difference and about communication, and possibly even reconceive of the original goal. In other words, they may *come to terms* with their inherent differences. Should the success of this process, then, still be (only) measured in terms of the original goal to persuade, even though neither party succeeded in getting the other to concede to their original position?

Rhetorical Orpheus unwittingly teaches us that other people cannot be *gotten*, per se, but their attention and their participation—and, yes, sometimes their concession—might be gotten through many different modes of engagement. Orpheus may be forgiven for his good intention to "save" his wife in the

material sense of her being. But we must learn from his error that on a rhetorical level our interlocutors cannot and need not be saved from the supposed non-being of difference. The audience is seldom the same as us; it is in fact generally other by nature, and this condition need (and perhaps can) not be overcome.

For this, it might be surmised that a well-rounded education in rhetoric involves inquiries into relationships with other people in all their complexity, which is in a way acknowledging their ultimate indeterminacy. However, such an aim does not always or even often correlate with the constraints of the standard composition curricula, which tend to promote an orientation toward sameness, where writing is "good" to the extent that it is both correct and operative in one's *own* interest (e.g., convincing readers of your opinion). Although the Council of Writing Program Administrators' "Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition" broadly encourages writing "in several genres," high-stakes assessment standards (as has been suggested above) nevertheless tend to emphasize persuasion as the principle rhetorical approach to significant writing tasks. In other words, while we may teach kinds of writing other than the persuasive essay, the assignments that "count" or at least often count more in the curriculum may not quite accurately account

for the nature of real audiences. In these cases, as we have seen in chapter two, the audience tends to manifest as an otherwise uninvolved placeholder (or reader heuristic) against which students construct their thesis statements and imagine them being convincing.

All of this being said, human beings still do not usually feel they are speaking into a void. Encounters with others are often productive, and communication generally "works," though—again—the measure of such success can be a dubious issue in itself. In short, words still convey meaning, and of course many approaches to the teaching of writing and rhetoric assume this as fundamental. Donald Davidson, among others, has advanced the idea of "passing theories," which are conventions we form for practically determining the reliability of a linguistic exchange or, simply, educated guesses about what is said in the present based on we know from past experience. Of course we all operate with relatively high functionality in this regard, or else we wouldn't be able to follow directions, or buy groceries, or have a conversation with a friend, etc. But these examples are what might be called contextualized transactions.

Large-scale, high-stakes assessment of student writing tends not to be contextualized in such a way. They tend to be largely

hypothetical constructions. For one thing, there is very little, if any, give and take between reader and writer in these transactions,<sup>77</sup> though there is much individual interpretation on each side, making way for a good deal of variability there. These learning conditions must rely considerably on default audience representations such as the provisional and ever-adaptable reader construct (e.g., politicians), the random and questionably motivated group member, the scoring rubric, the teacher persona, the ambiguous and ominous portfolio reader, society in general, etc. To some degree these are inevitable and not always detrimental circumstances. If, as has been asserted here many times over, the audience is always to some degree indeterminate, then what's wrong with these constructions and conventions? One answer is, of course, nothing necessarily. But the point of this passage is not to criticize these conventions in learning rhetoric so much as to supplement them. In response to such seemingly inevitable institutional limitations as suggested just above, attention to felt sense can be a most welcome invigorating and instructional experience.

Felt sense, after all, is a phenomenon; dwelling on it is a matter of being aware of the present moment. As we have seen in

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<sup>77</sup> Of course teacher feedback could be an exception here. But as Susan Miller reminds us, this relationship is fraught with issues of its own, which certainly deserve further scholarly investigation.

the Orpheus allegory, and as we regularly find in high-stakes writing occasions, it can certainly be advantageous to achieve a presence and balance of mind and body, as well as a corresponding sensitivity to the ethics of any rhetorical occasion. Orpheus has gone through hell and (mostly) back on the laurels of his persuasive rhetoric, but when faced with an encounter in which his usual appropriative devices are insufficient, he fails as a communicator for an inability to adapt to the context. Revealed as such to be something of a one-trick p(h)ony, the hero appears too busy trying to overcome his confrontation with the unknown to learn to be aware of it, which could then enable his coming to terms with it, his *accepting* it. Such acceptance (witting or unwitting, so long as it's functional) should prove to be beneficial to any communicator faced, on some level, with the indeterminate audience.

Chapter four examines another literary character confronted with the indeterminate audience, Chaucer's Narrator in the Book of the Duchess. In this case we shall see how dwelling felt sense (with the help of his dreamed counterparts) ultimately enables this character to accept the loss that has been preventing him from living his life productively. This interpretation makes an apt contrast to Orpheus's tragedy, and reasserts the benefit of

collaborating to adapt one's rhetoric appropriately to a communicative context.

## Chapter Four

### Audience and Acceptance:

#### Felt Sense in Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess*

#### **Abstract**

This chapter continues where the previous one concludes. The case is made that acceptance of audience indeterminacy should follow awareness in developing approaches to rhetorical occasions that may not favor the default persuasive mode of many assigned composition tasks. Employing the same *literaturing composition* technique as before, chapter four interprets Chaucer's early dream-vision poem the Book of the Duchess as an excellent example of how to dwell on one's felt sense in order to come to terms with the indeterminacy of much linguistic communication. Indeed, as in chapter two, "come to terms with" emerges a key phrase in this context, for the concurrent relevance of both its figurative meaning (i.e., to accept) and its literal meaning (i.e., to arrive at language, presumably after an interim or process). Unlike Orpheus from chapter three, Chaucer's protagonist eventually arrives at language for, and presumably accepts, the loss that causes his crisis. The means by which he accomplishes this includes attention to felt

sense, as well as discursive collaboration. It is concluded that achieving such acceptance may help writers not only to better express themselves, generally, but also to engage others amidst differences without the compulsion to appropriate them for the sake of sameness. After a substantial introduction, chapter four includes the following sections: *Loss, Consolation, Coming to Terms; Felt Sense and Acceptance: Contrasting the Narrator and Orpheus*; and a Conclusion.

### **Introduction**

For hundreds of years the Book of the Duchess has been quite variously interpreted for its many themes and styles. Readers have emphasized such diverging elements in it as: consolation, elegy, Christian morality, pagan philosophy, psychology, satire, humor, courtly love, autobiography, and poetic commentary. This long-established adaptability to criticism makes the poem's collective meaning—like that of the Orpheus myth—especially elastic and more than capable of including the present allegorical/rhetorical reading. In fact, the present approach to the text is hardly radical, given the relatively recent record of somewhat similar scholarship on the text and other evidence provided below. Chapter four contends that the Book of the Duchess presents rich allegorical possibilities concerning the psychology of linguistic expression under conditions of

uncertainty. More specifically, the poem is read in such a way as to model the rhetorical effectiveness of dwelling on one's felt sense, even collaboratively, in facing the indeterminate nature of the audience, which is a kind of loss or absence of certainty.

In its entirety, the poem comprises 1,335 lines. Of these, 1,033 (77%) are comprised of the protagonist's dream. Of the remaining lines, 239 (18%) tell another story that he reads in a book before falling asleep, and only 63 lines (5%) of the poem *directly* reflect this character's wakeful thoughts and actions. This indicates that undoubtedly central to the poem's meaning are the protagonist's dreaming consciousness and literary encounter (all of which, it is essential to note, are still events within the same individual's psyche). For this reason, at least ninety-five percent of the poem may appropriately be considered through rhetorical and psychological lenses, both of which this chapter employs in advancing its interpretation<sup>78</sup>.

To briefly summarize, the plot of the Book of the Duchess is narrated in the first-person by an unnamed poet who suffers sleeplessness and depression because of an unidentified eight-

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<sup>78</sup> On the subject of statistics, Beryl Rowland notes that the content of 914 lines (68%) of the poem is found to be derivative; however, he rightly adds: "there is no sense that Chaucer is copying other texts" (42).

year-long sickness, the cause of which remains ambiguous, as does the sole physician who he says can cure it. In bed one night, the sleepless poet/narrator reads the story of Seys, who dies at sea, and his wife Alcyone, who by divine intervention learns of her husband's death but fails to follow the advice she's given to accept the loss. The Narrator falls asleep and dreams that he has awoken in a chamber near a forest, where Octavian<sup>79</sup> has taken up a hunt. A puppy from the hunting party leads the narrator to a clearing where he comes upon a knight dressed in black, mourning the absence of his lady, which he explains (in response to the narrator's many questions) using the metaphor of losing a chess match to lady Fortune. The Knight describes her with the highest praise and recounts the development of their long-term relationship, which had eventually achieved a blissful unity before she was lost. The Narrator, either naïvely failing to understand the Black Knight or cleverly and tactfully prompting him toward a full

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<sup>79</sup> This may be the same Roman emperor whom some believe Virgil seeks to council in his Georgics (see chapter three, above). Chaucer was well read in Virgil, referencing or alluding to his work in The House of Fame, The Legend of Good Women, and Troilus and Criseyde. But whether he alludes here to Virgil, or whether Chaucer subscribed to this didactic theory of Georgics, let alone (if so) whether Chaucer would analogize his own awkward consolatory relationship to Gaunt with that of Virgil and Octavian, remains uncertain. Alternatively, Bernard Huppé and D.W. Robertson believe that *Octavian* represents a pun by combining *octo* (eight) and *vyen* (coming), suggesting the resurrection of Christ, a theory they support with good evidence. Of course Chaucer could be suggesting both and still other possibilities, too. Unfortunately, it exceeds the scope of the present work to further pursue this matter.

acknowledgement, persistently inquires into the nature of the relationship and eventually into the current whereabouts of the beloved lady, White. Finally, the Knight states explicitly that White is dead, after which the Narrator declares the situation to be a pity, the hunt ends, and the Narrator awakens in his original bedroom with book in hand, deciding to write down his curious dream in poetry.

The Book of the Duchess possesses many features of the medieval dream-vision genre, popular in Chaucer's time (e.g., narrative frames, divine interventions, and complex allegories), and the poem incorporates a number of tropes from the courtly love tradition (e.g., aristocratic characters, idealistic gestures, love lyrics), which was late in its development by the mid-fourteenth century. The poem adapts material from Ovid's Metamorphoses and Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun's Roman de la Rose, is certainly influenced by the work of Machaut and Froissart, and is more debatably said to incorporate ideas from Boethius's Consolation of Philosophy and Cicero's De Inventione. The best accepted theory on the text's composition is that it

was written between 1369 and 1372<sup>80</sup> in honor of the late Blanche, Duchess of Lancaster (1345-1369), the first wife of his patron, John of Gaunt. However, most Chaucer scholars believe that this elegiac occasion was hardly Chaucer's only motivation in writing the poem. Practically everyone who has written about the text considers it to possess some kind of additional, didactic intentionality (consolatory, philosophical, spiritual, etc.). Also many believe Chaucer to have used this deliberately ambiguous work, in fact, to comment on the nature and act of writing poetry<sup>81</sup>—perhaps especially on his difficult task in counseling his own patron. The actual historical significance of Blanche, then, seems to direct the plot of The Book of the Duchess about as little as the fall of Troy controls the action in Troilus and Criseyde or the journey to Canterbury restricts the themes of Canterbury Tales. The compositional occasion that was prompted, but not limited, by Blanche's death became a young Chaucer's opportunity to simultaneously make an historical mark

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<sup>80</sup> Some speculation even ranges as widely as 1368-1374. Michael Foster draws a relation between one's dating of the poem and one's interpretation of it, but Derek Pearson still warns against investing too much significance in Chaucer's association with Gaunt (82 ff), as have Huppé and Robertson (51-2). That is despite considerable disagreement, including from William Godwin, whose 1804 Chaucer biography includes Gaunt in its very (lengthy) title. M.C. Seymour recently argued that the currently accepted version of Book of the Duchess suffers from disturbances (mainly attributable to F.N. Robinson's 1933 edition), which a fresh returning to the three extant (15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> century) manuscripts could presumably improve on by revealing "a more polished and sophisticated and witty poem" (68).

<sup>81</sup> Cf. Boardman, Burlin, Edwards, Fichte, Kiser.

as an author,<sup>82</sup> oblige his patrons (some believe Gaunt or even Queen Philipa directly requested the composition), and introduce motifs that Chaucer would develop for thirty or so more years—most notably, the importance of accepting life's transience. That being said, there is almost no doubt that when the Narrator browses a book early in the poem, reading "Of quenes lyves and of kynges," (58)<sup>83</sup> and when he refers again at the end to a king from "A long castel with wallys white," (1318) these cues signify Chaucer's own duchess and duke, as "white" implies an anglicized *Blanche* and "long castel" suggests *Lancaster*.

Yet, along with these and other allusions to his patrons, Chaucer opens up the poem's allegorical potential to such an extent as to arguably include the universal human struggle of coming to terms with loss—even, it seems, of writers facing what has been called above *audience indeterminacy*. Yet in the opening lines, Chaucer characteristically reminds us that these transient subjects are also only "thinges smale" (59) in the bigger picture. Thus the Book of the Duchess can simultaneously serve to contextualize and console John of Gaunt's grief as well

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<sup>82</sup> It may be reasonably contended that like many of his contemporaries, Chaucer sought with Book of the Duchess to earn something of the kind of reception achieved by the previous century's Roman de la Rose—itself an extremely ambiguous text—which Chaucer partly translated from French to Middle English.

<sup>83</sup> All references to line numbers in the poem are from Phillips and Havely.

as that of any other reader coping with difficulty—including writers struggling with rhetorical challenges, all of whom should try to make the best of their uncertain lot. Chaucer scholar Michael Cherniss agrees that the poem's moral "should help not only those who have lost loved ones to Death but all those who must live under the burden of the blows of Fortune" ("The Narrator" 126). So Chaucer appropriately centers his poem on an anonymous figure (the Narrator) with an unspecified ailment stemming from an unidentified, traumatic situation, quite possibly a loss<sup>84</sup>. The poem's resolute ambiguity on these and other key subjects is effective and almost certainly deliberate in allowing the reading of one's own related issues into the text, a move that incidentally also complements Chaucer's elegiac task. Arthur Bahr neatly explains the "problem" Chaucer confronted because of the historical occasion for the poem's composition: "[f]aced with the task of comforting [John of Gaunt], yet unable to assume the appearance of superior emotional wisdom that would allow him to do so directly, Chaucer must work obliquely" (43). Indeed the Book of the Duchess works rather obliquely, and Chaucer takes advantage of this fact in the poem to promote his own hard work and to present a rhetoric

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<sup>84</sup> The case is made below that regardless of its initial cause, the character's persistent trauma results at least in part from the long absence of a cure, which is a kind of loss. As such, loss and absence are often conflated throughout the chapter.

for approaching such uncertainties and difficulties. Cherniss convincingly rationalizes the matter of the poem's ambiguity in terms of Chaucer's undeniable compositional powers: "[h]ad he desired that his audience be sure of his meaning, he would certainly have made it clearer than in fact he has" ("The Narrator" 116).

So the poem's pervasive ambiguity renders it inclusive of a number of distinct readings.<sup>85</sup> Alfred Kellogg, for one noted example, argues fairly uniquely for a narrow interpretation of The Book of the Duchess, claiming that the work expresses autobiographical elements from the author's own troubled marriage.<sup>86</sup> Indeed, Chaucer's wife, Phillipa, spent many years as a member of Gaunt's entourage,<sup>87</sup> during which time Geoffrey Chaucer may have suffered pangs of separation from his often absent spouse, as well as grief from her alleged adultery during that time. Since both of these emotions may be characterized as

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<sup>85</sup> There are at least a few competing interpretations that by now have achieved the status of *standard*. For instance, Huppé and Robertson claim in their fairly traditional reading of the poem: "the Black Knight was not intended as the dream representative of John of Gaunt" (52), yet Diane Ross is not wrong in also stating: "a traditional interpretation [...] equates the man in black with John of Gaunt" (2). Robert Payne's reader-response style view seems reasonable for acknowledging the elastic nature of Chaucer's poetic rhetoric not as a "fixed linguistic projection of an archetype, but as a flexible linguistic medium between speaker/poet and hearer/critic, and partly shaped by both, as well as by its passage through time" (286-87).

<sup>86</sup> See Severs as well as Rowland ("Chaucer as") for more on potential autobiographical aspects of the poem.

<sup>87</sup> In fact, about twenty years after the Book of the Duchess was written, Gaunt took Phillipa's sister, Katherine de Roet, for his third wife.

originating in a kind of loss, to use a key term from the present argument (i.e., of his wife's presence and fidelity), then Chaucer's consolatory gestures in The Book of the Duchess could be more self-reflexive than outwardly directed, as Kellogg has it.

Perhaps less acutely so than Kellogg's reading, but also narrow in scope, are many other interpretations that focus on singular characteristics, such as elegy (Rowland "Chaucer's Duchess," Tisdale, Wimsatt), or consolation (Cherniss "Boethian," Kreuzer, Lawlor), or narrative (Bronson, Robertson "The Book," Ross), or the influence of the courtly love tradition (Boardman, French, Gardner). The insightfulness of these and other such interpretations notwithstanding, it seems unlikely that any one of them occupies an exclusively correct place in the body of scholarship, nor do most of their authors probably seek a definitive reading<sup>88</sup>. Rather, the diversity of such insight supports the theory of the poem's inherent interpretive openness, for which critics do not have to limit themselves to an either/or kind of thinking. For instance, Ardis Butterfield offers an excellent concurrent analysis of elegy, consolation,

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<sup>88</sup> Huppé and Robertson may be an exception, claiming that their analysis possesses "the one key" to understanding the Book of the Duchess. These Princeton scholars' allegorical reading is no doubt ingenious and well supported, but this self-assessment may still be overstated by today's standards.

and the influence of French courtly love poetry on the Book of the Duchess, recognizing their interrelated significance to Chaucer's composition. Charles Tisdale agrees in part that the poem fuses elegy and consolation, adding that such is "a very difficult balance to attain because these two elements are essentially opposites" (380). Similarly, the allegorical view maintained by this chapter—that the awareness and acceptance of the poem's introspective narrator demonstrates a productive rhetoric in response to loss—happens to be inclusive of many of the possibilities listed above, including even Kellogg's claim. It seems fair to suggest that informed and honest readers will be more inclined to celebrate than to suppress the diverse interpretive richness of Chaucer's work.

This is all to say that the poem lends itself well to the technique of literaturing composition, as introduced in the previous two chapters. A composite or allegorized reading of the Book of the Duchess such as that which follows seems appropriate, given the poem's ability to simultaneously sustain autobiographical *and* elegiac *and* consolatory *and* narrative, *and* courtly (and other) interpretations, depending on one's perspective. Putting aside whichever of these applications one particularly favors, most of them are to some degree rhetorical matters. Each hinges on the main character's, that is to say

the Narrator's, ambiguous nature<sup>89</sup> in response to otherness (variously manifested), which obviously creates a versatile and fertile place for interpretation. To deny the Narrator such universal appeal would likely be to miss or curtail the lasting resonance of the poem and the influence of its primary signifying agent.

In this light, then, evidence in favor of the present rhetorical approach to the Book of the Duchess emerges right away in the poem, as the narrator elaborates at the beginning on the abiding loss that effects his illness: "I have grete wonder [...] How that I lyve, for day ne nyghte / I may nat slepe wel nygh noght [...] I have loste al lustyhede [...] So I not what is best too doo" (1, 2-3, 27, 29), and the missing person who can cure it: "there is phisycien but one / That may me heale" (39-40). Regardless of whichever malady particularly ails him or who the sole physician

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<sup>89</sup> One might specify his ambiguous layers of *consciousness*. More below on this.

may be,<sup>90</sup> the main problem at hand is that a cure is absent, which may well be a matter of the loss of some significant other: for example, a lover or a healer on one hand, or certainty or faith on the other hand. He is depressed and worried that he can no longer function, and being a poet, this means he may be blocked from writing, as Kiser contends (4). So the real issue at stake here becomes the Narrator's confrontation with the unknown or a loss or absence, or in rhetorical terms, the problem of coming to terms with the audience. Questions that arise, then, are: if or when the narrator will get better or start writing again, and what can be done to make that happen? This situation closely resembles Orpheus's challenge at the point of the turn (and that of any uncertain writer), struggling to communicate with the indeterminate audience.

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<sup>90</sup> These two points have been the subject of much analysis. See Robertson "The Book" for an overview through the 1960s, and Condren, Hill, Palmer for a subsequent debate. Most critics believe the narrator suffers a form of lovesickness—Huppé and Robertson call it "unfulfilled desire" (32)—and that the physician may be his beloved or perhaps God. But there can never be certainty on this matter. John Hill asserts that not lovesickness but a "head melancholy" (i.e., depression) stemming from a profound fear of mortality is the cause. Lisa Kiser tries to dismiss the sleeplessness debate as "off the mark," since the character clearly states that the reason for his insomnia is not important (4, ff). Phillip Boardman turns to stylistic analysis with the same dismissive intention. The present argument can similarly put aside the debate for the chapter's aforementioned preclusive reading focusing on loss.

Crucial to the present interpretation is the point that the Narrator and Black Knight (as well as the "dreamer," as it were<sup>91</sup>) are all aspects of one and the same consciousness, ultimately. After all, the dreamer and the knight only exist in the narrator's mind. So the Book of the Duchess may be considered a story about "dwelling," or looking inward on oneself, getting in touch with one's feelings, and awakening to a newfound awareness and, likely, to consequent acceptance that may bring some relief to one's struggle with indeterminacy. In other words, it is not a stretch to interpret the poem as symbolizing a *coming to terms* with a denial or blockage, which are both phenomena that writers experience when seeking a suitable approach to uncertain rhetorical situations. As a positive counterexample to these experiences, the Book of the Duchess demonstrates how to use felt sense in a way that Orpheus (not to mention Eurydice) would have greatly benefited from, and by extension, which writers in general may want to practice for their own and their audience's sakes.

### **Loss, Consolation, Coming to Terms**

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<sup>91</sup> Some critics refer to the narrator as "dreamer" when the character's actions take place in his sleep. I do not disagree with this move, but for the sake of keeping this confusing material as clear as possible, I will not make that distinction below.

Many elements of the Book of the Duchess have yielded considerable debate, in some cases over centuries, and the poem may well be debated for hundreds of years more to come. But among this abundant contention, it would be very hard to argue that loss is not a central theme in the poem. Indeed, the text issues a lesson about how to respond to traumatic loss such as the death or absence of a loved one. Most commentary on this aspect of the poem focuses on the idea of consolation, for example: does the story seek to console John of Gaunt or not, is the consolation Boethian or Ciceronian<sup>92</sup>, is the Black Knight consoled in the end or not?<sup>93</sup> These are worthy questions that many fine scholars have addressed, to which the present study owes a great debt. However, rather than restrict its analysis of the poem with dualistic questions of consolation, this chapter section also (and mainly) inquires into the wider matter of awareness and acceptance of loss, so as to suggest what such could mean to contemporary learners of rhetoric. If, as many believe, Chaucer seeks to council Gaunt or at least a general readership to acknowledge life's transiencies and to maintain some degree of faith in a divine scheme, then mere consolation

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<sup>92</sup> Cf. Cherniss "Boethian" and Watson, for example.

<sup>93</sup> Since the 1970s an intermittent trend of psychological readings slightly shifts the terms of the debate from *consolation* to *cure* or *therapy*, but my point applies in such cases, too. In fact, these may be more difficult to definitively prove than consolation, since even psychoanalytic theory has its doubts about *cures per se*.

is not enough to achieve this. One must also become aware of and accept these truths, or else be stuck in an egoistic cycle of lamenting and soothing one's inevitable tragedies, or even worse. For this reason, Chaucer demonstrates with the Book of the Duchess the gradual and imperfect process of his narrator's psychic and emotional coming to terms with these difficulties, a process which this chapter likens to a writer's need to productively engage the indeterminacy, or differences, of audiences.

All of the major figures in the Book of the Duchess have literally lost someone or something significant, and have figuratively lost their way in a desired course of action. The Narrator-poet has lost his abilities to sleep and write, Alcyone has lost her husband and their life together, the whelp has lost the hunt (and the hunting party, the hart<sup>94</sup>), and the Black Knight has lost White and therefore his audience (and White, her life, of course). Such thematic consistency makes sense upon realizing all but one of these characters are projections of the Narrator's mind: the whelp, the hunting party, the Black Knight, and White are each dreamed by the Narrator's own consciousness. It may be unconventional but it is not unheard of in the west

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<sup>94</sup> Middle English for *deer*, apparently a male red deer of six or more years according to Scott-Macnab (176).

(and it's common in eastern thought) to consider one's *consciousness*, per se, to be inclusive of various psychic aspects, as opposed to distinguishing between discrete psychic levels such as consciousness (wakefulness), unconsciousness (sleeping), semi-consciousness (dreaming), etc. The term *consciousness* in this chapter generally maintains the inclusive usage, such that any of the Narrator's issues—dreamed or wakeful—may be recognized in terms of its common source in his mind. This is an important step in reading Chaucer's poem as an allegory of the felt sense process in action, in which one dwells on internal properties beyond the conventional western understanding of *consciousness*. Alcyone, by partial contrast with the other characters, is a fictional imagination from a book and for this difference models a distinct but related model of behavior. Despite considerable consolatory and advisory efforts extended to her, she does not achieve full awareness or acceptance of her loss and essentially grieves herself to death for that. Although the Narrator begins the story in the same fatal state as Alcyone suffers, fatal grieving does not become his fate, thanks to his ability to look inward and eventually come to terms with his loss.

So whether or not it constitutes consolation, the rest of the characters collectively achieve an awareness for the Narrator,

whose psyche is projecting them. Moreover, a healthy acceptance likely follows "be processe of tyme," as he suggests (1331). Along these lines, Huppé and Robertson contend that the Narrator and the Black Knight represent "two parts of the [Narrator's] mind, one grieving at the loss [...] and another aware of the sources of rational consolation" (50). These scholars see the story as an effort on the part of the Narrator to "find himself," recognizing that by "causing the alter ego of his grieving self to make a sort of confession, the [Narrator], symbolizing the poet's own rational self, may indicate the way to the solace of truth to the poet, or at least to the reader" (54, 57).<sup>95</sup> Indeed, at the end of the poem we know that the Narrator has finally slept and that his ability to compose has apparently been restored to him, which are the two significant capacities distressingly lost to him at the beginning of the poem. So with this allegorical interpretation that the combined dreamed characters represent the ultimately positive development of the Narrator's own psyche and emotions, and that Alcyone represents a negative mode of behavior to contrast this with, a brief sequential analysis of Chaucer's scheme follows now.

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<sup>95</sup> Kathleen Hewitt appears to agree, arguing that both Alcyone and the Black Knight represent stages in the Narrator's coping with his loss, something akin to the well-known stages of grieving (denial and acceptance, respectively). Whatever consolation occurs in the poem, then, happens as the Narrator approaches acceptance by means of an awareness slowly generated by the dreamed or read stories of these other characters.

At the beginning of the Book of the Duchess, the sleepless Narrator can be compared to a blocked writer, especially since he is a poet who admits to being aimless, distracted, indifferent, and dazed. Out of touch with his feelings, he has lost all sense of productiveness because—as has already been argued above—he continues to suffer from a traumatic loss: “I have so many an ydel thoght [...] I take no kepe / Of noothyng [...] I have felyng in nothyng / But as yt were a mased thyng [...] I have loste al lustyhede” (4, 6-7, 11-12, 27). Any text beginning as such and then launching into hundreds of lines of dream narrative justifies at least some investigation into the psychic life of its main character. In fact, Chaucer’s poem seems to beg such inquiry from at least its twentieth and twenty-first century interpreters. Considering the most basic tenet of dream psychology—that dreams serve to imagine the fulfillment of (often unconscious) wishes<sup>96</sup>—it would appear that the Book of the Duchess might well represent the Narrator’s psychic struggle to come to terms with the loss causing his deeply troubled state. Regardless of whether the Narrator’s ailment is metaphysical or amatory (or simultaneously both, as certain courtly and Christian traditions would have it), or

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<sup>96</sup> For a starting point, see Freud’s The Interpretation of Dreams.

whether its cause is longing or bereavement,<sup>97</sup> the same structure exists in any of these cases: a sense of sameness or connection between the lover/worshipper and his beloved/God has been traumatically lost; the one's expression and its resonance in the other are thus traumatically sundered; and as a result, consolation is sought.

The Narrator's first course of action in seeking consolation is to call for a book, to pass the time while he remains sleepless. Scholars do not seem to have debated whether or not the *particular* book that is fetched for him was chosen by the Narrator, but the context seems to suggest it was,<sup>98</sup> in which case the selection bears notably on the current interpretation. That is to say, it figures that this character—who is seeking to come to terms with loss, himself—should choose a story that teaches a lesson about accepting traumatic loss. Indeed, the Narrator appears to be highly familiar with the text, recounting details of its contents, composition, form, subject matter, and rhetorical purpose (52-59). It may also be significant that the

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<sup>97</sup> Lumiansky distinguishes love-sickness from bereavement in arguing for the latter as the malady's cause, but I still maintain that regardless of which is the case, both experiences still originate in a loss or absence of the desired other. It is also possible that Chaucer wants to imply it could be both love-sickness and bereavement instead of either/or (indeed, Huppé and Robertson seem to conflate these [32, 95]), or yet other possibilities.

<sup>98</sup> "Upon my bedde I sate upright / And bade one reche me a booke, / A romaunce, and he it me toke / To rede and drive the nyght away" (46-49).

Narrator uses the term "fonde" to characterize his coming upon the tale of Seys and Alcyone among the stories collected in the book: "Amonge al this I fonde a tale / That me thought a wonder thyng" (60-61). See the discussion below about the relevance of the word *found* to the meaning of the poem.

John Gardner refers to the Seys/Alcyone section of the poem as "the transitional story" between the "frame story" and the hunt/Black Knight section (145). Indeed, Seys functions as such by establishing a negative model of responding to loss, with which to contrast the Narrator's positive model that later emerges through the course of his dream. Huppé and Robertson agree with this view, stating: "[t]he situation in the dream very possibly suggests the story which inspired the [Narrator] to dream in the first place," which is to say that "[j]ust as Seys came to Alcyone, so [the Narrator] as a rational being confronts a creature like that part of him which is immersed in irrational grief" (53). In other words, Alcyone's conflict so similarly resembles his own trauma that the Narrator's dream comes out of and resembles the very story that puts him to sleep, the key difference being that the Narrator learns what Alcyone does not learn. Later in their analysis Huppé and Robertson explain this difference: "Alcyone did not heed Seys' warning, 'Awake!' but continued in spiritual torpor. But

through his contemplative vision the [Narrator] has awakened himself from slumber" and from sorrow (93).<sup>99</sup>

Cherniss also finds a significant parallel between the two characters, pointing out details such as Alcyone's having "no reed but oon," and the Narrator having no "phisicien but oon," or the fact that "she prays for sleep and a dream which will help her," and the Narrator "follow[s] her example and pray[s] to his own God for a dream to guide him out of his own undefined difficulties" (117-18). Both characters grieve from a loss of certainty, and both seek relief in dreaming, that is, looking inward to acknowledge what will release them from grieving. Whatever the Narrator's affliction may be, says Cherniss, it likely cannot be worse than Alcyone's sorrow, so Seys's advice to seek freedom from melancholy should also apply to him. It should "deter him from a life of futile suffering and remind him of the transitory nature of worldly bliss," as should Alcyone's "unnatural death which recalls the Narrator's fear that he will die of his mysterious affliction" (118). Upon the sad outcome of her story, he soon falls sleep, which prompts another state of consciousness that eventually inspires the Narrator's awareness and possibly acceptance, which in turn enables him to

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<sup>99</sup> A "contemplative vision" could easily be another phrase for *felt sense*. See the next section below for more on this.

move on with his life. Although he fails to understand the moral of the Seys and Alcyone story with wakeful consciousness (i.e., right after he reads it), the Narrator does comprehend it on other levels of awareness (i.e., arguably in his dream, and more certainly, upon waking from the dream). Cherniss clarifies this point: "Awake, he sympathizes with Alcyone, who shares his own confused state of mind, and his sympathy makes him feel even more depressed. Asleep, he has a vision of himself as being capable of *disinterested* sympathy" (my emphasis). So at the end of the Book of the Duchess, the Narrator achieves what Alcyone does not, for in the final lines of the poem (1324-33) he precisely follows Seys's advice to her: "Awake! Let be your sorwful lyfe, / For in your sorwe there lyth no rede" (202-03). The difference presumably saves the Narrator's life and indicates, according to the present allegorical reading, that he has come to terms with his loss.

Some of these plotlines may be said to comprise an allegorical psychic surrogacy, since its action involves characters employing the body or spirit of other characters for the sake, ultimately, of reflecting the internal conflict of the Narrator, whose imagination is the source of all this. In one of the fictional and one of the dreamed scenes—the actions and descriptions of which closely parallel each another—both

grieving lovers inquire into the absence of their beloved, prompting a kind of reanimation of the departed. On Alcyone's behalf, Morpheus is bid to "take up Seys body the kynge, / That lyeth ful pale and nothyng rody," and "Bid hym crepe into the body" (141-44). Morpheus obliges and puts himself into the king's corpse to speak through it in an effort to encourage his Queen to accept her loss. Observe here Alcyone's wish to reanimate the dead Seys when approximating the cause of her traumatic loss; note also the description of the body<sup>100</sup>. A very similar situation and description arises when the Black Knight is first encountered in the dream, described in almost exactly the same terms, "Ful petuose pale and nothyng red" (470). Like Alcyone asks her companions, the Narrator asks his alter ego about the cause of his trauma. The ensuing lively and detailed description of Duchess White constitutes a pseudo-reanimation of the deceased woman, by speaking through her or simulating her speech. Arguably, both Alcyone and the Narrator know before conducting these inquiries that their respective royal counterpart has died, but neither one accepts the loss at that point, opting instead for a last but false image of consolation rather than the gradual peace of acceptance.

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<sup>100</sup> Chaucer alters the original story of Seys and Alcyone. In Ovid (and other versions) Morpheus does not use the body of Seys to communicate with Alcyone. See Wimsatt ("The Sources") for a full discussion of the sources of this myth in the Book of the Duchess.

As we have already seen, however, a notable difference also exists between Alcyone and the Narrator: that the latter character gets and takes advantage of a second opportunity to come to terms with his loss (albeit possibly unwittingly). It is through this second chance, his dream, that the transformation occurs and that the moral of the story is obliquely delivered. In more specific terms, the allegorical encounters that the Narrator's consciousness projects in his dream bring him to the point of awareness of his loss and, for this, presumably to the beginning of its acceptance.

The transition that Chaucer makes from the Alcyone story into the dream vision subtly renders its imagery and diction of location so as to effectively blend the Narrator's waking and dreaming consciousnesses. Even though the Narrator specifies at the start "thys was my sweven," (290) the subsequent passage's development of spatial prepositions and nouns works to blur interior to exterior boundaries, as if to suggest that the passage's significance applies to fiction, dream, and reality; both main characters; and multiple levels of consciousness. For over fifty lines, a passage of extended description opens the dream vision (290-343), which might seem to do little more than set a new scene, unless one reads carefully. The descriptive

focus begins "in my bed," shifts to "Upon my chambre roofe wythoute" (my emphases 293, 299), and repeats "my chamber," (312 and 321) before taking the focus of imagination beyond the room's "wallys" (332), out "My wyndowes" (335), "throggh the glass" (336), into the clear blue sky (340), and then onward to the hunt. So the narrative transition from one story and its location to another (and the move deeper into the protagonist's psyche) has occurred, but readers must keep in mind that the Narrator has not really left his initial room while dreaming of what Huppé and Robertson call this "room of the mind where the [Narrator] awakes" (97). The action here does not literally happen but is dreamt. Some critics have enjoyed pointing out in this light that after waking and surveying his chamber, the Narrator gets onto his horse apparently without ever leaving the room<sup>101</sup>. This may remind readers that the subsequent events which seem to happen in a natural, outdoor environment actually occur within the Narrator's mind. So as fantasy, wish fulfillment, or psychic allegory, the passage's significance ultimately bears on the quality of his inner life. By the end of the passage, the effect is to have created an illusion that the Narrator has actively participated in the action, even while readers remember that it's really a dream. This material, then,

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<sup>101</sup> See, for instance, Rooney (310).

supports the present interpretation that the dreamed content comprises part of the Narrator's (variously "conscious") efforts to come to terms with his difficulties.<sup>102</sup>

In this way, R. A. Shoaf offers a compelling possibility by pointing out the symbolic nature of the *hart/heart* pun in the hunt plot, which concludes in the encounter with the Black Knight. The Narrator, according to Shoaf, plays the role of "'medicus animae' or doctor," ("Stalking" 314) by offering to soothe the Knight's woes and eliciting the loss that causes them. The Narrator prompts his black-clad alter ego toward disclosure: "yif that yee / Wolde ought *discure* me youre woo / I wode, as wys, God helpe me soo, Amende hyt yif I kan or may. / Ye mowe preve *hyt be assay*, / For, by my trouthe, to make yow hool / I wol do alle my power hool. / And *telleth* me of your sorwes smerte; / Paraventure hyt may ease your herte" (my emphases 548-56). The hunt sets the stage for what follows here, by establishing the theme of confession.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Medieval theory maintained that dreams were produced by the body as much as by the mind. See Kruger on medieval dreaming.

<sup>103</sup> Shoaf's and presumably Chaucer's main source for this interpretation is Le Livre de Seyntz Medecines, a 1354 confessional that characterizes sins as a fox hunted by the dogs of conscience. Since Henry Gourmont—the first Duke of Lancaster—is the author of this book, most believe that Chaucer would have had access to it.

By this theory, the allegory works as follows: the escape of the h(e)art into the dark wood and the appearance of the whelp/conscience foreshadow the Black Knight's therapeutic confession and awareness of suppressed material to the Narrator, which marks the beginning of an acceptance of his loss. At the end of the poem the Knight finally confesses what he has been suppressing all along, that "she ys ded," after which he returns to his castle, an act which allegorizes the (re)capturing of his heart, as the Narrator concludes: "And with that word anon / They gan to strake forth, al was doon, / For that tyme, the hert-huntyng" (1311-13). If we combine this theory with the present argument, that the Black Knight is really an extension of the Narrator's consciousness, then it follows that the Knight's achievement of awareness in Shoaf's interpretation would apply to the Narrator, by means of association. Something of a self-improvement would then have been achieved by means of extended introspective concentration.

Much debate has focused on the nature of the dialogue between the Narrator and Knight, especially whether or not the former is genuinely or rhetorically ignorant of the reason for the latter's sorrow. Robert Watson offers a fairly convincing theory on the side of the rhetorical interpretation: if from the beginning of the encounter the Narrator knows White is "ded and

ys agoon," because he overhears the Black Knight state this before they begin their dialogue, then the ensuing question-and-answer session would discount the ignorant theory and prove that the Narrator's "goal is overtly therapeutic," as Watson proposes, and that "[t]he questions he will subsequently ask are intended to ease the knight's grief." Although the Narrator encounters the Black Knight on the brink of suicide, "it is significant that his condition is not hopeless," Watson points out. Indeed the Narrator attests that he "*fonde hym [to be] so trefable [...] skyful and reasonable*" (533-34, my emphasis<sup>104</sup>). Citing the Oxford English Dictionary, Watson notes that the term *trefable* in Chaucer's day meant "open to appeal" and "yielding to treatment,"<sup>105</sup> which corresponds with the narrator's "therapeutic intent" (561). So the Narrator maintains "a pretense of ignorance regarding the cause of the knight's grief," which "works as a heuristic fiction to achieve a therapeutic purpose" (547). Watson likens this affected obtuseness to the rhetorical methods of Plato's Socrates and Cicero's "plausible fictions," confirming that Chaucer was

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<sup>104</sup> See the discussion below about the relevance of the word *found* to the meaning of the poem.

<sup>105</sup> Phillips and Havelly translate the term in this passage's particular usage as: accessible or easy to talk to (427, glossary).

familiar with these sources (548).<sup>106</sup> Diane Ross comes as close as any scholar to explicitly identifying the Black Knight as a rhetorical technique: "[t]he man in black misses the point of the poem because he is in it; since he forms part of the pattern of consolation he cannot see it clearly" (2).

If the Narrator's dream of the Black Knight serves to fulfill the unsatisfied initial desires to sleep and to write, then it follows that the dreaming Narrator should encounter his projected alter-ego in the very state from which his desire originates, which he does: alone, desperate with grief, and waiting to be healed. Indeed, Huppé and Robertson note that the Black Knight "is exactly in the same situation as the [Narrator is] at the beginning of the poem" (56). If the Black Knight represents the fantasized manifestation of the Narrator's thoughts, emotions, and wishes, then it would also make sense that after he prompts the Narrator to acknowledge his loss, and thus brings him to a point of awareness, the Black Knight would conveniently disappear along with the rest of the dream.<sup>107</sup> Lee A. Bartlett considers the wish fulfillment at work here to be

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<sup>106</sup> "The complete pattern would be that the dreamer, lacking judgment outside the dream, regains judgment within it, while the knight, lacking judgment within the dream, regains judgment outside it" (Watson 549). See also Arthur Bahr on the poem's chiasmic structure.

<sup>107</sup> Many critics have taken note of this somewhat transparent move (e.g., Hansen, Martin, Robertson "The Book").

fairly obvious. He argues in a psychoanalytic reading of the poem that the Narrator's "dream of the Knight's success in wooing his lady is a reflection of what he himself wants to achieve" (10), which is to say, at least, the attainment of a desired but unattainable state.

The corresponding therapy, then, consists in part of weaning the Knight from his attachment to the lost object. Considerable evidence exists of extreme attachment, to offer a small sampling, "my lyfe [...] myn hele [...] My worldys welfare" (1038-40); morbid dependence: "While I am alive here, / I nyl foryete hir nevermoo" (1124), "I telle hir I am but dede" (1188); and outright refusal to live without her: "Allas that I was bore" (1301). Indeed, in the passage first describing the Black Knight, loss is conflated with death over the course of references to mortality at a rate of once every six lines (462, 469, 479, 481, 489, 506). It is incidental to the present analysis that these conceits may be commonplace to courtly poetry, for this evidence also supports the notion that the ensuing drama represents the Narrator-as-wit coaxing the Knight-as-will to achieve awareness and acceptance (Robertson A Preface 465). Shoaf agrees that the moral here is to evolve with one's losses by learning to accept death, thereby making the Black Knight Chaucer's negative model by living in the past, "a

prisoner of his own memory," who clings not to "real love for a real person but rhetorical obsession with a fin' amor image" ("Mutio" 164, 167). And more than this, the Knight has even been consumed by a literal translation of his own metaphorical rhetoric: "Y am sorwe and sorwe ys y" (168). If so, then this could imply that a similarly language-oriented response might be an advisable therapeutic course of action—such as coming to terms with loss/death through felt sense.

Coming to terms with his loss would mean to the Black Knight having to redefine his reason to be (and, notably, his occasion to compose verse), which had hitherto been entirely contingent upon the presence and sameness of his audience, his beloved White, who had eventually promised him reception of his overtures.<sup>108</sup> Coming to terms as such, then, would also mean accepting the difference or indeterminacy of audience, which after all relates to one of the Narrator's initial struggles at the poem's beginning. This greatly resembles the lesson that Orpheus fails to learn in Virgil's Georgics, and as we shall see in the next chapter section, the Book of the Duchess offers a fine counterpoint to the Orpheus myth in this regard.

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<sup>108</sup> Elaine Tuttle Hansen argues that the role of women in The Book of the Duchess is to be absent, so as to reassure the insecure male characters of their existence by means of displacing the threatening mystery of mortality. See Helen Sword's very similar comment about Eurydice in chapter three.

Coincidentally, in the course of his grieving the Black Knight references Orpheus, stating that not even this "god of melodye" "may my sorwe glade" (569), which suggests that external forces have no power to persuade him. The rhetorical method to mitigate his loss, it turns out instead, may be found by way of an internal route.

In a long poem that focuses so centrally on loss,<sup>109</sup> it seems especially important to inquire at the end into the moral or the attitude that has been developed toward this issue. One telling cue in this regard is that the word *found* appears as many as three times in the final ten lines (1325, 1329, 1332), a fact which becomes increasingly significant upon noting that the length of this final narrative frame totals only eleven lines. If there is a moral to the story, as most critics assume there is, then this framing passage almost certainly contains an indication of what that may be. The present interpretation recasts the usual questions about a consolation or cure in terms of awareness and acceptance, which there may be good evidence to show that the Narrator has found. The knight's loss, and by

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<sup>109</sup> Here is a catalog of references to loss in the poem: Seys's lost life (75); The Narrator's lost liveliness (29), twelve rhetorical lost queens (721), and inquiries into the nature of the Knight's loss (1135, 1139, 1310); the Knight's nearly lost life (513), lost understanding (560), lost bliss (686, 748) lost contentment (707), loss that is aforementioned (1302), and ambiguous reprise: *I've lost more than you think* (744, 1138, 1305); the lost hart; the lost game of chess; and the lost duchess of the poem's title.

extension the Narrator's crisis, turns out to be not quite insurmountable. The allegorical Black Knight disappears upon achieving full awareness of the loss, and the formerly sleepless and blocked Narrator finds himself both rested and able to write again. This may be taken to suggest in rhetorical terms that a lack of certainty (i.e., loss) can be accepted (i.e., consoled/cured) and one can use felt sense (i.e., find a way) to be appropriately productive in the face of audience indeterminacy (i.e., move on with one's life).

A number of critics also interpret the poem's final passage in terms of awareness and acceptance. Huppé and Robertson, for instance, explain that "the Knight's *realization* of the actual nature of his love makes any added moralizing after his last confession unnecessary" (100, my emphasis). Boardman says the poem demonstrates how the Black Knight "moves from sorrow to a joyful *remembrance* of the lady's beauty and grace," a movement "prompted by the narrator, whose insistent questioning takes the knight from a preoccupation with his own present grief to a celebration of the lady and of their relationship in the past," which "is, in fact, the strongest consolation available" (575, my emphasis). Watson even ventures to speak for the author about such an intended message: "Chaucer seems to be saying: [...] *realize* this paradigm of virtue, which you discovered by falling

in love, in living the rest of your life. When 'by process of tyme' the natural pain of grief has somewhat abated, you will be consoled by what remains to you" (575, my emphasis).

It would be hard to deny that an important realization has been gained by the end of the Book of the Duchess, as these scholars contend. A shift in thinking and feeling has occurred from an emphasis on what is lost to an emphasis on what is found. The process by which this awareness is achieved—represented in the triple repetition of *found*—happens gradually. The conflict slowly builds to the final, stark admission that resolves the pervading crisis of denial once and for all: "she ys ded," but not before one last exchange of denial and affirmation to confirm the nature of the shift: "Nay!", and, "Yis, be my trouthe" (1309). Because these two characters are considered complementary parts of the same psyche, it doesn't matter whether the preceding denial had been the Black Knight's or the dreaming-Narrator's. What matters is that the waking Narrator, who is the aggregate of these two projections, has achieved the clarity he has long since needed in order to productively move on from his trauma. "Is that youre losse?" the Narrator essentially asks of himself upon this "A-ha" moment of realization. Such awareness and the presumptive acceptance that follows is achieved by means of literally and figuratively

*coming to these terms with the loss: "Be God, hyt ys routhe"* (1310). Pronouncing the situation a pity, like this, achieves a kind of closure, or a reflective distance, for the now-revived Narrator, generated by analyzing the effect of the loss, indeed by dwelling on his feelings on multiples levels of consciousness.

### **Felt Sense and Acceptance: Contrasting the Narrator and Orpheus**

If we link the Narrator and Black Knight as two aspects of a singular consciousness that is dwelling on the problem of indeterminacy, then the seemingly paradoxical fact that both characters simultaneously know of but will not acknowledge White's death (until the very end) makes sense from this chapter's point of view. As we have seen, contrary to the assumption made by many scholars, there need be no debate over the Narrator's naïveté or cleverness when we consider the poem in terms of felt sense. As this theory goes, (at least some) knowledge exists within one's body before, and/or otherwise from, one's *coming to terms with* it consciously and linguistically. Accordingly, the dynamic between Narrator and Black Knight (whether it be charged by naïveté or cleverness) may allegorize the gradual, back-and-forth process of dwelling on felt sense toward a culmination of awareness. In this case, awareness involves recognizing White's death, which is the first

step toward the Narrator's (and Gaunt's and other readers' and auditors') acceptance of the fact. It is not at all uncommon for such a traumatic event to be difficult to come to terms with, as is the case in the Book of the Duchess and presumably with the untimely death of the much beloved Blanche. In fact, first among the widely recognized five stages of grieving happens to be denial,<sup>110</sup> characterized here in the extreme by Alcyone and the Black Knight. So the awareness that emerges from felt sense in the poem can represent the Narrator's breaking free from the denial stage and aspiring to acceptance. According to the present rhetorical interpretation, this process represents a writer coming to terms with the lost assurance of securing a sense of sameness from a definite respondent. In other words, readers of the poem witness in it the narrator gradually generating an acceptance of audience indeterminacy and thereby regaining his ability to write, and thus engaging difference after having been blocked for this. Perhaps somewhat ironic but nonetheless seemingly accurate is the idea that looking inward to one's own feelings of uncertainty, like this, can yield such an external ethical result as allowing the other to be genuinely other, which is to say resisting the impulse to appropriate their identity exclusively for one's own purposes.

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<sup>110</sup> The fifth is acceptance (Kübler-Ross).

A number of scholars would seem to affirm this interpretation as viable. Robertson, as we have seen above, considers the Narrator and the Black Knight to be "not 'characters' but exemplifications of attitudes" ("The Book" 408), clarifying the point elsewhere, that "their dialogue [occurs] between two parts of the same person" (A Preface 465). Butterfield finds in the poem strong evidence of "Chaucer's psychological sensitivity, [and] also his sensitivity to the limitations of language in the conveying of emotion and emotional sympathy" (34). G.L. Kittredge's influential reading of the poem maintains that the narrator simultaneously understands and does not understand his own nature (52 ff).

Like the act of dwelling on felt sense hopes to do, his dream reveals things to the Narrator that were previously unknown, which help him to become aware of and accept the limitations of his situation, namely the indeterminacy of the other. Cherniss writes:

His dream, like Alcyone's dream, is intended to help its dreamer resolve his dilemma by somehow revealing a cure for his mysterious ailment, and one aspect of this cure is his vision of himself as he should be—active, happy, and eager to participate in the

innocent pleasures of life.[...] Throughout his dream, the Narrator behaves precisely as he should in his waking state; he has full control of his faculties, and consequently, he has a proper perspective on human misfortune which the Knight lacks. (124)

As we shall see below, if only Orpheus had dwelled inwardly or collaborated in a dialogue like this to have gained such insight, then he could have saved his wife after all or at least lived a meaningful existence after her passing, depending on when and to what extent he achieved awareness and acceptance.

The structure of the introspection and the dialogue very closely parallels that of the process of dwelling on felt sense. The Narrator constantly pushes the Black Knight to tell him more, to rephrase his utterances, to look further inside himself, as Watson states: "Each of the dreamer's questions provokes the knight to shape the account of his grief in a different way," and "[t]he knight answers the dreamer's request for a circumstantial narrative of when, how, and why he came to love the one he now mourns" (558, 575). This dwelling eventually leads to a fuller recognition of the actual person who has been lost, instead of just the static maintenance of her place in the Knight's life. For this, he eventually finds a way to move on productively. Felt sense works circumspectly; it must be

lingered on, not provoked, just as the Narrator lingers patiently—if seemingly redundantly—on the Black Knight's problem. It is worth mentioning here a point that Bertrand Bronson raises in his influential 1959 PMLA article "*The Book of the Duchess* Re-opened." This may have been the first psychological reading of Narrator's relationship to the Black Knight as a kind of intra-psychic collaboration with a projection of his own sorrow (as well as of Gaunt's grief). Bronson claims that the real message of consolation to John of Gaunt actually appears disguised in Seys's early lines about letting go of sorrow, so as to "insinuate its meaning unobtrusively and without risk of antagonizing" the Duke with too direct a reference to his loss (881). The reanimated corpse of Seys tells his spouse in quite clear terms that the remedy she needs is to let go of her sorrow: "Awake! Let be your sorwful lyfe, / For in your sorwe there lyth no rede" (202-03). Chaucer introduces this moral early in the story so as to let it sink in over time, as it were, since the bereaved do not simply release their sorrow immediately. In other words, these things take time. So once his Narrator has very gradually worked through his feelings and has arrived at the brink of awareness in the end, he does in fact awaken and let go of his sorrow, by declaring the loss a pity. The consolation or remedy, then, if

these terms must be used, in part relies on dwelling in one's felt sense of the loss "be processe of tyme."

So by now it seems at least reasonable if not appropriate to assign the Book of the Duchess retrospective allegorical significance in terms of felt sense and audience indeterminacy. Unlike Orpheus, the Narrator in the Book of the Duchess learns that resurrections of the lost or absent other may be provisional at best, since audiences are always disappearing from certainty; they are ultimately unknowable to us on some level. That is to say, the effect of any single person's expression—no matter how artful—will be limited to some degree by the ever-elusive recipients of that expression. In other words, rhetoric comes with no guarantees, and the effect of an utterance's shelf life is brief. There is good reason to believe that Chaucer, for his characteristic acceptance of life's transience and of art's fallibility, was signaling just this in his poem, as Kiser notes: "The correct balance between life and art is never achieved in *The Book of the Duchess*. Nor was it intended to be, because Chaucer wants to prove that even after a poet's sound education and hours of practice, perfection is not guaranteed" (11).

The grief that Virgil's Orpheus experiences never transcends its egoistic function. That is, for all his explosive emotions and ensuing expressions thereof, Orpheus always formulates Eurydice's death in terms of his own loss, never in terms of her unique identity. But Chaucer's Black Knight does acknowledge his lover's individual value distinct from his own need; White most certainly possesses value other than her value to him. In rhetorical terms, this might mean that the Black Knight has ceased appropriating his beloved's negative position opposite him for self-interested purposes and has, in fact, begun to recognize her otherness as genuinely other (if only because she is dead). In other words, the Narrator eventually grows from his experience of loss, whereas Orpheus remains static in his, never learning to move on with life as such. One reason for this difference emerges: the Narrator *investigates* his feelings—one could say he pursues his felt sense—and Orpheus merely expresses his. The difference is that of the difference between acceptance and denial of the truth, not just of death, but of the inevitability of otherness in general.

Kiser offers a relevant, fairly "Orphic" interpretation of the elegy in the Book of the Duchess, which she suggests equates as a matter of figuratively resurrecting the dead Blanche (5). Chaucer incorporates the Seys and Alcyone story not only to

encourage John of Gaunt to accept his wife's death, which should be obvious, but also to contrast the Narrator's honest and productive version of acceptance with the illusions and idleness of Alcyone's story. Kiser asserts that Morpheus's reanimation of Seys's corpse constitutes a "false resurrection" for being "artificial," "cheap," and "mechanical" (6), as opposed to Chaucer's far more subtle and effective treatment of Blanche/White. Kiser adds that Morpheus's success "in literally raising the dead is finally inadequate fakery when compared to Chaucer's oblique, gentle, and painstakingly constructed resurrection of Blanche" (12). It must be noted that a similarity exists here between the inadequate resurrection of Seys and that of Orpheus's short-lived pseudo-success in convincing the gods to reanimate his wife. Significantly, both of these attempted resurrections are the product of an appropriative or persuasive rhetoric, and both prove to be ineffectual to the context at hand.

In contrast with these failed attempts is the collaborative and cooperative method of the restoration of White/Blanche to proper recognition after death, accomplished by the Narrator, who begins his story in the same devastated condition as Orpheus and Alcyone begin theirs. Indeed, as Cherniss points out, the Narrator for a long time: "is confused, ignorant of the proper

course of immediate action, and sorely in need of guidance toward a cure for his inertia, impotence, and uncertainty" (115). This sounds exactly like Orpheus and Alycone. The difference that eventually emerges, however, between the Narrator and the other two is that the Narrator dwells in his felt sense and they do not.

A rhetorical lesson may be learned here: that the audience is necessarily other; it is always to some degree indeterminate, or one could say *lost* to us. It is this difference, in fact, which arguably prompts much of our linguistic communication: the desire to express one's own sense of meaning in such a way that another may understand this value. But in engaging audiences as such, their unique value cannot be discounted if the relationship is to have much quality for either party; textualized living is collaborative as such. We exist in texts, they exist within us, we share them with others, they are hard to understand, and they may never be fully comprehended, which is why we should practice dwelling. Ross makes a very good point that explains how all of this bears on the Book of the Duchess:

Blanche's death calls this poem into being, and all the knight's words are spent trying to elucidate her importance for someone who has never felt her

presence. To the man in black, Blanche is the center of meaning. The [Narrator's] all but final question, 'Where is she now?' can be answered only by a turning back into the poem, in to the description which precedes the question. The poem is her literal location—where else, indeed, is she? (4)

Orpheus undoubtedly possesses fearsome linguistic power; he exhibits this especially in convincing Pluto and Proserpina to release Eurydice from Hades. But shortly after achieving this unprecedented heroic feat, he faces another challenge, a question. The same question, in fact, that Chaucer's Narrator faces at the end of the poem, about the beloved's location: *where is she now?* It is an ordinary problem with an ordinary, but alas collaborative, solution: asking. But Orpheus does not ask; he demands, he appropriates, he persuades. So he fails to ask his wife about her whereabouts, and he also fails to inquire into his own feelings. Orpheus fails to realize what the Black Knight eventually realizes (as a product of questions): that his beloved is absent, indeed that the very nature of audiences or others is indeterminate, that sameness is an illusion. Whether the physical being of another person is present, as in Orpheus's tragic case, or not, as in the Narrator's/Knight's case, it doesn't matter. The other is still to some degree other,

absent, lost to us as it were. But we can take heart in the fact that communication exists *along with* this fact, not *despite* it.

So instead of turning around to see his wife, Orpheus—the world's greatest poet—should have "turn[ed] back into the poem," as Ross puts it, back into the text of her being, of their engagement. That is to say, he should have analyzed the context and the script of his feelings and then spoken his findings to his wife, which would entail giving up his appropriative soliloquies of sameness, and engaging in dialogue and difference instead. If Orpheus had chosen this rhetorical path, then he would certainly have found in the ensuing exchange that Eurydice was also experiencing strong feelings at that climactic moment, that she too was uncertain and eager, that she also had much to say. The husband and wife could have talked about these things and gotten through their crisis together. Such a mutual interchange of thoughts and feelings would not only have saved the day, but would also have constituted much of the rest of their days ahead as a couple. It seems almost too obvious to say: that communicating like this is one of the main aspects of living with someone. It is indeed a major part of what loving each other means.

## Conclusion

Writers and other language users can take a lesson from the allegorized contrast that has been made above. They would be well served to appreciate the distinction between the Narrator's progression and Orpheus's stasis. There can be no doubt that, in communicating, at least sometimes the audience will present challenges on account of its absence, difference, mutability, muteness, uncertainty, etc. Rather than only or mainly strive for appropriating audiences out of a desire to make them same, one will presumably want to possess effective strategies for coming to terms with the inevitable challenge of indeterminacy. Dwelling on felt sense is such a strategy, and understanding how and why to do so by means of literary heuristics such as those presented above, seems an advisable course of action for a wide range of learners of rhetoric.

The Book of the Duchess teaches the lesson that instead of succumbing to the potentially stifling influence of loss or absence, analyzing one's feelings—toward achieving awareness and acceptance—can both help one to better attend to the present moment and to productively move forward (as presumably consolation would also help one to do). Such are also the processes and benefits of dwelling on one's felt sense of the indeterminate audience in rhetorical encounters. All of the key

players in the plot support this allegorical interpretation: the poem's namesake loses her life but gains immortality in Chaucer's commemoration, the whelp loses his pack but finds and helps a new companion, the hunting party loses the hart but finds its way back to the castle, the Black Knight loses his beloved but engages a beneficent interlocutor, and the Narrator loses his peace of mind and his productiveness but finally reclaims these with assistance from the others. The latter two characters—who are alter egos in this interpretation—obviously carry the most significance as well as the bulk of the allegorical content for the present analysis. In losing his beloved, the Black Knight faces the traumatic absence of the usual recipient or *audience* of his courtly affection. As a poet, the highly distressed Narrator can easily be likened to someone suffering from writer's block or being otherwise unproductively out of touch with his feelings. A relevant secondary theme that has emerged above is the significance of collaborating, made most explicitly by the discursive relationship of these two main characters. Initially both the Black Knight and the Narrator verge on the brink of death because of their grief, but they each survive because of the other's constructive assistance in dwelling on their feelings. By contrast, in order to illustrate the point negatively, Alcyone loses her husband but ignores the advice given her by a

reliable collaborator, and she dies for it, succumbing to excessive grief. In this light, it may have become a little clearer what Chaucer is advising his readers and auditors to take away from the Book of the Duchess.

From a strictly narrative point of view, regardless of whether the Narrator is naïve or clever, his interrogative method almost certainly achieves better results (in terms of awareness and acceptance) than would have an assertive rhetoric that tried to outright convince the Black Knight to feel better. From the allegorical point of view, as two parts of a singular consciousness, the Narrator and the Black Knight represent an exchange across conscious and unconscious boundaries that closely parallels the process of dwelling on one's felt sense in order to come to terms with a repressed or otherwise consciously unknown or unexamined subject. Such a process can prove crucial to appropriately approaching rhetorical contexts, in which something as significant as the response or identity or condition of the audience is inevitably somehow unknown to the speaker. Writers should be practiced in dwelling in these moments where persuasive rhetoric does not reach. But this is no easy task, which is why it helps to use the technique of literaturing composition—as this and the previous chapters have

done—to instruct us (especially non-specialists) in how and why to do so.

Both Orpheus and the Narrator suffer a traumatizing loss, but they differ notably in their response to this inevitability. Orpheus loses his head, literally and figuratively, and at the end of the story his disembodied head goes on singing long after the rhetorical occasion has passed. But nobody listens to it, it yields no effect, indeed, the head's utterances express no feeling. By contrast, the Narrator dwells in his felt sense of loss and thereby comes to awareness, and presumably in time to acceptance. He achieves a balanced attention to his feelings and language, whereas Orpheus alternates between too much of one at one time and too much of the other at a different time, and pays the price for being too extreme and too ignorant of his rhetorical contexts. Writers and learners of rhetoric can learn from this important contrast by reading these poems retro-allegorically, as the last two chapters have done.

Literaturing composition is, of course, only one technique among many potential innovations that pioneering nontenured PhDs can make on today's English scholarship. Similarly, the technique's use here for illuminating felt sense and audience theories is only one of its innumerable potential applications. However,

the introduction of pioneering techniques must start somewhere, and perhaps a relatively contained beginning like this one can establish a more reasonable than radical precedent. After all, the proposal here is not particularly radical but potentially of interest to a wider audience than just fellow scholars in English. Once one becomes more deeply aware of the audience's indeterminacy and truly accepts this difficult realization, then one might become more sensitive to the uncertain and shifting nature of the rhetorical context posed by one's interlocutors, and possibly more open to alternatives to persuasive, appropriative routines. In short, the hope is that one may arrive at better results in communicating. This is a start to one variation on traditional work in English and composition studies, but much more like it will need to be done.

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