REVIEW

REFLEXIVITY AND AGENCY IN RHETORIC AND PEDAGOGY

Rebecca Moore Howard

Richard Harvey Brown, ed. *Writing the Social Text: Poetics and Politics in Social Science Discourse.* New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1992. 240 pages. $42.95 and $21.95.

Marie Secor and Davida Charney, eds. *Constructing Rhetorical Education.* Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1992. 360 pages. $24.95.

William B. Stanley. *Curriculum for Utopia: Social Reconstructionism and Critical Pedagogy in the Postmodern Era.* Albany: SUNY P, 1992. 266 pages. $49.50 and $16.95.

The postmodern penchant for reflexivity has affected all arenas of social research, including composition and rhetoric. Sandra Harding explains the importance of reflexivity as she defines feminist methods:

> The beliefs and behaviors of the researcher are part of the empirical evidence for (or against) the claims advanced in the results of research. *This* evidence . . . must be open to critical scrutiny no less than what is traditionally defined as relevant evidence. . . . This kind of relationship between the researcher and the object of research is usually discussed under the heading of the "reflexivity of social science." (9)

Reflexivity encourages a questioning of the most basic premises of one's discipline. Charles Bazerman, whose essay "The Interpretation of Disciplinary Writing" appears in *Writing the Social Text,* describes the fruits of interrogating one's discipline: "By reflection one can come to know the systems of which one is part and can act with greater self-conscious precision and flexibility to carry forward and, if appropriate, reshape the projects of one's discipline" (37).

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In rhetorical studies, "the systems of which one is part" include subject formation. Reflexivity in rhetorical studies has called attention to subject formation as fundamental precept and project of the discipline. It has become commonplace for rhetoricians to engage the question of agency in the subject—the relationship between writers and their cultural setting(s). Can writers express their "selves," or are the very concepts of "self" and "individuality" illusions that protect the power of the status quo? Can writers control their writing processes, or are their writing processes—and, indeed, the writers themselves—constructed by their cultural settings? The speech-act theory approach to social construction depicts the "constructing" as being done by rather than upon the subject, who is possessed of independent volition (Rubin 13). In postmodern interpretations, however, the subject does not "possess" agency, cannot simply "choose" roles and discourse communities.

What, then, would be the point of composition instruction, which attempts to foster control over the writing process or the ensuing written texts? In a 1991 *College English* review article, Kathryn T. Flannery explains the quandary: while English studies has traditionally depicted writing and reading as empowering—attributing to subjects the ability to determine themselves and to change society—postmodern theory challenges "the originary agent, the Cartesian 'I'" (701) and thereby contradicts the most basic premise of English studies. Bereft of the promise of agency in the subject, English studies is emptied of its traditional purpose and meaning.

All three of the books reviewed here engage the problems of subject formation. Two of the books—*Constructing Rhetorical Education* and *Curriculum for Utopia*—are about pedagogy. Two of them—*Constructing Rhetorical Education* and *Writing the Social Text*—are about rhetoric. Both types of "rhetoric" that James Berlin describes are represented here: *Constructing Rhetorical Education* focuses on rhetoric as it entails pedagogy, whereas *Writing the Social Text* offers more of the "aestheticization" that would make of rhetoric "a disinterested intellectual pursuit concerned primarily with working out the logics of ideas" (Berlin 185). Regardless of whether rhetoric is defined as persuasion or as social analysis and regardless of whether pedagogy proceeds on cognitive models (as in *Constructing Rhetorical Education*) or on social force models (as in *Curriculum for Utopia*), the rhetoric and pedagogy of these three volumes affirm the possibility of subjects/writers/students exerting control over their lives/writing/learning and thus changing society. In many of these accounts that affirmation is not a presupposition, but is instead contingent upon acknowledging the subject as socially determined. In fact, subject formation might even be seen as a metanarrative for rhetorical and pedagogical studies.

In *Curriculum for Utopia*, William B. Stanley describes a pedagogical movement known as social reconstruction, and he explores what he calls mainstream,

poststructural, and feminist theories of pedagogy. His purpose in this survey is to critique and revise "critical pedagogy," a categorical term under which he groups "revisionist education history, the 'new sociology' of education, reconceptualist curriculum theory, cultural studies, feminist scholarship, critical theory, and various forms of postmodern and poststructuralist analysis" (2). Critical pedagogy asserts agency in the subject by stressing student empowerment and challenge to the social order (102)—in contrast to conservative "mainstream pedagogy" that accepts and affirms the "major institutions and values" and "prevailing methodologies" of the dominant discourse (63).

The predecessor to critical pedagogy was social reconstructionism, which, before its mid-century decline, was differentiated from the child-centered progressivism of John Dewey, with its emphasis on citizenship and problem-solving, by the social reconstructionists' desire to use schools "to challenge directly the dominant social order and to achieve specific changes in our social, cultural, and economic institutions" (8). Critical pedagogy, in turn, is differentiated from social reconstruction by its indebtedness to European philosophy, postmodernism, and feminism. Yet even as Stanley declares the influence of feminism, *Curriculum for Utopia* evinces conflicting attitudes toward feminist work. Although Stanley laments the tradition of white male dominance in critical pedagogy and stipulates that white men's experience is "likely" different from that of marginalized groups (128), the theorists to whom he has recourse are predominantly male. Most of the feminists in *Curriculum for Utopia* are confined to the women's sections: feminist critiques of critical pedagogy (128–149) and feminist and other "left/radical" critiques of postmodernism (157–172). Feminism, in other words, may not figure prominently in Stanley's own theory-building, and it is further marginalized in *Curriculum for Utopia* by Stanley's casting doubts upon the credibility of those whom he chooses to represent the field. Elizabeth Ellsworth is the feminist whom he most frequently mentions, yet he specifies how severely her case-study methodology limits the general applicability of her conclusions. Ironically, in a volume which aligns itself with the "postmodern era," Stanley disparages curricular research that emphasizes difference and works within a local context. Instead, he requires that curriculum studies resolve differences among students into "solidarity" and include students at all levels instead of one class for one semester. Since the subject for Stanley must be a consensual amalgam, he deems Ellsworth's research insufficient. He further undermines his chief feminist's credibility by asserting that some other feminists consider her critique of critical pedagogy suspect (145–147). Wavering commitment to feminism is suggested, too, in his rebuttal of feminists' and postmodernists' criticisms of Henry Giroux, who, he says, has made a "serious attempt to *understand* feminist scholarship" (136) and an "effort to use elements of [postmodern and poststructuralist] theories" (163; emphasis added).

Stanley seems much more committed to the use of postmodernism and poststructuralism than of feminism. For him, postmodernism is a way of being in the world; poststructuralism, a way of thinking about it (152–153). Arguing against nihilism as the necessary product of poststructuralism, Stanley points out that "nihilist assumptions are deeply entrenched in our culture. For example, our historical focus on individualism, political choice, the market economy, instrumentalism, and scientism all promote a view that reduces truth to procedural outcomes or market forces." The "radical pluralism" of insisting that no one impose ideas on others has two negative consequences: it undermines the basis for social reform, and it naturalizes the status quo as "the outcome of individual free choice" (174).

Stanley would judge nihilistic accounts of agency naïve at best and hegemonic at worst. His own examination of subject formation leads him to affirmation of postmodern theories. Derrida, he says, "does not deny the reality of the human subject. Rather he questions a conception of the subject as existing prior to language [and] experiences, and capable of immediate self-knowledge" (183). Both Foucault and Derrida "decentered the human subject. Both argued that discourse shaped the individual in the sense that the speaker or writer became an effect of the organization and use of his or her language. For both writers, one could resist, subvert, or deconstruct aspects of the systems they confronted" (177). Stanley endorses the work of Gramsci, Bourdieu, and Althusser, who have revealed the ways in which schools operate not for the empowering of subjects but for the reproduction of ideology, hegemony, and domination in the State Apparatus of education (93–99). Identifying the reproduction of power, however, is not tantamount to remedying it. For that remedy Stanley turns to the theories of Apple, Giroux, Shor, and Freire, who assert that schools can operate with sufficient autonomy to challenge social forces, that students can be active rather than passive participants in the educational process, that the ideology of dominant groups is sufficiently conflicted that within it lie possibilities for resistance, and that school curricula, too, offer possibilities not only for reproduction of dominant power but also for resistance to it (100).

Thus Stanley attributes to pedagogy the potential for both interrogating and nurturing agency in the subject. As for rhetoric, Stanley is having none of it; rhetoric is notable for its invisibility in *Curriculum for Utopia.* Only once does Stanley use the term, and then in the pejorative sense, objecting to the "more extreme aspects" of Ellsworth's "rhetoric"—a definition of *rhetoric* that Julie Klein, one of the contributors to *Writing the Social Text: Poetics and Politics in Social Science Discourse*, hopes is on the decline (Brown 12).

In *Writing the Social Text* pedagogy waits in the wings while rhetoric takes center stage. The contrast with *Curriculum for Utopia* is worth remarking upon:

both volumes specify a program for empowering subjects, one without rhetoric and the other without pedagogy.

Perhaps because of an assumed social science audience, almost every contributor to *Writing the Social Text* defines "rhetoric." These definitions attribute reflexivity to rhetoric, and some contributors characterize agency as a defining issue. In the introductory essay, "Poetics, Politics, and Truth: An Invitation to Rhetorical Analysis," editor Richard Harvey Brown describes rhetoric as engaged in textual analysis, and with Derrida he views society as text (7). Julie Klein's "Text/Context: The Rhetoric of the Social Sciences" adds that rhetoric is not only a discipline but also the means whereby other disciplines engage in reflexivity (23). For her, language is the "very condition of thought" (12). In "The Rhetoric of Efficiency: Applied Social Science as Depoliticization," Hikka Summa observes that rhetoric tends to see texts as actions, products of "knowledgeable agents," whereas postmodernism interrogates the very notion of individual agency (151). Brown unites the two in a postmodern or "critical" rhetoric. His closing essay "From Suspicion to Affirmation: Post-Modernism and the Challenges of Rhetorical Analysis" advances his critical rhetoric for the social sciences: like William B. Stanley's critical pedagogy, it rejects the Cartesian originary "I." Truth in Brown's critical rhetoric emerges from the play of becoming. Just as Stanley finds that the realization that schools reproduce dominant ideology is insufficient to correct that condition, Brown finds the postmodern "hermeneutics of suspicion" insufficient. We "still need moral criteria to make and measure actions and decisions," a task which Brown would accomplish through a "hermeneutics of affirmation" which would challenge foundationalism and unveil truth in our own *telos* by embracing the Other (219–221). "A rhetorically reflexive social theory is no longer 'merely theoretical.' Instead, it makes something happen: it disables the power of the words to go on blindly proliferating the ideologies and the canonical readings that they impose. In this way a critical rhetoric earns its adjective of 'critical.'" (224). Thus Brown attributes to rhetoric possibilities for both interrogating and nurturing agency in the subject.

Critical rhetoric must, of course, be critical of its own assumptions. Brown takes this principle so seriously that he includes in the volume two essays critical of his project. Jacques A. Mourrain accuses postmodernism of neoconservativism for failing to engage a social agenda and instead wallowing in the aesthetic ecstasy of the text. Paul Sites, too, offers counterpoint to the themes of *Writing the Social Text.* His objective is a foundational theory of human needs that motivate people to exert control in order to gratify those needs (184). His subject-internal perspective might seem much more at home in a volume like Marie Secor and Davida Charney's *Constructing Rhetorical Education.* Included in *Writing the Social Text,* though, it voices important objections to postmodernism, especially the pre-

sumed elision of individual agency that Brown would rehabilitate in his critical rhetoric.

Most of the essays in *Writing the Social Text* address the problem of subject formation. Even contributors Paul Sites and Walter R. Fisher, who reject what Sites calls the "linguistic turn" (177) and Fisher "postmodernism" (203), investigate and affirm the possibility of agency in the subject. In fact, none of the authors in the three books here under review deny that possibility. Those in *Curriculum for Utopia and Writing the Social Text* consider agency problematic but possible, through the aegis of critical rhetoric or critical pedagogy. Many of the authors in *Constructing Rhetorical Education*, in contrast, take agency for granted.

In its very title *Constructing Rhetorical Education* unites rhetoric and pedagogy, but in many cases the "rhetoric" is not the critical rhetoric of *Writing the Social Text*, nor is the "pedagogy" the critical pedagogy of *Curriculum for Utopia*. Its editors are committed to a "pluralistic" presentation of rhetorical education, and the essays in their volume often range far from the goal stated in the preface, that of empowering subjects. Richard Harvey Brown specifies a theoretical commitment for his collection and then includes essays with other and sometimes conflicting commitments. The result is a volume of conceptual density, of multifaceted investigation of a central issue. Marie Secor and Davida Charney, in contrast, specify theoretical commitments but do not select their essays on the basis of those commitments. The result is a volume that they call "an argument for what it takes to construct a complete rhetorical education" (ix), but it could also be called a volume without a focus. Readers will, however, find much of value. Two essays in particular should be read: Carmen B. Schmersahl and Byron L. Stay's differentiation of the nature of writing across the curriculum at liberal arts colleges and at research universities, and Louise Wetherbee Phelps's rehabilitation of the term *basic skills*.

The unifying principle of *Constructing Rhetorical Education* is the broad topic of rhetorical education, yet not all the essays satisfy that requirement. Most end with an "implications for teaching" section. That pattern is so consistent, and the teaching implications sections sometimes so superficial, that it may reflect the editors' attempt to unify this large and somewhat amorphous collection of articles on rhetorical theory. A few of the essays do not engage pedagogy at all. Pedagogy does play a role, though, in the others. Barbara M. Sitko asserts that because student writers have a hard time imagining the needs of their readers, they have difficulty revising. Sitko's analysis of frequency and type of revision reveals no imbalance of power between readers and writers. In contrast, Anne J. Herrington's "Composing One's Self in a Discipline: Students' and Teachers' Negotiations" identifies the problem of reader hegemony and urges teachers to resist appropriating their students' texts (112). Like Sitko, Evangeline Marlos Varonis

presents learner-internal research and concludes with an intriguing postscript that attributes to her own writing one of the problems that her essay says basic writers confront: knowledge-telling rather than knowledge-transforming (198). The reflexive moment at the conclusion of Varonis's essay becomes the *modus operandi* of Aletha Hendrickson's comparison of IRS techniques of intimidation with statements of attendance policy in her technical writing class.

Other essays in *Constructing Rhetorical Education* more prominently situate writers and writing in the social environment. Mary Rosner recommends that we teach students to analyze the discourse communities of which they are a part (326), and Diane Dowdey demonstrates that citation systems are one concrete forum for making students aware of different conventions in different academic discourse communities (331). In a particularly stimulating essay, Cynthia L. Selfe asserts that students' control of their collective identity as writers can be enhanced by pedagogical tactics that bracket the social markers of gender, race, class, and income.

In their introductions to the six sections of the book the editors summarize their contributors' perspectives: rhetoric is "the art of developing arguments appropriate to particular contexts" (90), and "rhetorical competence is strongly associated with socio-cognitive maturity" (172). Secor and Charney differentiate rhetorical competence from writing skills, associating the former with "audience accommodation" and the latter apparently with the tasks involved in revision (172–173). Their learner-internal model orients rhetoric toward cognitive development and persuasion rather than toward the subject formation and reflexivity of *Writing the Social Text.*

Julie Klein asserts that although the rhetorical turn "is neither natural nor universal," there is a general trend across disciplines in the humanities and social sciences "characterized by a reflexive questioning of traditional categories and assumptions through study of the role language and argument play in the construction of knowledge" (Brown 22). Klein's caveat that the rhetorical turn "is neither natural nor universal" is crucial to our appreciation of learner-internal research. Too easily we can declare an issue like subject formation precedent to all other investigation. Given Lyotard's definition of postmodernism as an "incredulity toward metanarratives" (xxiv), it would be ironic indeed if the influence of postmodernism upon a discipline (in this case composition studies) were the imposition of foundational questions.

All of the authors in all three of these texts believe that subjects/writers can exert control over their lives/writing. Agency has *not* become a metanarrative for rhetorical studies; it has *not* become the question that must be addressed before the writer can be. Nor has the question of *how* agency can be effected become foundational. Despite the widespread postmodern concern for subject formation

in rhetorical and pedagogical studies, a necessary condition for writing instruction emerges intact: writers may exert control. Given the stability of that condition, composition scholars have the option (but not the requirement) of pursuing the question of "how." All three of these texts demonstrate that many are electing that pursuit.

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