

Louise Yelin

DECIPHERING THE ACADEMIC HIEROGLYPH:
MARXIST LITERARY THEORY AND THE PRACTICE OF
BASIC WRITING

Value, therefore, does not stalk about with a label describing what it is. It is value, rather, that converts every product into a social hieroglyphic. Later on, we try to decipher the hieroglyphic, to get behind the secret of our own social products; for to stamp an object of utility as a value, is just as much a social product of language.

Karl Marx, Capital

This article was conceived as an elaboration of a question I have asked myself repeatedly during the past academic year: What does a Marxist theory of literature and culture have to offer the teacher of Basic Writing? I have realized that this question could not have been asked in the same way ten years ago. It is, in fact, a question with a very recent history, and to pose it as I have done assumes something that needs to be stated: its relationship with the historical period in which it arises. The question encompasses and links two of the many responses of academe and academics to the political and social movements of the 1960s and 1970s: Basic Writing, which entered the university curriculum as a result of open admissions, and the renewal both of Marxist scholarship and of interest in Marxist theory in the humanities and social sciences.

Marxism will have little to offer us teachers of Basic Writing if it is treated merely as another academic subject, or as a separable division of the knowledge industry at the opposite end of the academic spectrum from the one we occupy as teachers of “remediation.” To treat it this way, moreover, is to ignore the common history of Basic Writing and the recent revival of Marxist scholarship. As a theory—or mode of

Louise Yelin teaches Basic Writing at Hostos Community College, CUNY. She is a specialist in nineteenth-century English fiction and an associate editor of Feminist Studies.

analysis—of society and culture, however, Marxism can enrich our work by providing both a way of seeing the institutional context in which we teach and a way of understanding what we teach: that is, an illumination of the relationship between Basic Writing and language, literacy, and values.

I

For the past two years, I have taught Basic Writing at Hostos Community College, a two-year college of the City University of New York with a student population drawn largely from the black and Hispanic communities of the South Bronx. When I arrived in September, 1977, I was surprised to learn from my colleagues that a large number of students enrolled in Basic Writing courses do not complete them. Not all of these students fail; many simply disappear at some time between the beginning and the end of the term. But even though this seemed to be standard operating procedure, I was frustrated when my students began to drop out and when a large number of those who regularly attended class, did the assigned work, and took the final examination, did not pass the course.

While struggling with my frustration, I read Mina Shaughnessy's *Errors and Expectations*.¹ The elegance and lucidity of Shaughnessy's articulation of the goals, purpose, and problems of Basic Writing served as a counterpoint to the gracelessness and sloppiness of my own experience. (Frustration, unfortunately, is never elegant; at best it provokes a kind of gallows humor.) The respect for Basic Writing students which underlies Shaughnessy's seriousness about Basic Writing as an intellectual endeavor was particularly bracing for me, for it served as a constant reminder of the egalitarian perspective with which I had begun. I also learned a great deal from Shaughnessy, not only about what kinds of things to do in class, but also about what I could reasonably expect of my students—and, therefore, of myself. Nevertheless, when I attempted to put Shaughnessy's suggestions into practice, the results were rarely as I would have wished.

Unwilling to accept the propositions that I was a poor teacher or that my students were incapable of learning, I had to look for an explanation that would account for our collective shortcomings in a way that Mina

1. *Errors and Expectations: A Guide for the Teacher of Basic Writing* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1977).

Shaughnessy's did not. *Errors and Expectations*, in its respect for students as individuals entering the educational process for the first time and its belief in the value and power of education, is the most recent instance of a tradition of enlightened liberalism which began with John Stuart Mill. Indeed, Basic Writing itself is an educational project whose underlying ideology is this kind of liberalism. But while the liberal tradition offers the teacher of Basic Writing a valuable respect for the individual and a concomitant optimism about what can be accomplished in Basic Writing, it does little to explain the factors which militate against the success of programs such as open admissions. (This is one reason that this particular liberal tradition is vulnerable to the kind of attacks that have been launched—by the “new conservatives” and often in the name of liberalism—against open admissions at City University and elsewhere, attacks which focus on the ineducability of open admission students.²) In contrast, a Marxist analysis suggests that we can better understand the limitations of Basic Writing—as well as its strengths—if we examine it as part of a web of cultural, political, and economic structures and institutions.

Basic Writing students come to college with a desire to learn and a desire to get good jobs upon graduation. These two desires loosely correspond with two philosophies of education, the old ideal of a liberal, humanistic education and the more “practical” notion of vocational training. In the abstract, there is no necessary contradiction between the two, especially as regards a project such as Basic Writing. That is, the development of linguistic skills is necessary no matter what course a student wishes to pursue. But, in fact, there is a fundamental conflict between the two views, for the opposition between them is not simply a difference in focus and cannot be resolved by recourse to pluralism.

The recent book by Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, *Schooling in Capitalist America*, and Antonio Gramsci's writings on “The Organisation of Education and of Culture”³ do not deal directly with Basic Writing, but the implications of their work are relevant to a discussion of

2. See, e.g., Geoffrey Wagner, “On Remediation,” *College English*, 38, No. 2 (Oct. 1976), and the ensuing correspondence, *CE*, 39, No. 5 (Jan. 1978), between Barbara Gray and Wagner, and Theodore Gross, “How to Kill a College: The Private Papers of a Campus Dean,” *Saturday Review*, 4 February 1978.

3. *Schooling in Capitalist America: Educational Reform and the Contradictions of Economic Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1977); “The Organisation of Education and Culture,” in *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, ed. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), pp. 26-33.

Basic Writing in its institutional context. Gramsci points out that liberal (classical) education has historically been reserved for intellectuals and members of what he calls the “dominant” classes, while vocational education is advocated for what he calls the “instrumental” or “subaltern” classes. Periods of rapid educational expansion, which generally follow periods of economic reorganization, have seen the growth not of liberal education, but of vocational education or technical training. Vocational education has therefore served as a kind of ideological underpinning for structures which reinforce social stratification. What results is a contradiction between what I have identified as the liberal, humanistic *ideology* of Basic Writing and the social practice of Basic Writing as it exists in institutions where vocational education or “career programs” predominate. These programs, in fields such as accounting (bookkeeping), medical laboratory technology, dental hygiene, and secretarial science, prepare students to enter the expanding service sector of the economy.

As teachers, we cannot resolve this contradiction in the classroom, but we can acknowledge it, as Robert Lapidés suggests in a recent article.⁴ That is, we can acknowledge the fact that our students need—and want—to become fluent in Standard English in order to get jobs for which a vocational education presumably prepares them. This acknowledgment is related to another aspect of the liberal ideology of Basic Writing, the notion of equal opportunity. “Basic Writing” is a rubric with more dignity (and more respect for students) than “remediation,” but the latter is, in effect, what we offer in Basic Writing courses, and with it, an opportunity for students to join the academic mainstream, whether humanistic or vocational. Yet we may suspect that there are more students in Basic Writing classes than there are jobs waiting for them after graduation. In this respect, Basic Writing embodies a contradiction between the liberal ideal of equal opportunity and the economic realities of American capitalism.

One response to this contradiction is what Bowles and Gintis identify as the technocratic-meritocratic view of education, the idea that economic success and mobility depend upon education in certain technical and cognitive skills. In this view, students who fail have not acquired the necessary skills. But Bowles and Gintis cite studies which

4. “Teaching Basic Skills: Working with Contradictions,” in a special section of *The Radical Teacher*, No. 8 (May, 1978), on “The Politics of Literacy.”

demonstrate that cognitive skills account for a relatively small part of economic success.⁵ If education does not determine mobility, and if students' cognitive abilities do not determine economic success, then the technocratic-meritocratic view of education, the idea that students who fail deserve to fail, itself serves as a means of legitimizing social stratification.

One of the ways that this process of legitimation is accomplished is the "weeding out" of students. This was one role of freshman English in the old land grant colleges; any high school graduate was admitted, but only a few passed. It now seems to be a function of community colleges: at least three times as many entering community college students want to complete four or more years of college as actually do so, and less than half of community college entrants receive A.A. degrees.⁶ Following out Bowles and Gintis' logic leads to the suggestion that the fact that large numbers of Basic Writing students either do not complete the course or do not get credit for it is not aberrational, but systemic.

Bowles and Gintis' analysis of American education put my frustration in context by connecting it with larger social problems and issues.⁷ Indeed, their work is most valuable in its insistence that apparently local issues such as Basic Writing be viewed in a broader perspective. But it is not enough to see—and Bowles and Gintis do not suggest—only the ways that social institutions shape our lives. We also need to view the institutional context in which we teach as just that, a context, and to set against this kind of analysis of institutions a view of culture as it is created by human struggles within, around, and against existing social structures.

II

There are almost as many Marxist theories of literature and culture as there are Marxisms, almost all of them with implications which touch on

5. See, e.g., Chapter 2 and p. 106n.

6. Bowles and Gintis, p. 211.

7. Bowles and Gintis illuminate the particular discontent of teachers, and especially community college teachers, many of whom are educated within the liberal, humanistic tradition and find their jobs increasingly regimented and alienating. For a discussion of this issue while emphasizes the conflict between professors' academic training and research interests and their teaching of basic skills in English and Mathematics, see Edward B. Fiske, "How Open Admissions Plan Has Changed City College," *The New York Times*, 20 June 1978, p. b11. Fiske interviewed, among others, a physicist who teaches remedial math and a professor of German Literature who teaches ESL.

Basic Writing. Here I shall be dealing with a tradition of Marxist thought seen most recently in the work of Raymond Williams.⁸ This tradition originates in Karl Marx's idea that social consciousness is determined by social being⁹ and is further elaborated by Gramsci in the *Prison Notebooks*.

The particular strength of Williams' work—and of this tradition of Marxist cultural theory—lies in the way that he views all aspects of society and culture as products and processes of human activity. Williams accepts virtually nothing as “given” and treats everything as having a history and therefore being open to analysis. His recent book, *Marxism and Literature*, examines the specific conditions of cultural and literary production in an attempt to forge a theory of culture which treats culture as the Marxist dialectical method treats history and society. Williams is attempting to restore to cultural criticism the wholeness, the totalizing powers of explanation, of Marxism as a mode of analysis. Like Gramsci, Williams avoids the reductive determinism of some Marxist views which treat culture simply as an ideological “superstructure” erected on the economic “base” and which regard cultural products, e.g., ideas, texts, language, as mere phantoms of the human brain which simply “reflect” an underlying economic reality (pp. 75-79, 95-97). In other words, Williams takes culture—and, by implication, cultural projects such as Basic Writing—seriously as a mode of social practice. Williams' work, like that of Marx and Gramsci, also constitutes an attempt to demystify the tools of intellectual history or cultural criticism. That is, Williams attempts to demonstrate that the analytical concepts—e.g., language, culture, and society—with which the intellectual or cultural historian works are not universal categories, but rather products of human social history.

The idea that culture, both as process and concept, has a history has implications which bear on the theory and practice of Basic Writing. First, Williams' mode of analysis provides a way of seeing established or

8. My discussion of Williams' work relies primarily on his most recent book, *Marxism and Literature* (London and New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1977), in the *Marxist Introductions* series, ed. Raymond Williams and Steven Lukes. All references to this book will be cited parenthetically in the text. I have also drawn upon *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (London and New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1976); *The Country and the City* (London and New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1973); and *Culture and Society 1780-1950* (1958; rpt. New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1966).

9. Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859), in *Karl Marx: Early Writings*, trans. Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton (New York: Vintage Books, 1975), pp. 425-26.

“dominant” structures, institutions, and values and alternative or “emergent” ones as related parts of a whole. That is, Williams’ method enables us to see apparently disparate cultural phenomena as related aspects of a dynamic process of human history. In addition, it enables us to see the institutions in which we work and the cultural formations in which we participate not only as shaping our lives, but also as having been shaped, created by human struggles. Similarly, it offers us a vision of the cultures from which our students come as products of human activity. That is, Williams’ mode of analysis insists that we take our students seriously, but without romanticizing them as members of a “culture of the oppressed.” In this respect, Williams’ Marxist humanism resembles Mina Shaughnessy’s liberal humanism, but Williams emphasizes the dialectical nature of the relationship between our students’ alternative or emergent cultures and the established cultural institutions in which we meet them. For, as a philosophy of enlightenment—and of human liberation—Marxism differs from liberalism in its insistence that the self can be understood only in relation to society, or as it is situated in society: that is, that a fully developed consciousness cannot be other than consciousness of social being.

In addition to these theoretical implications, Williams’ theory of culture also has a more local bearing on the teaching of Basic Writing. But before we can evaluate the applications of Williams’ theory to Basic Writing, we need to state what it is that Basic Writing courses are supposed to accomplish.

Basic Writing precedes “freshman composition” or expository writing in English department curricula: its stated purpose is to prepare students for freshman English. According to the City University of New York guidelines for placing entering freshmen into appropriate English courses, students are ready for freshman English when they can write an essay which “introduces some point or idea and demonstrates an awareness that development or illustration is called for” and which has a discernible, if not fully coherent, pattern of organization. The writers’ vocabulary must be adequate to convey the range of their ideas, and their syntax must ensure “reasonable clarity of expression.” Finally, the writers must demonstrate, through punctuation, an “understanding of the boundaries of the sentence;” spell the “common words of the language with a reasonable degree of accuracy;” and show the ability to use “regularly, but not necessarily faultlessly,” the inflectional forms of Standard Written English. Thus, one evident purpose of Basic Writing courses is to enable students to write essays which fulfill these criteria.

One obvious area of instruction (and perhaps the most problematic, given studies which show little correlation between instruction in grammar and coherent writing) is the structures and codes of Standard English. In addition, the guidelines require that a student be able to make some kind of general statement in response to a given topic and offer some kind of support for this generalization. Thus, Basic Writing courses must teach students to distinguish and move between abstract and concrete levels of discourse. In this respect, our teaching of language skills cannot be separated from our teaching of conceptualization, for, as Williams suggests, language is the way that we come to be conscious of ideas, feelings, beliefs, and values. In fact, a reading of City University placement questions reveals that an articulation of feelings or beliefs about ideas or values is necessary for a passing grade. The test asks students to respond to a short paragraph which states an opinion, e.g., that TV has a harmful effect on young people or that people in our society feel successful if they make a lot of money, by agreeing or disagreeing and explaining their answers with illustrations from their own experience, their observations of others, or their reading.

Basic Writing courses also perform a function formerly fulfilled by freshman English or by students' high school education. Many Basic Writing students enter college as unfamiliar with academic practices as with academic discourse (or Standard English). One purpose of Basic Writing as an entry-level course is to acquaint students with the behavioral codes which prevail in the university. Thus, Basic Writing teachers can evaluate themselves not only on their students' competency in writing, but also on the basis of students' success in courses later on in college.¹⁰ If Basic Writing serves as a kind of practicum in academic codes—both linguistic and behavioral—it is also an introduction to the value these codes express, that is, to the values of the dominant institutions of American public life. Thus, when we teach Basic Writing, we are actively engaged with language, behavior, values, and institutions—with the elements of culture in the anthropological sense. How can Williams' theory of culture illuminate our practice in these areas, particularly in regard to the kinds of assignments we give, the ways we present them, and our interactions with students?

According to Williams, language is

10. Barbara Gray, presentation at City University Association of Writing Supervisors Conference, April, 1978.

. . . a constitutive element of material social practice. But if this is so, it is also a special case. For it is at once a material practice [that is, an activity by means of which we produce our existence] and a process in which many complex activities, of a less manifestly material kind—from information to interaction, from representation to imagination, and from abstract thought to immediate emotion—are specifically realized. Language is in fact a special kind of material practice: that of human sociality. (p. 165)

Williams elaborates the theory that language is constitutive by setting it against theories which reify language by treating it as a self-contained structure or system and against those which reduce it to a simple reflection of reality or a mechanical “instrument” of communication. The idea that language is prior to social reality, Williams suggests, reduces the “living speech of human beings in their specific social relations in the world . . . to instances and examples of a system which [lies] beyond them” (p. 27). That is, by treating *langue*, or language as system, as prior to and determining *parole*, or language as individual speech acts, this notion of language treats it as a system which is “inaccessible to ‘individual’ acts of will and intelligence” and in effect denies the possibility of “individual initiative of a creative or self-generating kind” (pp. 28, 40). The idea that language is reflective or expressive of a prior social reality and the idea that language is a “medium” or “tool” of communication similarly fail to comprehend language as an active *process* of signification, which Williams defines as the “social creation of meanings through the use of formal signs” (p. 38).

As against these theories of language as prior, reflective, expressive, and instrumental, Williams argues for a dialectical materialist theory of language as constitutive both of social consciousness and social being; dialectical, in that language is both a system of signs and accessible to changes wrought by individual users of language; materialist, in that language, as signification, is a means of production of social life. Moreover, Williams goes beyond theories which view language as the result of a dialectical opposition between *langue* and *parole* by insisting that signs—words and symbols—themselves have a variable range, depending upon the situation in which they are used (p. 39).

The sign is social, but in its very quality as sign it is capable both of being internalized—and indeed it has to be internalized if it is to be a sign for communicative relations between actual persons, initially using only their

own power to express it—and of being continually available in social and material ways, in manifest communication.

(p. 41)

The consequences of this view of the sign—and, by implication, of language—are of great importance for the teacher of Basic Writing. Williams suggests that the idea of the variable range of the sign is a

. . . necessary challenge to the idea of ‘correct’ or ‘propèr’ meanings which had been powerfully developed by orthodox philology and which had been taken over both into social-class distinctions of a ‘standard’ language flanked either by ‘dialects’ or by ‘errors,’ and into literary theories of a ‘correct’ or ‘objective’ reading.

(p. 40)

This analysis obviates a need for emphasis upon *abstract* standards of grammatical correctness, although not a correctness *per se*. That is, a Marxist approach would challenge not correctness, but the *idea* of absolute standards of correctness, and the social and political relations of domination and economic, racial, and sexual exploitation concealed within that idea. In other words, Williams’ dialectical materialist theory of language provides us with a way of seeing the relatedness of different kinds of linguistic situations, structures, and dialects without resorting to a naive relativism.

In our educational practice, we can introduce our students to Standard English as a mode of discourse within a particular social and historical context and with a particular social history which involves the relationship of Standard English to other languages and other dialects of English. (As Robert Lapidès observes, we would be doing our students a disservice if we did not offer instruction in Standard English, but our instruction will be enhanced if we do what he calls “teaching to the contradictions.”¹¹) We might consider, for example, the idea that one makes different linguistic choices in different social situations, and ask our students to think about linguistic choices with which they are already familiar. In a discussion of journal-writing, we might suggest that a journal written for a Basic Writing class, while informal, is unlikely to be as intimate as one whose only audience is the writer. Similarly, in a discussion leading to a fairly standard Basic Writing topic, a description

11. “Teaching Basic Skills,” p. 8.

of a significant event in a student's life, we might elicit from students the various ways that they would describe the same event to their parents, their peers, their teachers, and their employers.

From here, we might move to a discussion of the social—and institutional—settings in which students encounter Standard English, and a discussion of why students feel they take Basic Writing. Some students will offer as a reason the fact that they failed the placement test; others, their desire to get a college degree and a good job; still others, their desire to speak and write correctly. All of these answers provide an opportunity not only to discuss the purposes of the course, but also to trace the history of Standard English and with it, the changing canons of correctness. We might focus on the history of Standard English as a history of migration and conquest, beginning with the Celts and moving through the conquest of “England” by Angles, Saxons, and Normans; on the movement of the English language to North America and the influence on American English of successive waves of immigrants; on changes in the language which resulted from the spread of literacy in the 19th and 20th centuries; and on the ways that slang often becomes part of standard (informal) usage and just as often becomes obsolete. Here, I think, we will be offering our students a critical perspective on language, a perspective which can be sharpened if we ask them to consider the relationship of Standard English to the languages they and their families have spoken. While pointing out the processes by which Standard English has become “standard,” we might also give an assignment which asks students to trace, as far back as possible, the linguistic histories of their families and which asks them to consider the roles of literacy and bilingualism in these histories.

What I am suggesting is that we can evoke in our students not just a thoughtfulness about language, but also a consciousness of languages in their social and political contexts, of languages as complex social codes. This kind of approach suggests that we present Standard English simultaneously as a social and historical phenomenon and as a system of linguistic forms and structures. As we offer instruction in syntax, inflection, vocabulary, spelling, and punctuation, we can deal with the inevitable—and necessary—questions of correctness and error without presenting them arbitrarily, but rather, by placing them in an historical context.

Williams' notion of language as a process of signification also has implications for Basic Writing. Williams' view, like Shaughnessy's, suggests that we must regard our students' efforts at composition not

simply as struggles with inflection or sentence structure, but also as a struggle to make meaning. But he treats this struggle with an emphasis slightly different from hers. Williams observes that both the concept of purely “discursive” or “factual” writing and the concept of “fictional” or “imaginative” writing suppress the fact of writing as practice, as “active signifying composition” (pp. 145-48). In contrast, Williams insists upon the necessity of seeing all writing simply—or not so simply—as writing. This point of view is particularly useful in countering the arguments of those who say that instruction in Standard English is crippling to students who need, rather, to “find their own voices.” Williams’ analysis suggests that this argument patronizes students in the name of “creativity.” Indeed, Williams’ discussion of the history of the concepts of literary criticism, among them “creativity” and “imagination,” suggests that the idea that there is such a thing as an “individual voice” apart from any common language is itself an ideological product of a quite recent period of history.

Williams’ demystification of the dichotomy between “discursive” and “imaginative” writing, together with his notion of writing as both signification and communication, offers a means of bridging the gap, common in composition courses, between analytical or critical essays, “reports,” and “creative writing.” That is, it suggests that the distinction between fact and fiction is less important than students’ ability to move between the abstract and the concrete. Consequently, our teaching should encourage this kind of movement in writing usually classified as narrative and descriptive as well as in more evidently expository modes. In this respect, a Marxist approach does not differ from many others, but a Marxist dialectical method can offer a fresh perspective on many of the paper topics commonly given in Basic Writing courses.

Let us consider, as an example, a description of a person. The Marxist view of the individual, that the self can be understood only in relation to its social and historical setting, suggests that a fully articulated description of a person comprehends the web of relationships in which the individual is located. In presenting the assignment, then, we can discuss this network or series of networks—family, racial or ethnic group, class—and the relationships between them. In addition, we can consider the relationship of writer, subject, audience as a way of making explicit the connection between a particular act of writing and the institutional context in which it occurs: as a way, that is, of subjecting to

scrutiny the social conditions which determine the processes and products of composition.

The notion of composition as a process of signification, as Williams presents it, is not individual, but dialectical, in the sense that individuals use and shape a collective language. Williams argues, in his discussion of "Signs and Notations," for a similarly active concept of reading:

The most basic kind of notation is of course the alphabetic. In highly literate cultures this means of production is in effect almost naturalized, but the more we learn about the processes of reading the more we realize the active and interactive relationship which this apparently settled kind of notation involves. Thus, the notation is not, even at this level, simple transfer; it depends upon the active grasping, often by repeated trial and error, of shapes and relationships which the notation promotes, but does not guarantee. Reading, then, is as active as writing, and the notation, as means of production, depends on both these activities and upon their effective relationship. (p. 170)

If, as Williams suggests, notation is a means of literary production which depends upon the relationship of reading and writing, Basic Writing courses should be concerned with reading as well as writing. Writing teachers, that is, might teach reading, and not just as ancillary (using essays or excerpts in readers as models for student essays or as material for analysis) to the teaching of writing. Implicit in Williams' emphasis upon reading as an active grasping of shapes and relationships is the idea that instruction in "techniques" of reading (e.g., "scanning") is likely to be less fruitful than encouraging students to engage in a sustained and often laborious effort at understanding. In addition, we can discuss with students the ways that language "means", and make explicit the connections between the active processes of reading and writing.

In fact, the current division between reading and writing in academic skills departments often results in an artificial split between the production and consumption of language. This split parodically reproduces the split between the spheres of production and consumption within the advanced capitalist economic system. In addition, it reifies language (or the texts in which we encounter it) as an artifact to be consumed or raw material to be transformed within the process of production. That is, the split between writing and reading courses reinforces the sense of language as a thing and literary texts as commodities which can be distinguished from the ways in which and the people by whom they are used.

A recognition of this split can illuminate the quite special place we occupy as teachers of Basic Writing in regard to language as a process of signification. On the one hand, we act as participants, in some sense, in the composing processes of our students; this is what is meant, I think, when we say that we “teach writing.” On the other hand, we are also professional critics—consumers?—of language as it is encountered in written texts: those of us who studied or teach literature and those of us who engage in literary scholarship are critics of texts, while all of us are critics of the texts produced by our students. In this respect, we belong to what Williams describes, in his discussion of the development of philology as a discipline, as a tradition of privileged observers of language and languages:

There was the largely unnoticed consequence of the privileged situation of the observer: that he was observing (of course scientifically) within a differential mode of contact with alien material: in texts, the records of a *past* history; in speech, the activity of an alien people in subordinate (colonialist) relations to the whole activity of the dominant people within which the observer gained his privilege. (p. 26)

An acknowledgment on our part of the privileged situation we occupy as observers of our students’ use of language does not imply that they do not need to become fluent in Standard English, but it places questions of fluency—and competency—in perspective.¹² As a result, we can enter the composing processes of our students—and perform our roles as teachers of writing—with a fuller understanding of what it means for them to write in general, and to begin to write Standard English, in particular.¹³

What I have been suggesting is that the activity of writing (and therefore the practice of Basic Writing) cannot be isolated from broader questions of literacy. But these, in turn, are related to the concept of literature as Williams explains it. Williams traces the history of

12. The question of competency tests is a complicated one. These tests are often advocated by those who would like to return universities to an Edenic state which existed, supposedly, before open admissions. As a result, some radical groups have suggested that competency tests discriminate against third-world and working-class students and therefore argue for their abolition. But neither competency tests nor abolishing them solves the problem of insuring competency. A fresh approach to the problem is therefore needed.

13. For a discussion of “beginning” as, among other things, an intention to mean, see Edward W. Said, *Beginnings: Intentions and Method* (New York: Basic Books, 1975).

“literature” from its beginnings, as a condition of being able to read, and later as an increasingly specialized kind of language and as a category of analysis (pp. 48-52). He points out that until quite recently, most Marxist theories of literature have not questioned this category. Rather, the most valuable contributions of the Marxist tradition to literary studies have been an expansion of the definition of literature to include popular literature (the “literature of the people”) and an attempt to relate literature to the historical period within which it had been produced. If the former is analogous to the work of social historians which restores to a prominent place in history the lives of those who have been dispossessed, the latter is analogous to the work of Marx and subsequent Marxists in deciphering social products as hieroglyphs by revealing the conditions of their production.¹⁴

These two aspects of Marxist literary theory are complemented by a third which insists that we recognize each literary text, each act of signification, as an articulation of ideas, feelings, or values. It is in regard to the question of values that a Marxist approach to literature has the fullest implications for the teaching of Basic Writing, for it is here that Marxist theories of culture converge with Marxist analyses of institutions.

As I suggested earlier, Basic Writing courses often constitute students’ introduction to the values and institutions of American public life. Williams’ discussion of the concept of hegemony suggests that what students encounter, in Basic Writing courses, is an experience of hegemonic values and institutions:

The concept of hegemony often, in practice, resembles [that of ideology], but it is distinct in its refusal to equate consciousness with the articulate formal system which can be and ordinarily is abstracted as ‘ideology.’ . . . Instead it sees relations of domination and subordination, in their forms as practical consciousness, as in effect a saturation of the whole process of living—not only of political and economic activity, but of the whole substance of lived identities and relationships, to such a depth that the pressures and limits of what can ultimately be seen as a specific economic, political, and cultural system seem to most of us the pressures and limits of simple experience and common sense. (pp. 109-10)

14. See, e.g., *Capital*, trans. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling (New York: International Publishers, 1967), I, 74-75; 175-76.

The notion of hegemony, that is, enables us to see the ways that values, in particular the values of a dominant class, are encoded in practices which we may take for granted but which our students do not. In addition, it provides us with a way of seeing culture not in opposition to society, but as a part of a whole structure of political and social relationships, as part of the “lived dominance and subordination of particular classes” (p. 110).

A crucial consequence of this kind of analysis is its insistence that the notions of “inside” and “outside”—as in inside and outside “the system”—are myths: ideological constructs which conceal relations of domination and subordination. For if our students do not begin “outside” the system, it cannot be the function of Basic Writing to “integrate” them into it. In our educational practice, therefore, we need to demystify the notion of “integration into the system.” On the one hand, we can explain that there is no outside, by revealing that “outside” is a figure for dispossession, for economic, racial, and sexual exploitation. We can ask our students, for example, from whose perspective they appear to be outside, and who if anyone, appears to be outside to them. On the other hand, we can dissect the promise of entry “inside” by analyzing the ways that the relations of domination and subordination which prevail in American society militate against equal opportunity. In other words, we can restore the social and political content of these ideas and, in effect, engage our students in a discussion of the relationship of social consciousness and social being. This kind of discussion might lead to the assignment of an intellectual autobiography which asks students to describe a particular belief or value they hold, trace it to the conditions or events which caused them to hold it, and relate it to what they see as their place in American society. Such a writing assignment, and the discussions which precede and follow it, can provide the basis of a common language, shared by us and our students, embracing rather than flattening differences in cultural assumptions, in systems of meanings and values.

Indeed, the concept of hegemony offers such a perspective of relatedness. Williams insists that we see hegemonic structures as a dynamic and changing set of relationships between “dominant” meanings, values, and institutions and “oppositional” elements (pp. 123-25). Some of these oppositional elements are “merely novel”; others, which he terms “emergent,” are part of a process whereby new meanings, values, practices, and relationships are constantly being

created. Williams' discussion of dominant and emergent cultural values and institutions is elaborated in regard to the development of "high" cultural movements and formations, but it also provides us with a way of seeing our students as members of emergent social groups and ourselves—and Basic Writing—as representatives of established institutions. Williams' insistence that "definitions of the emergent . . . can only be made in relation to a full sense of the dominant" suggests that Basic Writing is, in effect, the terrain in which the relationship between "emergent" and "dominant" is realized.

A dialectical approach to Basic Writing as a cultural project not only requires a recognition of this relationship, but also suggests that as we teach our students the codes and structures of Standard English and acquaint them with the values and practices of academic life, we must also offer them a means of deciphering the academic hieroglyph, a way of understanding that inscribed within each act of signification, within each social process and practice, is a whole structure of social relations.