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Sheep in Wolves' Clothing: How Composition's Social Construction Reinstantiates Expressivist Solipsism (And Even Current-Traditional Conservativism)

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The main premise of this article is that social construction, under the guise of being the radical wolf that will empower teachers and students alike, has instead promoted a pervasive sheepishness, a passive disinterest in large-scale progress in composition studies. While social construction ostensibly offers a contextually-sensitive open field for scholars and teachers, its practical effect has been to fragment composition studies by encouraging ultra-specific scholarship that does not readily cohere into shared knowledge. We believe that social construction is fundamentally a form of Romanticism, enabling not only the solipsism of which its advocates once accused "expressivists,"[1] but also the conservatism for which expressivists once excoriated current-traditionalists. And while some scholarship has clearly turned away from social construction in recent years, we believe that its influence continues—most obviously in the durable arguments against the "positivism" of data collection.

We believe that reframing social construction through a Romantic/Classic lens might clarify the roots and the lasting consequences of the theory's enduring appeal. Composition's long-standing resistance to data-rich research approaches, fully explored by Richard Haswell ("NCTE/CCCC's"), is one of the most prominent signs of social construction's Romanticism, and our essay aims to untangle both the philosophical causes and practical effects of this orientation. Finally, we invoke a different line of thinking available from the beginning of these disputes, Robert Pirsig's "metaphysics of quality," as a compelling example of one possible way out of the feedback loop of current social construction and into a more progressive and responsive philosophy.

We pause here for an important preliminary note. During the course of trying to publish this article, here and in other journals, we met with criticism from several reviewers for not outlining social construction theory with complete care before forwarding our own argument. We want to make clear that this perceived omission is by design. While it might be academic custom to sum up previous studies to prove one's credibility, there are two reasons why we have streamlined that part of our article. First, we contend that social construction is such a nebulous theory that attempting to pin it down would take an article in itself. That is indeed one of the problems with social construction that we directly

[1] We will follow the convential labels for different movements in the field of composition, but we cannot let pass the fact that "expressivists" have never so labeled themselves. The term is a curious case of the kind of diminishing "othering" that social constructionists decry when used in other social settings. In drafts, the authors were frequently tempted to write asides arguing against the unfair trivialization of the actual writings and thinking of Elbow, Macrorie, and others so labeled, an injustice that bothers the authors even if neither of them holds particularly close to that style of pedagogy. Keeping our critique focused on social construction requires that we deal with what social constructionists see themselves as doing, so we will focus on their own construction of "expressivism."

address below. Because social construction can encompass so many modes and directions, and because its very nature eschews judging claims by any means other than popularity, it has rendered itself nearly immune to a clear reassessment or even summary. The muddy, shape-shifting nature of social construction is one of the very things we discuss at length in our article, and wading into all of that at the onset would have distracted from our purpose, which is to demystify the basic orientation of the theory. Secondly, we believe that the demand itself is unreasonable and hegemonic, considering how often discussion in the profession simply assumes the primacy of the theory. Nobody can miss the reign of this cloudy theory, nor can anyone miss how closely that reign has corresponded with what Haswell has clearly documented as a "war" on scholarship from other perspectives in the pages of the field's most central and powerful organizational journals. We appreciate that the editors of JAEPL have permitted this admittedly contentious argument simply to go forward.

Social Construction's Well-Constructed House of Cards

The root of the problem with social construction is easily stated: if reality is what the discourse community says it is, then what the present community believes is, by definition, right. The only way to enter the conversation is to join the established in-crowd. The best way to do that is to show allegiance to its beliefs. Thus, social construction is functionally tautological; by such means cults are born. The further credo has become that all knowledge is local (Huot 105), so that all judgments need to be made within local discourse communities and are essentially incommensurate. That is, in-crowds can proliferate and become their own judges of what's best locally. By that means, social constructionists render themselves beyond critique. Who is to say what is better or best locally? As long as one declares fealty to the larger dogma of social construction, we're all right. We're also incapable of producing what Richard Haswell called "RAD" research—replicable and aggregable (neither is relevant if everything is local), and data-supported (that is, suspiciously "positivist") research—information that might inform some of us, sometimes, that we are wrong. Hence, within the construct of social construction, nobody can ever be wrong, except by rejecting social construction itself. We do not mean to be snarky by using the term "in-crowd"; we earnestly believe it accurately represents the exact philosophical situation in a way that the field should confront more overtly.

The inability to declare anything wrong has real and interesting consequences. For example, many leading lights in rhetoric and composition cooperated with the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) in constructing its "VALUE" rubric on writing. AAC&U is itself a responsive and responsible academic organization. While the resulting rubric has many good features, it makes the curious claim that the number of errors in student writing steadily declines through a student's college career. In fact, close study indicates that error rates remain close to constant throughout writing careers, even though the nature of the errors changes as students' syntactic abilities develop (Haswell, *Gaining Ground* 191-205). As Haswell explains, growth in other dimensions of writing tends to produce new kinds of errors, particularly at the early stages of learning. But without careful attention to research—and an attitude that it matters—potentially misleading "lore" like the decline of error cannot really be challenged. Indeed, social

construction offers no path to challenge "folk wisdom." Thus, even our best and brightest can be coerced into accepting demonstrably false lore.

Composition scholarship has produced little new knowledge about how writers make gains throughout the reign of social construction. Without a full philosophical shift, neither will it be likely to persuade more realist or idealist audiences that it has anything to offer to anyone outside its circle—which circle does not necessarily, or even with much likelihood, include the students who encounter composition briefly in an early stage of their college careers. Far from having the sort of radicalizing social influence that social constructionists ironically idealize, social construction has mainly established a way for composition practitioners to insulate themselves from stumbling across the kinds of accumulating anomalies that, as Kuhn pointed out, become the force that drives paradigm change. Composition has built itself the perfect rut. Furthermore, social construction incinerates any ground for complaint about standards imposed on us by any outside forces. After all, these outsiders to us are simply insiders in other discourse communities, constructing other realities. If they think their reality includes us and controls ours—and if they have the power to insist on that—social construction offers no principled basis for saying otherwise.

The main advantages of social construction have been in the professionalization of composition itself, of course. By proper operation of its own theories, once one joins the social constructionist in-crowd, the tickets of advancement become more readily available. Those who are good at social moves advance, entering the position to advance the similarly oriented and gifted. But this interesting professional game would seem to have no practical ends. It threatens to offer status as its own end. Of course, in plain fact many scholars do a great deal of practical and progressive work, essentially ignoring the social constructionist credo even while paying it homage, at least implicitly. Nevertheless, the logic of social construction predicts that we should end up with exactly what we have: more tenured specialists, but few advances in pedagogical methods, few measurable results from improved practices, and little over-all progress for the field of writing even in its political status. Given that composition teaching has been pushed constantly to the lowest economic levels, for most students in most first-year writing courses, writing remains the writing of "Engfish" (Macrorie 1) for processing by contingently-employed teachers who have little hope of ever joining or engaging the full professional apparatus that has built itself around the social contructivist paradigm.

Zen and the Art of Composition Theory: Using Pirsig's Lens to Examine Social Construction's Move towards Radical Romanticism

We have found an unusual value in looking at the enterprise in light of Robert Pirsig's related attempt to unravel the problem of avoiding a Romantic-Classical oscillation, essentially the same problem that drove the field of composition to social construction. Pirsig carefully examines the nature of Romanticism as part of an inquiry arising out of his experience teaching college composition—which he steadfastly calls, presciently for 1974, "teaching rhetoric." His central question was this: How do we know when we are teaching Quality in writing? As Pirsig relentlessly and copiously demonstrates, we seem to know it when we see it, but everyone has trouble explaining it. Pirsig's most concrete realization

is that conversations about this topic mainly bog down in an endless argument between Classicists, who believe Quality results if we quantify and technologize the results, and Romantics, who believe that quantification and mechanization necessarily destroy the Quality that we seek. His focus, given the times, is mainly on the irrational resistance of Romantics to anything technical—typified by his cycling companions' aversion to learning how to maintain their own motorcycle, a reaction against the technologies that so largely define our lives. There are clear parallels between the attitudes of those who want to drive motorcycles without maintenance and the attitudes of those want to teach composition without any resort to empirical study or discussion of standards. Large factions of the field decry as "postivitists" anyone who wants to open up the "engine" of teaching and learning and start taking things apart to see how they work. The collective behavior of our published scholars has remained decidedly on the Romantic side of Pirsig's split, with the attraction to information technologies representing less a shift to the "Classical" side than a sensible adaptation to new social realities.

Romanticism, as Pirsig describes it, covers a constellation of attitudes, all positioned in opposition to Classical thinking. Preliminarily, he describes Romantics as "inspirational, imaginative, creative, intuitive" and proceeding not by "reason or by laws" but by "feeling, intuition, and aesthetic conscience" (85). Romantics therefore reject systematic, scientific thinking as "inhuman, mechanical, lifeless, a blind monster, a death force" (19). Pirsig uses the phrase "blind monster" as the Romantic's summary of the Classical view, a view both cold and indiscriminate, a steamrolling objectivity that oppresses rather than clarifies. Along with their suspicion of systematic thinking, Romantics aim to be independent of oppressive social systems, including government and bureaucracies. As Pirsig puts it, a Romantic revolts against being "a mass person" (21). Finally, Romantics do not believe Quality can be quantified. It cannot be broken down or measured. Even the attempt does violence, as all measurement by its very nature leaves something out. Ultimately, they see classical thinking as reductive, painting over complexity and sorting individuals into false systems—numbers, datasets, results—that cannot represent fully human reality.

At first, expressisivism seems far more closely aligned with Romanticism than does any other composition theory. Certainly, it is the theory that has been most consistently connected to Romantic ideals within composition scholarship, particularly by its detractors. Lester Faigley breaks down expressivism's three Romantic goals: "integrity," "spontaneity," and "originality," thereby highlighting the theory's perceived inner-directedness (529). James Berlin describes the theory as a "descendent of Rousseau on one hand and of the Romantic recoil from the urban horrors created by nineteenth-century capitalism on the other" ("Rhetoric and Ideology" 484). In Berlin's earlier work, the discussion of expressivism appears under the heading "Subjective Rhetoric," and focuses on tracing the movement's early ties to art and literature, leading to its later focus on "the cultivation of the singular vision and voice of the student" (*Rhetoric and Reality* 152). Overall, expressivism is linked to Romanticism through both its lineage and its focus on finding inner truth through the writing process. And overall, these Romantic features are most often singled out as weaknesses. Berlin ultimately faults the theory for its denial of "the place of intersubjective, social processes in shaping reality" (146), a widely shared criticism of expressivism by social constructionists of all stripes.

This overview may make it appear that expressivism represented the last gasp

of Romanticism in composition studies, but we argue that this tidy result is far from the case. By looking more closely at the tenor of the social constructionist critique of expressivism, the first contours of an alternative, social constructionist Romanticism begin to surface. Social constructionists criticized expressivism for being myopically focused on the individual's subjective experience. A large part of this criticism revolved around the idea that by focusing on only the student's inner mind, expressivist theorists neglected the social constructions within which and by which students write. The student's social class, cultural history, and region of the country, the social dynamics of the institution and the classroom itself—all these made up the student and therefore the student's orientation to the writing task. So social constructionists saw expressivism as ultimately *reductive*—reducing the student's complex social situatedness to a too-simple sense of "self." Social construction's fear of reduction, however, is clearly a Romantic fear, as it plays into the idea that all elements of a whole contribute to its ultimate Quality, and therefore no one piece should be extracted for measurement or even comment. The self can't be discussed apart from the social. Reality can't be considered apart from the language within which it is mediated. An essay cannot be considered apart from the dialectal swirl from which it issues. Berlin's description of the dialectic is a clear example of the Romantic idea that no piece can be taken from the whole, and also includes language that is explicitly anti-Classical:

> The dialectic, moreover, is a complicated process that is not cumulative or arithmetic in nature; knowledge does not usually result from simply adding or subtracting rhetorical elements. Instead, meaning comes about as the external world, the conceptions the writer or speaker brings to the external world, and the audience the writer or speaker is addressing all simultaneously act on each other during the process of communicating. (*Rhetoric and Reality* 167)

And while all this makes intuitive sense (of course we do not want to reduce our students or the complexity of our work), the fear of reduction itself has led to a new, even more radical Romanticism, requiring scholars to continually describe more and more of the social field surrounding the writer at the expense of doing other work. Ignoring the lesson of Zeno's paradox and really of social construction itself, researchers dig more and more deeply toward a "reality" that can never actually be reached. To have any other aim but to widen this portrait is to be reductive, positivist, Classical, square. This infinite regress finally creates a scholarship that can blend in almost anything from any other field, but cannot make distinctions between what is important and what is not, what works and what does not. Left alone with this ever-expanding interdisciplinary portrait of the social situatededness of student writers, theorists and teachers must finally lean on their own subjectivity to make sense or use of what they see—a Romantic predicament. The isolated, discerning self, then, becomes just as central in social construction as it was in expressivism. The only difference is that the "self" here is not the student, but the teacher—the one who ultimately makes judgments about better and worse, and sets those judgments into the "positivist" concreteness that is grading. Social constructionists' argument with expressivism was not a rejection of Romanticism itself, but instead a way of advocating for a different and ultimately more fanatical Romantic view.

One protest here might be that while social construction may seem Romantic in its

preoccupation with irreducibility, its central claim is anything but. The idea that truth or reality is socially constructed seems, at first, explicitly anti-Romantic, since Romanticism is often thought of as a private quest for a fixed and inner truth. Yet Romantic truth itself resists definition (e.g., the beauty of art is ineffable), just as the antifoundational socially-mediated "truth" in constructionist theory cannot be pinned down, since it is forever in an irreducible cultural flux. Neither theory, then, provides an assessable goal. We can never be sure if students in an expressivist classroom have found their inner truth or not, since we cannot see into their minds. Likewise, we can never be sure if students truly understand their social situadedness, if they are sufficiently aware of the cultural forces bearing down on the writing task, or if this awareness has in fact done them any good. We cannot even be sure if our own classroom presentation of discourse and community is adequately dynamic, or if we have fallen into harmful reductions. For both expressivism and social construction, there is no defined end result and therefore no way to know when a result is achieved. The search for inner truth or the search for any "real" social discourse are similarly endless processes, and any successes must be intuitively felt rather than measured or named. Despite the differences in epistemology, both expressivism and social construction are similarly Romantic in their orientation towards Quality. Both theories contain a conception of truth that does not lend itself to any measurable outcome—a shared weakness that produces problematic results, as illustrated particularly when it comes to assessing writing.

Social Constructionist Assessment as Romantic Enabler

Nowhere do both the extreme Romanticism of social construction and its resistance to Classical thought stand out more starkly, or to larger effect, than in the area of assessment. The basic uses of assessment are to decide how well things are going, and then what you should do more and what you should do less. As we will see, social construction essentially prevents such judgments by making all assessment an exercise in infinite regress. The practical result has been a standing critique of all such judgments as "reductive," "objectivist," and, of course, "positivist," greatly complicating disciplinary decisions about what to do with assessments, and even whether to conduct them.

We take Brian Huot's *(Re)Articulating Writing Assessment for Teaching and Learning* as the main exemplar of social constructionist assessment. We begin our examination there precisely because Huot has presented social constructionist assessment so well, and because his vision in its general scope has been so widely accepted. With expert scholarly method and considerable rhetorical skill, Huot develops a "new theory and practice of writing assessment," establishing the principles that the new practice of writing assessment be site-based, locally-controlled, context-sensitive, rhetorically-based, and accessible (105). Thus, assessment in Huot's view would not ever become what Richard Haswell later called "RAD" research—replicable, aggregable, and data-supported. Whereas Haswell would have us build a larger body of research that can be tested by others, accumulated, and represented in a variety of ways, including as collected data, Huot pointedly insists that assessment should focus on serving only the precise purposes at hand. Indeed, Huot seems to reject even the possibility of Haswell's project, decrying as "positivist" error the very idea that "human traits … can be measured accurately across individual contexts." Here,

the Romantic resistance to any reduction and systemizing is made plain. Huot's reasoning begins by criticizing this erroneous "classical test theory" as (in part quoting assessment expert Egon Guba) "based on a positivist philosophy which contends 'that there exists a reality *out there*, driven by immutable natural laws'" (83). Again, we should pause to note that, apparently, anyone who actually believes there really is a law of gravity might not agree with Huot's construct. Such are the extreme philosophical claims in which social construction genuinely is grounded, a fact too often glossed over. Huot does go on to limit the range of his claim more carefully, seeking mainly to guard against any assumption that a complex ability like writing is a "fixed, consistent, and acontextual human trait" (83). Huot asserts that all positivists would believe that premise—which may be true enough as it goes, but it does not follow that all believers in a more nuanced realism—such as Haswell, for instance, whom Huot later praises for his assessment method (106)—are positivists.

Huot, then, essentially builds a straw scholar, positioning all opponents of social constructionist assessment as entirely duped by positivist objectivism, with every step toward objectivism leading inevitably down the slippery slope to "positivism." In remarkable, ungrounded leaps, any believer in empirical study of any kind becomes willing to accept without question or qualm the most dubious and reductive of assessments. As he notes, "those of us who teach and research literacy have always known that writing assessment could never be totally objective, and that writing which *approached* such objectivity would never be effective communication" (92). Huot also charges that "within the positivist assumptions that construct and rely on the technology of testing, there is no need for different sets of procedures depending on context, because writing ability is a fixed and isolated human trait" (83). Yet it seems patently obvious that a great many people who understand that writing always has subjective and interpretive aspects also demonstrate a faith that it also has objectifiable aspects, ideas about reality that can be shared and tested. It is just as apparent that many non-positivists simply use tests as one piece of information among many, arrayed to construct a more complete picture of a complex reality. For instance, Haswell's call for RAD research ("NCTE/CCCC's") makes plain that his wish is not to use any one measure reductively; quite to the contrary, he wishes to have us accumulate a vast amount of varied information in ways that we can "aggregate" to make complex decisions. Huot, speaking accurately and expertly for social constructionist assessment, posits it as a way to save us from the excesses of positivism, but his argument simply goes too far. One may in fact believe in a reality that is "out there" and still believe that this reality is also interpreted rhetorically by discourse communities, and is extraordinarily difficult to pin down with confidence. That blended belief, in fact, opens up even more room for interpretation, given that multiple findings from local sites must then be read and interpreted together within a larger interpretive community—the RAD approach posited by Haswell.

Furthermore, in the area of assessment we once again find that advocates of social construction, in part by failing to claim their underlying Romanticism, actually end up enabling Classical systems with which they cannot adequately contend. Huot notes that "[at] present, assessment procedures that attempt to fix objectively a student's ability to write are based upon an outmoded theory supported by an irrelevant epistemology" (94). Yet we find little sign that current scholarship roundly condemns grading student

writing, a result that such a statement would seem to demand as a necessary consequence. Just as social constructionists will (paraphrasing Walker Percy) order a pizza and expect to get one, they continue to give simplistic, five-category ratings of student ability and expect people to accept them. Indeed, they do so knowing full well that students, other schools, and employers do in fact accept grades. Among ourselves, then, apparently we should "[acknowledge] the indeterminacy of meaning and the importance of individual and communal interpretations and values" (101). But to the outside world, we may still unproblematically display our judgments in simplistic grades—and indeed, if anything, must resist norming them so that they might mean the same thing in different classrooms. What Huot does not acknowledge is that teachers and theorists must already make compromises with social construction, since so much of what we do—like grading—requires us to step outside of our social constructionist (and Romantic) roles. Instead of making this negotiation a feature of our disciplinary conversation, theorists like Huot instead simply skip over discussing the parts of our tasks as teachers that are simply too hard to reconcile. Furthermore, the larger project in which Huot is engaged betrays his own faith that composition scholars can indeed make meaning together in ways that go beyond our local sites and contexts. After all, if all knowledge of any kind is always only local and contextual, then nobody could ever say we should publish and use any particular theory of writing assessment, either.

The consequence has been a burgeoning field of assessment, but curiously very little new information about how it is that students become better writers or what teaching practices produce that result. Of course, those who follow social constructionist orthodoxy must accuse us of "positivism" for even considering the idea that there is such a thing as "better" writing outside a local rhetorical context. But there's the problem. If our discipline really has no way of saying what is better or worse in any way that transcends the local site, then we have no means by which to critique anything at all that teachers might do in their classes. Furthermore, it then becomes obvious that, even locally, any attempt to enforce a course-wide policy must be similarly flawed; after all, the most refined and accurate local rhetorical site will be the individual classroom. Indeed, in that every individual has a different subjective and cultural location and a different construct of the rhetorical situation, the students themselves are the only ones who can genuinely assess their own work.

Hence, we can see how the social constructionist paradigm, carried to its own logical conclusions, produces Romantic, individualist results. In the most Romantic of senses, WPAs become the heroes of the program, teachers the heroes of their classes, students the heroes of their writing. Of course, in practice what happens is that whoever in that chain has the most authority "wins," and gets to declare what will be valued. Or, all too often, authority has its center in some other social location, like an excessively literature-focused English department or a more fully committed positivist somewhere higher up in the academic administration. Yet much as compositionists complain whenever this authority gets located somewhere outside the ranks of those who understand composition well, the ideas underpinning social constructionist assessment theory itself will rule out any resort to studies or measures that might contradict the narrative offered by those with the power to impose it. The discourse community in charge, after all, has spoken. Ultimately, being a form of Romanticism in denial, social construction produces results that simply vacillate

between the Romantic and the Classical, depending on whether the individual or the system happens to have more power to define a satisfactory result.

Irreducibility and Inaction

Essentially, social constructionist assessments have not had the practical effects they surely intend. Because such methods are non-replicable and offer no measurable outcomes, they are neither transferable nor appealing to anyone beyond the relatively small circle of those already immersed in composition scholarship. The resulting vacuum has been filled by genuinely positivistic, objectivist assessments sold by testing companies that do not share our qualms. We rightly decry these assessments, but the problem is that our field's critique of such poor methods errs on the Romantic side of the Classic/Romantic split. Social constructionists are correct in pointing out that these assessments are reductive and harmful, but they tend to attribute these flaws to the mere existence of Classical, reductive elements in the assessments—the data, the numbers, etc—rather than anything else.

The problem with this critique is twofold. First, our critique of bad assessments by outsiders is weakened by our outright rejection of all things Classical. Instead of advocating for better assessment methods, social constructionists make the unpalatable (especially to even well-intentioned outsiders) argument that data-driven assessment itself is reductive and wrongheaded. For those on the periphery of our field, such a sentiment paints composition scholars as an eccentric band of Romantics, not as professionals with any authority worth heeding. Secondly, the inability of the field as a whole to create a cache of knowledge of what works in the classroom has left teachers with little to guide their practice. Hence, writing teachers must find guidance elsewhere—be it a from a textbook, a common syllabus, sets of rules and regulations, or from simple social pressure. As should surprise no one, the two most common kinds of social pressure lead to an "anything goes" Romanticism and a current-traditional Classicism—too often in a combination that says, "Leave me alone in my classroom (to teach grammar)!" Social construction, and its assessment scholarship, advocates for a highly responsive understanding of student writing in relationship to the social sphere. Yet the radical Romanticism of such scholarship restricts its influence, which has had the practical effect of leaving huge swaths of the field untended and therefore vulnerable to outside assessors, uninformed administrators, and individual teachers whose classroom practices reflect the uncurated range of the history of composition studies—from retrograde grammar drills to literature study to pure cultural studies to expressing the inner self, and everywhere in between.

Pirsig's *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* again provides a useful gloss on composition's current impasse. The book is both the memoir of the author's motorcycle trip with his son and a work of original philosophy concerned with fully exploring why people get locked into certain styles of thought. Pirsig's early travel companions, John and Susan, refuse to work on the mechanics of their motorcycle and demonstrate a resistance to technology in general. Pirsig begins his exploration by fully describing the differences between the Romantic mindset, which describes his friends, and the Classical mindset, which often is seen in good technicians and scientists. Pirsig, using a handful of sand as a metaphor, describes how differently Classicists and Romantics approach understanding.

The handful of sand looks uniform, at first, but the longer we look at it the more

diverse we find it to be. Each grain of sand is different. No two are alike. Classical understanding is concerned with the piles and the basis for sorting and interrelating them. Romantic understanding is directed toward the handful of sand before the sorting begins. Both are valid ways of looking at the world although irreconcilable with each other (96-98).

Romantics, with their unwillingness to reduce phenomena into categories, instead describe all the ways the phenomena might be viewed. A student is both a student and a member of the classroom discourse community—the school as a whole, the region, the country, etc. The student is a gender, a race, a class, an age. Cultural, societal, familial, institutional pressures are all at work. The Romantic, however, does not make these observations to split the students into groups, but to simply describe the many facets of their situatededness. Huot refers to this large picture as "contextual integrity," which is notable for both its clear articulation of a Romantic value (the whole is more than the parts), and the whiff of ethical necessity. Pirsig points out that the Romantic can add to a description indefinitely, since any subject has an infinite context. As Pirsig writes, "You'd think the process of subdivision and classification would come to an end somewhere, but it doesn't. It just goes on and on" (96). Yet as Pirsig later points out, this worldview often produces a paralysis born of unsorted information:

> The overwhelming majority of facts, the sights and sounds that are around us every second and the relationships among them and everything in our memory...these have no Quality, in fact have a negative quality. If they were all present at once our consciousness would be so jammed with meaningless data we couldn't think or act. (400)

In the case of composition studies, we are overrun with the data of discrete observations that do not cohere into shared knowledge. Haswell's study of the 2004 CCCC conference found that of the 478 presentations, only 17 were RAD scholarship, the majority of such panels adding a tiny new facet to the contexual portrait of student writers. The problem with even these studies, as Haswell points out, is that they do not build on one another. He uses the 2004 article, "Redneck and Hillbilly Discourse in the Writing Classroom: Classifying Critical Pedagogies of Whiteness," as an example of scholarship that might add to the contextual picture of writers, but is not applicable beyond itself. The title typifies the hyper-specificity that often marks this scholarship, and while the article included observational data, it was not gathered using any classical methods. "[T]he data do not much help a scholar who might want to test or add to these facts," Haswell explains, "because there is no system by which to sample, elicit, and analyze student response" (202). His call for RAD scholarship is based on the fact that the field itself has not built any shared, systemic knowledge, only at best a small pile of one-offs hidden among a vaster pile of entirely un-RAD discussion.

Pirsig would argue that this result is typical of what a hardline Romantic would produce, since "Romantic Quality always correlates with instantaneous impressions"—the context as we see it, a specific moment in the discourse community (316). Social constructivist composition scholars constantly redraw the picture, with no bit of knowledge meaningfully building off the past or stretching into the future. Pirsig contrasts this approach with classical Quality, which is "concerned with more than just the present.

The relation of the present to the past and future [is] always considered"(316). Science is Classical because knowledge comes from data that are accumulated and tested over time, so that each study adds to a narrative line of understanding. In composition, the research is instead a collection of snapshots—of a specific discourse, of a local context, of a cultural moment. The paralysis of the field that so frustrates Haswell is born of composition's unwillingness to review its store of knowledge, to find what is worthy of continued testing and study. The field, Haswell warns, is at risk of stagnation or even obsolescence because of this refusal. Pirsig would agree. Under Romanticism, there is "no formal way of evaluating, no way of acknowledging this Quality...the entire train [of knowledge] has no way of knowing where to go" (363). Composition studies, through a somewhat unwitting championing of the Romantic over the Classical, is philosophically opposed to what is foundational to nearly every other academic discipline—summarizing what it already knows.

A Way Out: The Idea of Quality

Haswell's exhaustive study of the state of composition studies reveals two things: one, that the field is not aggregating its own knowledge, and two, that field indeed has a lot of knowledge. Composition studies remains a perpetually new field, not because it doesn't know enough, but because it has no apparatus for sorting through and verifying what it knows. Pirsig boils down the problem with being wed to such a Romantic, anti-objective style of thought: "If Quality is subjective, existing only in the observer, then this Quality that you make so much of is just a fancy name for whatever you like" (291). If social construction cannot produce aggregable and summarized findings, how can we know that the pedagogies or the scholarship is anything more than what that particular scholar liked? If we cannot test another's method or idea thereby applying its insights, how can we trust or make use of the insights? And how can we blame students for so often believing that our grades reflect simply how much we like them?

Using RAD scholarship more widely is the surface solution, yet this approach would not get at the root of the philosophical resistance that has thus far shut it out. Before scholars and journals in the field can generate a truly RAD project of inquiry, there needs to be a philosophical recalibrating on the most fundamental level. Social construction, as we have shown, is too limited a worldview to carry the profession forward. Yet part of the reason why "positivism" remains such a fear, even to those theorists not married to social construction, is that we do not have an alternative philosophy at the ready that can meaningfully incorporate Classical thought. A free-floating RAD scholarship, unattached to any compelling worldview, will make little systematic difference, despite the laudable recent increase in such scholarship. Social construction, despite its flaws, clearly still appeals to teachers and scholars, so the strongest option for a new epistemology is one that can fold in its best features while expanding the types of knowledge we can pursue.

Pirsig's notion of Quality offers a view of reality that is neither reductive nor meaninglessly expansive. It can be the backing for RAD and non-RAD scholarship. Most importantly, it provides a view of reality that makes discernment—the center of assessment and knowledge-making in general—central. We do not hold that Pirsig's Metaphysics of Quality, as the theory has come to be popularly labeled, is the only such solution; but

we do find it interestingly consistent to explore a potential solution that was originally worked out in the context of teaching composition—and calling it "rhetoric." After all, there remains keen value in attending to local contexts in all their particularity.

Pirsig's Metaphysics of Quality emerges slowly in the text of *Zen*. Because Quality aims to join Classical and Romantic thinking, Pirsig's groundwork involves debunking the perceived differences between the two. One of his first major sections leading into his idea of Quality is concerned with challenging the idea that the hard sciences are entirely objective, neutral, and mediated by facts. Essentially, Pirsig argues against the charge of positivism that so worries theorists like Huot. In his book, Huot contends that classical thinkers such as mathematicians ignore context and the importance of the observer, agreeing with Guba that science is "'context free,' because the laws revealed by this type of scientific method are held to be independent of the observer and the particular events in which they were discovered" (83).

Huot dismisses science as insensible to context in a few lines, and continues on as if the mattered is settled. Pirsig is puzzled by people like Huot who believe that science is simply an announced act of detached observation. He uses the mathematician Poincaré as one example of how classical thinkers nonetheless subjectively make choices based on context.

> [Mathematics] isn't merely a question of applying rules . . . . It doesn't merely make the most combinations possible. The combinations so obtained would be exceedingly numerous, useless and cumbersome. The true work of the inventor consists in choosing among these combinations is to eliminate the useless ones . . . . and the rules that must guide the choice are extremely fine and delicate. It's almost impossible to state them precisely; they must be felt rather than formulated. (342)

The selection of methods or facts or observations—a subjective act—is as critical the work of the sciences. The observer, unlike in Guba's formulation, is not independent from the observed. Yet if scientists and mathematicians select from reality, rather than simply apply rules, then how do they make their selections? What governs their decisions? And if composition studies were to use RAD methods, how could we be assured that we are choosing the right methods, the right facts to observe? Pirsig's central investigation in Zen is centered on questions like these, since neither the facts of the world nor the individual filtering of those facts seem to explain reality fully. He uses Poincaré's view of mathematical discovery as a critical clue. Poincaré was sure that the discoveries that he had made did not come from the facts alone, since the facts themselves didn't automatically produce a discovery. Instead, it was as if the more interesting and relevant facts eventually made themselves known and harmonized into an insight. There must be a unconscious element at play here:

> Poincaré then hypothesized that this selection is made by what he called the 'subliminal self' . . . . The subliminal self, Poincaré said, looks at a large number of solutions to a problem, but only the interesting ones break into the domain of consciousness. Mathematical solutions are selected by the subliminal self on the basis of 'mathematical beauty,' of the harmony of numbers and forms, of geometric elegance. (336)

Pirsig continues, challenging the idea of science's objectivity and hence pushing past Poincaré's ideas to begin a full articulation of Quality. Pirsig's Metaphysics of Quality has three main parts. First, it recasts reality not as a objective fact nor a subjective construct, but as a third entity, Quality, that is neither. The subjective and objective are not pitted against each other as incompatible worldviews. Instead, both are contained under Quality. The second piece of Pirsig's philosophy eliminates the romantic/classical dualism by showing that both are merely ways of reading the same Quality. Finally, Pirsig's Quality is dynamic and temporal. It exists in the moment-by-moment choices people make when ordering their world, the precise way subjective readings play off of objective facts. Quality is what drives us to choose the interesting facts, to make the discoveries that would be worthwhile to us just then. As Pirsig puts it, "Quality couldn't be independently related with either the subject or object but could be found *only in the relationship of the two with each other*. It is the point at which subject and object meet" (304).

Such a philosophy is difficult to summarize, but even this surface description has promising implications for composition studies. On a basic level, both RAD scholarship and scholarship concerned with student context could unproblematically coexist, since both are equally legitimate ways of confronting Quality. In fact, both styles of scholarship could more easily be seen as interchangeable lenses for viewing student writing, rather than competing visions of truth. Pirsig emphasizes the idea that even what appear to be natural or scientific laws are just the best—the most Quality—way of reading the world at the moment, discussing the idea that we can posit more than one geometry that seems to correspond with reality:

> One geometry cannot be more true than another; it can only be more *convenient.* Geometry is not true, it is advantageous. Poincaré then went on to demonstrate the conventional nature of other concepts of science, such as space and time, showing that there isn't one way of measuring these entities that is more true than another; that which is generally adopted is only more convenient. (337)

Scientific knowledge and Romantic insight act as complementary languages for understanding reality; neither are reality itself. This backs up Haswell's idea that RAD scholarship, far from being dry and positivist, is actually as just as dynamic and flexible as any other language. This is why RAD scholarship "may be feminist, empirical, ethonomethodological, contextual, action liberatory, or critical" (201). Beyond the versatility of what could be studied, the resulting data itself is plastic. The information "doesn't just lie there" but is "potentialized," its value being its "capacity for growth—its comparability, replicablility, and accruability" (202). The data that jump out at us—the surprising change in sentence length, the similarity of arguments in a certain region—would be the kinds of Quality facts that would lead to more studies and discoveries. Social constructionists see hard data as confining and controlling. But under the idea of Quality, we are in complete control of how we view the data, and the information itself will make its Quality known.

Pirsig's philosophy provides, among other things, a framework for valuing the intuition and the serendipity that accompanies intellectual discovery. In some ways, Quality validates what he calls "preintellectual reality," that Romantic sense of rightness.

The moment a teacher sees something striking in her classroom is just as much a part of Quality as reams and reams of numerical data about student writing. They are equally weighted, both parts of the same whole. The Quality is in how they interact. Perhaps the teacher's intuition led to a RAD study that others are building upon in their own classrooms. Or perhaps she consulted older data on student writing after her class, and her insight helped her see a trend in the numbers that no one else had. Under the idea of Quality, the Romantic and the Classic symbiotically move knowledge forward.

We need not turn only to Pirsig for such models, though we might pause to consider carefully the way forward suggested by a work that serves so well to diagnose the current problem. In ways far too involved to address here, strains of philosophical pragmatism urged by composition scholars such as Ann Berthoff and Thomas Kent have addressed these same problems in great detail—and in ways that should certainly give comfort to anyone who fears a lapse into outright positivism. What seems most clear is that the field needs to move on. Social construction has had its uses, but it has become too comfortable an oasis. It's time to pack up and move on down the road.

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