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### COLD PASTORAL

*The Moral Order of an Idealized Form*

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. . . *the Golden Age, a myth functioning as a memory.*

—Raymond Williams

Approaching the topic of WPAs and change from a pastoral perspective might strike readers as a bit far-fetched; the writing program is hardly known as a bucolic landscape. And yet WPAs are usually quite experienced with *paraklausithyron*—a song sung before a closed door; well versed in amoebian song—a contest of alternating strains in an argument batted back and forth, without clear resolution; and prone to extolling friendship as an absolute value springing from a need for help. These familiar moves are part of the pastoral form—a form that, over time, came to operate by conventions that displaced real social tensions with an ideal not only of order, but order of a certain kind as an unquestionable moral good. By virtue of his or her relation to an institutionally sponsored writing program, the WPA inhabits a version of the pastoral: housed within the writing program, the WPA directs a set of formal practices that are intended to rehearse and refine dominant cultural values that subvert material change. The work we do as WPAs can thus become surprisingly controversial, unintentionally contestatory, and (in some cases) the justification for vehement personal rebuke. By examining our pastoral functions, we might more easily come to see how proposing program changes based on the logic of research and theory can be institutionally recoded as the moral transgressions of a bad shepherd who betrays the kindly master and puts the flock at risk.

#### THE PROBLEMATIC NATURE OF WRITING PROGRAM CHANGE

The WPA is the physical emblem of the writing program, and that emblematic status can open us to often extremely painful attack when we assume that a primary function of the job is to be an agent of change. Thus the conventional piece of advice in WPA circles that we should

carefully choose our battles. Enacting such wisdom is problematic, however, since it is so difficult to know in advance when a given program decision will elicit a hostile response. The WPA who attempts to introduce changes in a writing program—be they curricular, pedagogic, evaluation-based, or otherwise administratively grounded—therefore faces what might be called a problem of perspective: as WPAs, we would do well to understand the place of the writing program not only in its local conditions but in larger systems of institutional and cultural power, since even apparently minor program changes can be interpreted as threatening challenges to dominant values. Such awareness might mean we are less likely to be blindsided by unexpectedly hostile resistance, and less likely to be immobilized by it when it occurs. It might also enable us to choose battles that can produce the foundation for substantive change—for what might be systemic change, as opposed to the “small victories” of administrative existence.

We logically look to the literature on writing program administration and politics to inform and guide our choices about instituting change and managing resistance. But we face a problem of perspective and hence methodology: if general rules apply only weakly to varying local conditions (a WPA truism), then the common situational approaches—the case studies of the Council of Writing Program Administrator’s Intellectual Work document, for instance (1998), or the descriptive problem-solution scenarios of texts such as Myers-Breslin’s edited collection, *Administrative Problem Solving for Writing Programs and Writing Centers* (1999)—necessarily require us to think about local conditions in ways that distort local realities, sometimes opening up fresh perspectives on them, certainly, but often providing riskily and unpredictably contingent acontextual frames for action at the local level. And so the WPA leadership role becomes even more bewildering by the apparently unstable conditions of reception we face, for what might count as a significant victory in one context is not even the source of a problem in another; what seems a modest programmatic change here is an almost unthinkable act in some programmatic elsewhere. Further complicating the mix, as we try to measure the impact of program changes, we necessarily circumscribe the object of study, for tracking its full effects even in a local situation is beyond our capability, and attempting to do so almost certainly reduces the significance of whatever we can claim.

An appealing metaphor to capture the complexity of the WPA’s relation to change might be a WPA ecology. But such a metaphor suggests a holistic system that, if it does not exclude, then certainly de-emphasizes

the powerful role dominant ideologies play in affecting our position as potential agents of change. Instead, as a way of understanding why introducing change in the writing program is often so unpredictable and resisted, I use Raymond Williams's study of the pastoral as a genre that evolved into a calcified form reproducing a hegemonic moral order, in order to understand the writing program less as an academic unit and more as a social genre, a conventionalized form in service of a cultural function. I move among the realms of our WPA conditions—the local, historical, theoretical, and individual—because the changes we have worked for or been forced to confront operate among them.

For new WPAs, this approach may seem far removed from more explicitly “applied” discussions of WPA work. It may also seem perversely pessimistic for an essay in a volume on change in the writing program. But I'm unwilling to celebrate those small victories that are the typical results of pragmatic approaches to WPA work without also recognizing their insufficiency and typical inability to produce systemic change. The celebration of small victories can reinforce a reluctance to seek change in the form of the writing program as an institutional structure. I'm equally unwilling to be blithely optimistic about WPA work in the face of the powerful cultural forces we must challenge for significant change to be possible. I acknowledge my own bias here: I believe that the writing program has a more powerful cultural than academic agenda, that the WPA is as much directed by this agenda as he or she is the director of it, and that real change can follow only if we recognize that the form of the writing program is conservative and inherently hostile to systemic change. How-to approaches to writing program administration can have (intentionally or not) a historically sanitizing effect, erasing the cultural critiques that should inform writing program work. The historical and theoretical critiques of composition practices that scholars such as James Berlin, Susan Miller, Sharon Crowley, and Donna Strickland have produced form necessary contexts for otherwise strictly administrative strategies for change.

At the same time, some WPA-led program changes have rich potential for transforming conventional writing program practices. I do not intend a binary of minor/major changes, but a sense (for new WPAs especially) of a Geertz-like “thick” context for battle-choosing, one that includes a sense of ideological along with pragmatic effects. Like the pastoral itself, the writing program has become a commonly practiced form, with defining figures and motifs, providing an apparent connection between high culture and the lower orders. Williams's study of the

pastoral form deconstructs this connection, and it is this aspect of his literary analysis that might help inform a “thick” reading of our own programs.

#### THE FUNCTIONS OF PASTORAL FORM

An early chapter in Williams’s *The Country and the City* is, coincidentally, entitled “A Problem of Perspective.” In it he examines the pastoral, the literary form constructed to represent the virtues of rural life, derived from Hesiod’s *Works and Days*, a kind of agricultural calendar, and formalized by Theocritus in Hellenic Greece of the third century BCE. Williams attempts to locate in historical time this pastoral “way of life” handed down over the centuries, a “country life” (1973, 9) of rural virtues lost through the changes wrought by modern practices. As he moves backward in time in search of sources he discovers, of course, that this golden age recedes with him, that its values “mean different things at different times” (12); as Derrida has put it, there is no plenitude of “before.” Poetic characteristics may shift with the tastes of the time period: the shepherd becomes Wordsworth’s highland lass or Arnold’s scholar gypsy. But the function of the pastoral form does not change: it remains as the embodiment of a cultural argument that an ideal order once existed, one that rightly ordered human relations and protected natural goodness against forces of destructive change. The form supports any dominant ideology that grounds its authority in a fictional, idealized past.

Williams shows the pastoral form is not a historically locatable natural phenomenon but an invention of the “city,” the site of cultural production and, in later centuries, the center of economic production as well. Williams argues that while Theocritean idylls and later Virgilian eclogues (two of the earliest pastoral forms) offered significantly idealized and distorted representations of actual country life (shifting the metaphoric landscape from farming to shepherds and their flocks, for example), both Theocritean and Virgilian pastoral nonetheless includes representations of economic, cultural, and political tensions of the poets’ times, and both retain a materially recognizable representation of the rural. These early pastoral forms, he argues, served as a vehicle for imagining a future different from the present condition (even as they led, in Virgil’s case, to the creation of the trope of Arcadia, “a magical invocation of a land which needs no farming” [17]). But later pastoral forms elided even a reductive material connection to country life and its tensions, privileging instead the vision of a future that would “restore” the “golden age” of a lost past:

[E]ven in these [Greco-Roman] developments . . . which inaugurate tones and images of an ideal kind, there is almost invariably a tension with other kinds of experience. . . . The achievement, if it can be called that, of the Renaissance adaptation of just these classical modes is that, step by step, these living tensions are excised, until there is nothing countervailing, and selected images stand as themselves: not in a living but in an enamelled world. (18)

Losing their dialectical element, later forms of pastoral erase political tension and material realities, depicting instead “untroubled rural delight and peace.” The voice that represents the “country”—those outside the sphere of cultural power—gradually gives way to the voice of the “city,” the cultural center. Not surprisingly, the voice of the country soon speaks only in ways that serve the cultural center’s values.

Tying the eradication of social tension to the pastoral genre’s use in a culture whose “city” center has shifted to capitalist and colonialist enterprise, Williams demonstrates how its form, with its now state-apparatus function, allows some changes, resists others, and ultimately calcifies in relation to one dominant ideological system. In his history of pastoral, we arrive, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, “at the decisive transition when [the generic conventions] have been relocated, in a new ideology, in the country-house.” (22) We see, in other words, a form that assimilates difference and tension by invoking a mythical golden age and set of virtues, subsequently colonizing this redefined country for its own purposes and reproduction.

Like the prototypical writing program, the early pastoral consisted of a real world and an imaginary ideal, with a myth of return as its warrant. Here I think of Mina Shaughnessy’s *Errors and Expectations* (1977) as one statement of early writing program practices in service of a return to mythologized standards; or many of the documents John Brereton has collected in *The Origin of Composition Studies in the American College* (1995) in which composition courses are premised on a recapturing of prelapsarian linguistic excellence; or the more overtly nationalist rhetoric of the state-sponsored Indian schools (see Enoch 2002) of the nineteenth century (which are, or ought to be, equally a part of writing program history as Harvard’s Subject A is). These program narratives capture the real cultural conflict of class, race, and linguistic backgrounds; we see and hear the struggling open-admissions students in Shaughnessy’s text and the resistant voice of Indian school critics such as Zitkala Sa. But in both the literary genre and the writing program as a social genre, this connection to material conditions loses over time its

former dialectical character, and both become a form overdetermined by the self-interests of a particular ideology. We see the form of the writing program come to speak for and of students, to commodify them via conventional program practices, and to reconstruct their needs and values to be more in line with the cultural authority. The institutional writing program is the “country-house” next step, transforming earlier writing program versions that distorted but nonetheless included student voices and difference.

Williams’s painstaking analysis of the pastoral genre thus offers us a useful interpretive model for exploring how the genre of the writing program can be used to suppress tension and contain actual change, even as program form seems to evolve. By creating and maintaining as its referent a “golden age” to be reclaimed, the writing program as a social genre ultimately allies itself with a mythically traditional moral order. Like the pastoral, the writing program points to an idealized social realm that validates not the tension of competing linguistic and cultural communities but a golden age of past and potential linguistic purity, where language and culture were and will once again be natural and simple, in a seamlessly pristine interrelationship. Modern writing programs evoke this Arcadian landscape through their generic operations, testing and placing students in courses that will cleanse them of difference, as Miller (1991) has argued; schooling and evaluating them in relation to the mythical past which their essays—their written and corrected productions—then help to memorialize, charging them with its (re)propagation.

#### TRANSGRESSIONS OF A MORAL ORDER

The ideological functions of writing program practices seem especially important to recognize in this time of increased attention to diversity in higher education. Difference and tension are what the genre disallows; the former must remain at the thematic level, in order to contain the latter. This process of assimilating difference is akin to Williams’s notion of the “charity of consumption, not of production.” The writing program promises access to cultural capital, the country house of the mainstream, but transforms resistance and so avoids systemic change. In its charitable provision of access, it consumes difference and reproduces the cultural values of the institution that houses and contains it. Change in theory, curriculum, or pedagogy is assimilated into the traditional form of the writing program. The individual writing program may evolve, but its generic activities continue to reproduce

traditional values, and the future they point to inevitably references a mythical past. The five-paragraph theme may be nearly universally disdained, for instance, but the epistemology that produced it remains powerfully present. Writing process pedagogy can be championed, but its social-epistemic theory becomes reduced to prescriptive steps in an arhetorical conventionalizing formula, the mimetic mode displacing the rhetorical. Multiculturalism can be embraced, but it takes its place as a thematic addition to a canonical curriculum, a mythical notion of cultural unity, or simply a theatrical representation of cultural difference (the guest speaker, or attendance at a campus “cultural” event). This same hegemonic imperative to consume difference shapes the WPA’s landscape, and it accounts for much of the tension that is (dis)placed onto the position. From this perspective, change—minor as it may seem out of a given context—becomes an enormous and usually self-consuming achievement, an evisceration of dialectical elements resulting in an enameling of curriculum, pedagogy, and politics.

Jane Hindman, in an essay on liberatory teaching and assessment, has examined how one common writing program practice has helped ensure the status quo of program effects. In liberatory teaching, the pedagogical goals are at odds with the institutional means of measuring instructional success, she argues. In liberatory pedagogy classrooms, students may feel threatened, resentful, uncertain, *untaught*; often, students come to value the critical methods they have encountered only after the course has ended, as this knowledge begins to intersect with their experience, as bell hooks has claimed. The liberatory teacher can logically expect negative response to her and her course, but institutional practices convert such response into negative instructor evaluations—a finger-wagging *bad teacher, bad teacher* moral judgment. Hindman argues “that distress [over negative response] is precisely what some of our professional practices perpetuate: composition studies inculcates student-centered and/or liberatory pedagogies in its literature as well as in most teacher-training programs; meanwhile, institutional reliance on conventional, performance-model teaching evaluation methods countermand that scholarship and training” (2000, 15). The system reflexively consumes the practices that threaten its privileging of instructional power.

And so we arrive at a WPA dilemma. As Hindman argues, “No matter what we may profess . . . our practices prove what we are for or against in the long run. We must recognize the habits and values we inductinate in our practices” (25). But working to change indoctrinating practices means sponsoring practices that (re)introduce into the writing

program tensions of a social and political order, and we cannot be sure how change will be received. We can see an example of unpredictable response to change in a conventional writing program practice—placement—in the smooth implementation of directed self-placement (DSP) in one location but resistance when the same program was introduced in a different set of local conditions. What emerges from the two cases is that, while friendly subversion can in certain circumstances be possible and practical, a dominant ideology of the student as object of institutional consumption reasserts itself when the same practice is exported to a different location.

DSP, as theorized and implemented by Daniel J. Royar and Roger Gilles (1998) at Grand Valley State University, is a major subversion of conventional placement practice in that students have the authority to place themselves into what they decide is the appropriate writing course at their institution. This significant change in practice—one with great potential for weakening the ideological formation of students as incapable, unknowing objects of program processes—happened quite smoothly in Royar and Gilles’s program, as they report it. In their account, the program’s description is cloaked, in a sense, in the rhetoric of pragmatism and use of the familiar WPA rhetoric of efficiency:

[A]dministrators are . . . pleased with DSP. Admission directors don’t have to help organize placement exams or explain to students why they need to begin their college career with a not-for-college-credit course. They are pleased to invite potential students to compare the way we and other schools treat their incoming students: we provide options, while other schools take them away. And of course, unlike placement exams, DSP costs nothing. . . . (67)

As presented, this break with conventional practice and also its ideological framing offers almost a consumerist argument for DSP: admission administrators “invite potential [student-customers] to “compar[ison shop]” in order to see which “options” they can get for the same sticker price. This promotional practice is strictly value-added—it “costs nothing.” With its potential to undermine a foundational ideology of students as objects of direction, DSP is a satisfying reversal in which the buyer should but does not beware, and instead accepts a writing program innovation that dislodges the familiar as natural and necessary. DSP empowers students, at least potentially, to avoid a class- and race-based gatekeeping system. In an admittedly small part of the larger hegemonic structure, this gatekeeping function has been dismantled, apparently without significant resistance.



Interestingly, however, the site of resistance can travel: the apparently minor change that successfully takes form in one program may, if enacted elsewhere, lead to direct or indirect countersubversion. David Blakesley offers a brilliant analysis of this traveling resistance in his *WPA: Writing Program Administration* essay, “Directed Self-Placement in the University.” Because placement is a “process of socialization,” he argues, “WPAs may have greatly underestimated the ethical and moral complexity of writing placement” (2002, 10). WPAs who have found themselves in battle, chosen or not, with institutional values might see their situation clearly described in Blakesley’s account of his efforts as WPA to introduce DSP on his former campus. If our disciplinary authority is tied to ethos, as he argues— “[T]o those who don’t share our disciplinary history, discipline-specific knowledge functions ethically rather than logically, establishing the intellectual integrity of the WPA more than it might rationalize or justify specific programmatic change” (13)—the attacks we experience are indeed personal; what we see as reasonable and supported claims only serve to give us credibility as speakers, not agents with disciplinary authority. In the cold pastoral of the writing program, our authority is of a moral order. Our authority is based in the community’s consideration of us. When changes we have initiated or supported threaten the moral order, the charity of consumption that is the writing program’s moral agenda in the institution is upended; as Blakesley’s analysis of resistance in one campus entity (the Center for Basic Skills) so clearly shows, we have produced instead of consumed students. We have empowered them, ceded authority to them, and allowed them to participate in formerly privileged practices—whereas earlier models of placement would have consumed them, transformed them into basic writers, English as a Second Language (ESL) students, or other commodified bodies to be shipped to established program niches. When changes we have promoted strike others outside of the discipline as dangerous, threatening, or inappropriate, then we are seen to have personally transgressed, and so to have ceded our moral right to influence policy. Donna Strickland’s historical study of composition work and writing programs (2001) shows them to be institutionally allied with the labor of correctness rather than intellectual labor, the outcome of the historical pattern of developing writing programs separate from the “head” work of literature. WPA-led change can thus itself strike those outside the program as incorrect, arrogant, transgressive, even insulting in its violation of conventional boundaries, justifying rebuke and requiring active realignment in the proper order of the

hierarchy in the name of standards, common sense, prudence, or some other naturalized “truth” or moral virtue.

New WPAs, entering the field or moving to new programs, may blunder into discovering this ethos- rather than discipline-based authority. Several years ago, as the newly appointed WPA in my former institution, I met with a group of faculty in other disciplines who were eager to expand a writing component model for their courses, to be taught by writing program faculty. When I voiced my concern that the writing component and faculty member can easily become secondary appendages in such a model, a professor of history gasped, then screamed out, “*What am I hearing?*” What she was hearing, obviously, was an ideological position that broke with the epistemological order of disciplines and authority, knowledge and rank, and the status quo of the writing program genre. She grasped immediately the logic of my response, and equally quickly and automatically translated it into a moral challenge, one that sincerely and deeply offended her. My goal had been to participate in establishing a sense of shared community with colleagues interested in writing instruction (although as a kind of day labor, as I later realized). After this “casual” lunch, I saw entrance to this community, for the exposed ideological reasons, neither likely nor clearly desirable. In retrospect this blunder helped avoid an apparent coalition that would, I believe, have worked against the program’s later self-directed redefinition of its courses as rhetorically based (a “minor victory”), but which also made for real difficulties in advancing writing across the curriculum. Threatening program changes were effectively contained.

Like choosing one’s battles, the kind of coalition-building WPAs are advised to do in any attempted program innovation is a much more formidable task than it first appears to be. As we see in Blakesley’s discussion of his attempts to include stakeholders in the DSP program planning, the WPA is enmeshed in a process of gaining the assent of others to dislodge the status quo and implement a moral reordering, even if neither WPA nor stakeholder fully recognizes the task as such. While the usual diction of “stakeholders,” “community,” and the WPA’s “people skills” are part of such an engagement, these local behaviors connect to much less well-defined, less-easily locatable, and much more culturally important practices and ideological imperatives. Blakesley writes, “[W]ho would imagine that writing placement itself could carry with it such wide-ranging questions about identity, the role of the individual in society, or the function of institutions?” (10). He acknowledges that as he sought to implement the DSP program, he “underestimated

the degree to which placement itself (and thus any changes [he] might instigate) functioned in the wider institutional context as the expression of power and a symptom of the institution's normalizing desire" (12).

#### WPAS AS DIALECTICAL CHANGE AGENTS

Sharon Crowley has written a powerful polemic toward ending the universal composition requirement (1998). Hers is a proposal that, if promoted by a WPA as an actual program revision, would clearly be in many departments a chosen battle of a spectacular order (which is not a criticism but an acknowledgment of the deeply entrenched nature of the writing program's ideological functions as she analyzes them), one that would almost certainly disrupt the writing program as a conservative genre by fundamentally altering its institutional functions.

Clearly, less obviously spectacular but nonetheless potentially foundational innovations such as DSP have the potential to undermine the writing program's ideological functions because they assist in abolishing the program structures and practices that perform conservative, repressive work. The agenda of a WPA change agent might be to support program changes that are potentially structural and systemic rather than static—changes in which the program form is filled with shifting content, but its ideological function remains intact. If we can help deconstruct common program practices that form the elements of writing programs generically, we can undertake program changes that reintroduce difference and tension as dialectical elements. Crowley's suggestion that the usual first-year course sequencing be abolished and replaced with survey, genre, and theory courses in rhetoric-composition is one such curricular innovation that can possibly take place over time, reordering the work of the program in relation to ideological functions. Incorporating alternative discourses, including the retheorized notions of personal writing that Hindman and others have advocated, into a program's curricular learning outcomes has a potentially dialectical effect, influencing pedagogical approaches and instructor-student relations. We might see the task of WPA leadership as a matter of identifying such moments of the potential interpellation of difference; as Cain and Kalamaras put it,

[T]he site where the work of all WPAs begins [is] in the improvisatory and conditional nature of [WPA] decision-making and action. Improvisation is a matter of drawing upon as many pre-existing forms as possible in order to create, within a particular moment in time, a new form that reflects as well as responds to conditions that do not easily fit within conventional categories.

But in order for the improvisation to work, one must first have access to many different, even competing forms of thought from which to draw upon. (1999, 56)

Their words suggest that we inhabit the writing program not as a country house, but as a contact zone.

In her June 29, 2002, contribution to Duane Roen and Joseph Janangelo's WPA "signature project" presented at the 2002 Conference of the Council of Writing Program Administrators (for which WPAs on the WPA listserv were invited to submit a brief description of the program features or projects they felt most significantly identified their work in the WPA position) Rebecca Moore Howard wrote,

My signature project is to establish our introductory curriculum as a dialectic between disciplinary and public desires for writing instruction. Not as a place for nor a result of dialectic, but as itself a dialectic. The curriculum necessarily has fixed perimeters (grading guidelines, course requirements, etc.), but if it is itself a stable product, it does a disservice to the discipline of composition and rhetoric or to the public (academic or larger public) that endorses and sponsors its work. The desires of those two constituencies are often conflicting and irreconcilable; no fixed compromise between them is satisfactory. Hence the need for dialectic—not the product of nor place for dialectic, but dialectic itself, in the curriculum.

Howard's response embodies writing program administration as a contact zone whose purpose is to foreground competing ideologies and to place in creative tension the writing values of the program, institution, and larger public realms, reactivating the writing program genre's capacity to connect practices to real social conflicts.

Successful WPA-led innovations such as Howard's dialectical curriculum or Royar and Gilles's DSP are evidence that such changes can happen—sometimes smoothly, sometimes with but despite resistance. Without the WPA's critical questioning of common practices in the status quo writing program, we direct an endless pursuit of a mythical Golden Age and endorse an epistemology that, like Keats's Grecian urn, a "Cold Pastoral," utters the decree that "'Beauty is truth, truth beauty'—that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know." Unless WPAs become change agents, we valorize the assimilation of difference in a charity of consumption, and we serve the idealized order of a calcified hegemonic form.