Book Review

Thomas P. Miller. *The Evolution of College English: Literacy Studies from the Puritans to the Postmoderns*. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2011. 344 pp. Paper $27.95.

This remarkable work of disciplinary history completes the project Thomas P. Miller began with his award-winning book, *The Formation of College English: Rhetoric and Belles Lettres in the British Cultural Provinces* (1997). Although *The Formation of College English* sought the discipline's historic origins, *The Evolution of College English* sets out to understand how, in the North American context, the discipline evolved over 300 years to the point where it is now defended by the Modern Language Association on the grounds of its "uselessness." How do we get from rhetoric and *belles lettres* to uselessness? And, is there an alternate future ahead for a discipline that has adopted a principled stance against all forms of utility?

Miller is not the first to set out to tell the story of the evolution of College English; indeed, his book maintains a steady dialogue with—and is best read alongside—Gerald Graff's *Professing Literature* (University of Chicago, 1997). What Miller makes quite clear is that "College English" was never "a discipline," per se, but rather has become, over time, the name for a wide range of commitments related to literacy broadly conceived. One of these commitments, to be sure, includes "professing literature," but that is just one corner of a discipline Miller prefers to call literacy studies. The other corners are language studies (including linguistics), English education, and writing studies (including both creative and technical writing). And what *The Evolution of College English* does quite elegantly is show why one corner or another of Miller's four-cornered literacy studies gained prominence over a given stretch of decades, altering what the study of English meant from one generation to the next.

All histories are interested, and it is one of Miller's virtues as an historiographer that he openly states his interests early on: his goal is not to retell a history of the discipline as either the movement from one grand theorist to the next or as the falling away from some original commitment to the study of literature. Rather, Miller puts the teacher at the center of his history because, for him, the teacher is a figure who encompasses all who have ever worked in the field, whether the field is defined as literature, language, English education, or writing, and whether or not the individual being discussed at any given moment was a researcher (p. 23). Delightfully, Miller opens his history by foregrounding Ben Franklin's desire, as an autodidact, to bring the

"common people" along by shifting the educational emphasis away from a rigid classicism to see the study of English as preparation for public life (p. 84). But, this argument for English, which sought to link composition, rhetoric, and oratorical skill with the study of history, politics, and science, was erased by the Morrill Act of 1862, which created vocationally focused land grant colleges and placed "the liberal arts on a higher plain divorced from the menial concerns of working people" (p. 123).

This divide between education for personal enrichment and education for practical application is, from Miller's perspective, the unnecessary constant that runs the full course of the history of the discipline. There have been, over time, multiple opportunities to bring the discipline's four corners together under the same big tent. Miller singles out the work of Kenneth Burke as representing the discipline's most significant lost opportunity: "Burke's rich engagement with the pragmatics of symbolic action provides perhaps the best example of how much the discipline lost by reducing rhetoric to methods for teaching marginalized courses in syntactic proprieties, while at the same time isolating literary studies from the social uses of literacy" (p. 170). While a broader disciplinary interest in pragmatics and civic engagement did briefly hold sway decades later during the rise of cultural studies in the 1980s, by the end of the twentieth century, College English was back to being primarily understood as literary study. For those on the inside, the accompanying drop in student enrollment was best understood, according to a 2002 Association of Departments of English Committee Report on the English Major that Miller cites, as evidence of increased "selectivity." This strange, self-serving assessment, Miller notes, "made sense from the perspective of those who worked in highly selective institutions, who could afford to look down on the vulgarity of the public in the ways that literary critics often have" (pp. 213–14).

The final chapter of *The Evolution of College English*, "Why the Pragmatics of Literacy Are Critical," is sure to become standard reading in graduate programs in rhetoric and composition because it charts a way for the discipline's four corners to coexist in newly constituted Departments of Literacy. In such departments, it would be possible to "come to terms with the fact that the interactive technologies that are often identified with the decline of reading have popularized writing in ways that could expand programs of study" (p. 231). Miller argues that emphasizing teaching as the center of the discipline and, at the same time, actively organizing for teacher's rights would go a long way toward dismantling a model of professionalism that "excludes the majority of our coworkers from full standing in our field, and also isolates all of us from the rest of the educational system" (p. 240).

Other futures are possible, of course, but Miller's book makes clear that whatever vision of the future we end up hoping for will always be inextricably tied to the kind of history we write. For those who work in rhetoric and composition, Miller's vision, which emphasizes pragmatics, teachers, and classroom practice, is sure to be appealing; at the same time, his history has shown that teachers from the discipline's other three corners (literary and cultural studies, language studies, and English education) have oscillated between being attracted to and repulsed by a vision of College English as the cornerstone of General Education. Given the trends Miller identifies in his final chapter, which include technological transformation and a shrinking job market, it is a safe bet to say that, whatever College English becomes in the decades ahead, it will not be the result of a conscious choice by its practitioners so much as it will be the result of a series of disciplinary adaptations to an evolving political climate that deems public higher education to be an unwarranted public expense.

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