One

Lying Cretans, or the Paradox of Critical Thinking

> "For the contest is great, my dear Glaucon," I said, "greater than it seems—this contest that concerns becoming good or bad—so we mustn't be tempted by honor or money or any ruling office or, for that matter, poetry, into thinking that it's worthwhile to neglect justice and the rest of virtue."
>
> —*The Republic of Plato*

An Aura of Suspicion

What is this "contest" that Socrates considers here—this struggle between "becoming good or bad" cast as a test of our individual character and collective will? What kind of contest is this that demands that we remain resolute against, not just the enticements of wealth and fame, but also that least likely of temptations, poetry? Are we not more accustomed to seeing poetry presented as a palliative that might help restore our fallen spirit but which, out of sloth or some other vice, we resist taking? And if poetry (here a metaphor for all of literature and perhaps aesthetic experience, even feeling, as well) is the enemy, then who are our allies, if not some form of writing or thinking that is decidedly unpoetic, unliterary, anti-aesthetic—or,

stated positively, some form of writing and thinking that is determinedly analytical or critical? If Socrates' concern is the same as ours—the long-standing tension between critical and aesthetic thinking—then is there not much for us to learn in where his real interests lie, perhaps less with logic, rational control, or objectivity (three things long associated with critical thinking) than with matters of ethics and specifically with the overriding demand that we reform how we live?

The call for a critical pedagogy, as expressed here in one of its earliest forms, appears to be fundamentally more concerned with ethical reform than social analysis: more concerned with the good than the true. Its motive seems to be less to understand the world than to resist it, as the first crucial step in changing it presumably by replacing current practices with better ones, namely, those that move us closer to the ideal of universal justice. When the issue is justice, in Socrates' words, "becoming good or bad"—replacing the unjust world we all know with something better—can aesthetic questions relating to the emotive state of readers be seen as anything other than self-indulgence, a form of moral laxity and corruption?

Yet what a strange, frightening world Socrates depicts—this warlike world of allies and enemies, with the decadence of poetry associated with indulgence and pitted against the self-denial of resistance, the right living of critical thought! What an odd stance for philosophy, we may wonder, with its apparent concern for objectivity! Are we wrong to suppose that Plato, philosopher and author of *The Republic*, in this passage is more interested in promoting virtue than truth, or is critical truth even here best seen as an arm in the battle for social change, progress?

Is not the principal question we are raising one of motives, and of trust? Can we finally trust the truthfulness of a philosopher, or an educator, whose main concern seems to be largely with moral reform, that is, more with changing the world than with understanding who we are? Or to focus more directly on the concerns of this essay, just what are we to make of language educators who laud either the ethical value or the objectivity of critical analysis over the dangers and misrepresentations of literature, and in some extreme cases, of reading and writing themselves? Just how are we to respond, for example, to an impassioned book like J. Elspeth Stuckey's *The Violence of Literacy* that attacks the tyranny of modern

language study and the educational system organized to train people to read and even write books like her own? Are we not in danger of falling into the classic paradox of the Cretan philosopher who warns us about the lack of trustworthiness of people from Crete? Is not Stuckey's book a type of warning about Cretans, or English teachers, from a fellow resident of Crete—in this particular case arguing that literacy is "a system of oppression that works against entire societies as well as against certain groups within given populations and against individual people" (64)?

One way out of the paradox of the Cretan philosopher and hence to a better understanding of the current pedagogic conflict between critical analysis and aesthetic expression may be to recognize the two different ways of viewing Stuckey's assertions about language. On the one hand, there is the truth of the utterances themselves, what might be called the *phenomenological claim* that each assertion makes on us by holding up something before us that strikes us as truthful. "Ah, yes," we say, "here's an insight: Now I can see that reading and writing teachers, like Cretans, really are a deceptive group." In understanding the utterance we feel enlightened; in focusing on the text itself, we trust its speaker as a spokesperson for truth, ignoring whether or not she too is a teacher of reading and writing or, in the case of the ancient paradox, the philosopher's own place of origin. Here we believe, logical consistency notwithstanding, that certain truths—perhaps ones uttered by individuals with a special status, such as philosophers or authors—have a universal or transcendent quality that prevents them from being entirely reducible to the circumstances in which they were generated. As receivers of such a phenomenological claim, we shed much of our skepticism; we believe in the value of the message and subsequently trust the messenger, not because we know the person's profession or origin, but as a source of an insight that we ourselves find valuable.

On the other hand, we can have a quite different relationship to this assertion, one based not on passive acceptance of the phenomenological claim but on our active ability to judge the validity of the claim based on an expanded knowledge of the world. In this alternative mode, grasping the phenomenological claim of the text is only a first step in true understanding. We then must transform that first insight into a more rational basis for our acting in the world: "I'm not fooled," we respond; "the speaker is herself a writing

teacher or a Cretan, and, consequently, not trustworthy." Countering the seductive phenomenological claim of all statements is our own exercise of *critical control*, an exercise based on our ability to assess and then act on phenomenological claims, in this case, the self-referential claim that undermines the speaker's own trustworthiness. With critical control, the reader remains outside the spell of the text, informed but largely unmoved by the message itself and thus free to arrive at a conclusion about the relative untrustworthiness of all speakers and about the special untrustworthiness of this particular message.

What is important here is the broad status of the current assumption that our exercise of critical control is the stronger of two responses to the text, essentially working against, or enveloping, a text's phenomenological claim. First, it seems, we have to consider the claim of the text—a false allure that often would have us act against our own interests—then we have to exercise control over that claim. First we receive the warning about Cretans, then we act on it by questioning the speaker's reliability. The claim of the text appeals to our emotions in the private act of reading, whereas in exercising critical control we act rationally and in a wider social context, guided by a simple and direct message: Be wary. This contrast between the private emotional claim of the text on largely passive readers and the active, public critical control of readers permeates contemporary discussions of language education; or to anticipate the current position, the one persistent phenomenological claim of the profession—in conference after conference, lecture after lecture, and, most telling of all, book after book—is the primacy of critical control, the need for readers to get beyond the private, phenomenological claim of texts in order to exercise rational control over what they read and over cultural sign-systems in general. It is the need for suspicion before all texts, especially those most likely to act on us emotionally—what phenomenological critic Joel Weinsheimer refers to as the *classic*, the text that has an extrarational authority over us, that makes a claim on us, either by virtue of its status within a venerated tradition or by the intense emotional experience it engenders within us.

One such conference of language educators that emphasized this contrast between phenomenological claim and critical control was the English Coalition Conference, a gathering of sixty English educators who met at Wye Plantation in Eastern Maryland for

three weeks in the summer of 1987 and subsequently produced two books, an official publication edited by Richard Lloyd-Jones and Andrea Lunsford and subtitled *Democracy Through Language*, and an unofficial account, *What Is English?* by Peter Elbow. This conference represented all levels of language instruction, elementary through college, and what is important here is the high degree of consensus this diverse group reached about achieving and maintaining, not a delicate balance between phenomenological claim and critical control, or between poetry and criticism, but instead the dominance of the latter over the former. We need to see past the emotional appeal of texts, the conference participants tell us in a multitude of ways, to see such phenomenological claims for what they really are: a disguised and potentially injurious means of short-circuiting our ability to respond critically. At the heart of language is, not poetry, not the rich, imaginative sharing of momentary insights in the midst of our collective ignorance, but social interaction between individuals and groups with diverse and conflicting interests. Verbal meanings arise, not out of inspiration or personal reflection or even accident, but through purposeful, goal-directed social interaction—hence the oft-repeated imperative for students to become active language users, less by digging deep within their own experiences to explore what is rare and half-hidden, than by stiffening their resolve in dealing with others. The key admonition for students and all readers is not to be mislead by appearances but instead to root out other people's real motives and in so doing to take responsibility for their own language use—all as a means of learning that the principal use of language is not poetic expression, not delight or wonderment, but control of the world through critical reflection, often upon the workings of language itself. As Elbow states, "The way of talking that probably best sums up this idea for all participants is this: learning involves *making of meaning* and the *reflecting back on this process of making meaning*—not the ingestion of a list or a body of information. At all levels we stressed how this central activity is deeply social" (18).

The positive imagery here, of students as active builders versus passive consumers, people who "ingest" information as just another product, deflects real opposition (and therein weakening the very opposing voice it claims to be fostering) by caricaturing and eventually demonizing other long-standing and once dominant traditions of language learning that emphasized such things as poetic

expression, a distinct literary tradition (reading the classics), or even the far humbler work of mastering a distinct set of reading and writing skills. As we are thus told in the first principle of the Secondary Strand (the secondary school section), "Learning is the process of actively constructing meaning from experiences" (Lloyd-Jones and Lunsford 17), and, by definition, all nonactive learning becomes nonlearning. The new critical pedagogy, outwardly so insistent upon the value of questioning and open debate, seems to encourage an oversimplification that stifles debate by separating all parties into one of two camps: the elect—active, critical learners who question everything, except, perhaps, the need to question everything—and everyone else. Critical teaching, argue two forceful spokespeople for this new sensibility, Cy Knoblauch and Lil Brannon, "presumes that a critical citizenry, willing as well as able to take responsibility for the nation's future, is preferable to a passive, unengaged citizenry that lets government, business, and mass media do its thinking" (6).

James Berlin, in his posthumous *Rhetorics, Poetics, and Cultures*, echoes this call for an "education [that] exists to provide intelligent, articulate, and responsible citizens who understand their obligation and their right to insist that economic, social, and political power be exerted in the best interests of the community" (52). But what, we must ask, is the source of this new-found student power? Stand up for what is right, students are urged, but how are they to know what is right, other than to look around and see the obvious: Who is just and who is unjust? "We must take as our province the production and reception of semiotic codes," Berlin argues, "providing students with the heuristics to penetrate these codes and their ideological designs on our formation as subjects" (93). Is this anything more than the traditional claim of teachers who want to pass on their knowledge and wisdom to their students? "Attempts to negotiate and resist semiotically enforced cultural codes," Berlin adds, "can take place only when these codes can be named and interrogated in reading and writing, and this is a central role of the teacher in the literacy classroom" (112). Yet just how are we to do this as teachers—train students to use reading and writing to see the truth—unless, of course, the battle between justice and injustice, or between good and evil, is easily there for all to discern (that is, does not require any special reading and writing skills), if only people commit to seeing the world with a clean heart?

This new English teacher exhorts—and often seems to do little else: rarely in Berlin or in Knoblauch and Brannon are we given images of other well-established learning traditions that for centuries have helped students, albeit often indirectly, better understand the world and themselves. In the drive to reform the curriculum, anything that is not active resistance is reduced to blind, mindless passivity. Consequently, there are few positive representations of the value of meditation, introspection, and soul-searching. Rarely do we find praise for the discipline of solitary practice often involving a near-compulsive imitation that, counterintuitively, excites the youthful genius even more often than the drone. Advocates of restructuring literacy education under the banner of critical language largely ignore our delight in manipulating preexisting forms and patterns, our desire for that form of creativity that entails both variation and repetition, that is, for what Michael Oakeshott calls the "practical knowledge [that] can neither be taught nor learned, but only imparted and acquired" and then "only by continuous contact with one who is perpetually practicing it" (11). Nor are they likely to deal with the meditative repose associated with the loss of self that we all feel, as novices or experts, in mastering a well-established craft, from playing the violin to molding clay, in many cases often with the help of a master teacher.

Similarly, seldom do these reformers deal with the constructive, truth-finding roles of fantasy, fiction, misrepresentation, lying, and, above all, metaphor. Instead, we are given picture after picture of beginning students, not as clumsy neophytes, but as *active meaning-makers* who, much in the mold of budding social scientists, use language to investigate both the world at large (including the motives of their own teachers) and, more importantly, self-reflectively, language itself, in the process coming to see what many of their teachers are presumably blind to and hence has to be explained to them in pamphlet after pamphlet: how existing power relations permeate and control language use. Verbal meaning does not take place in a vacuum, we are repeatedly told, but in a social world characterized by the unequal and unjust distribution of power. To be *critical*, accordingly, is not an abstraction or a vague synonym with being objective—it is instead to be objective in a special way, namely, by recognizing and resisting this pervasive inequality and lack of social and economic justice, in part by insisting on the social negotiation of meaning as a key means of correcting broader social inequities.

The focus of English as an academic discipline becomes, not what it has been for most of its hundred plus years of academic existence, the study of aesthetically heightened texts—that is, the study of literature—but instead the general study of the *production* of literature and texts themselves, or what might be called the sociology of literature. "Above all," writes Elbow, our concern must be "about making knowledge rather than about studying already existing knowledge" (118). The idea of literature as a special category of writing grounded in aesthetic experience—long a mainstay of English as an academic discipline—is thus largely refuted by the English Coalition Conference. The older notion was present in the 1966 Dartmouth Conference, where literature was cited as a unifying force in modern life to be read "for its own sake, as its own reward," or in the words of British critic Denys Thompson, quoted by Herbert Muller (like Elbow, the unofficial recorder of events), as "stand[ing] for humanity at a time when the human values are not upheld, as they used to be, by religion and the home, or even by education itself as a whole" (77). Some twenty years later, Elbow tells us that "the question of literature was left strikingly moot" by the English Coalition Conference, adding, "Not only was there no consensus, there was a striking avoidance of the issue" (96).

Elbow's evaluation of the status of literature, however, is misleading. The coalition was silent only on the issue of traditional literature, including Shakespeare, the historical core of English studies and also on the matter of which texts to study. It was not silent on the more basic question of redefining the very term *literature* by questioning and then eliminating fiction, poetry, and drama as special categories of writing deserving extra attention by readers and in turn offering them extra rewards. Here the work of participant Robert Scholes, quoted by Elbow, played a key role: "To put it as directly, and perhaps as brutally, as possible, we must stop 'teaching literature' and start 'studying texts.' . . . Our favorite works of literature need not be lost in this new enterprise, but the exclusivity of literature as a category must be discarded" (Scholes 16). And, it should be added, once this change is effected, with the ability to "use the term *language arts* interchangeably with *English studies*" (xxi), much as the term *social studies* now often replaces the more traditional, narrative form, *history*.

The implication here and, as we shall see, a chief motivating force of the new critical pedagogic reformers is the belief that the

same social, political, and economic forces that distort all human relations are never absent from language use or, in Stuckey's critique, from education. To the extent that these forces remain unexamined (especially in those most seductive, hence most dangerous of all texts, emotion-packed literature), moreover, there is little being done to prevent the powerful from using language to control the powerless. "Our larger purpose," writes Berlin, "is to encourage students to negotiate and resist these [cultural] codes—these hegemonic discourses—to bring about more democratic and personally humane economic, social, and political arrangements" (*Rhetorics* 116). To be *uncritical* in a classroom setting, therefore, becomes less a failure of thought processes than of social and moral will, less a matter of subjectivity than an immoral unwillingness to oppose injustice.

"Oppression," conclude Knoblauch and Brannon, "in the service of privilege is a persistent social condition, which critical consciousness aims to expose and relieve" (163). The *uncritical* is not so much wrong-headed as wrong-hearted, if not evil. Everywhere in the reformist calls for more critical language instruction there is a palpable aura of suspicion, at times almost an incipient paranoia, directed toward an ill-defined but seemingly omnipresent "other," and cultivated by authorities within the profession who seem to be untiring in proselytizing the virtues of self-criticism, albeit often to true believers. "Language practices," goes the steady drumroll, "enforce a set of ideological prescriptions regarding the nature of 'reality'" (Berlin, "Rhetoric" 35).

The problem here is not with the assertion that language distorts: no one can deny that language hides as often as it reveals, or, perhaps more accurately, hides what (and while) it reveals. We are all deceived much of the time and about many, if not most, things, especially those closest to ourselves, those that most directly relate to our self image. The problem with Berlin and other vigorous advocates of a new critical pedagogic reform is not with the diagnosis (the Nietzschean notion that misrepresentation is a given of the human condition), but with their pervasive optimism regarding treatment for the problem: namely, their belief in how easily we can overcome linguistic, even ideological, distortion. For partisans like Berlin, it is as if the language of distortion magically falls away when one claims the moral high ground, claims for one's own discipline, as Berlin does, the one great task of education, "no

less ambitious than [of] distinguishing true from untrue discourse in disputations about power and privilege" ("Composition Studies" 103).

At the core of Berlin's pedagogy is a commitment to an overt, unambiguous announcement of its break with past practices, or at least a break with an ideological projection of those practices. Everywhere the basic opposition is between a yet-to-be-enacted reform (what I do and am urging others to do) and a widespread traditional practice (what everyone else now does). One is reminded of the great Enlightenment thinker Condorcet and his boundless optimism that the apparent multiplicity of knowledge in the world would have little impact upon our ability to teach people (even "those who can study only for a small number of years in childhood" 233) the few basic truths that would liberate them. His secret: focus exclusively on that which "excludes all dependence, either forced or voluntary." As with Berlin, Condorcet places his utopian hope for students, not in the mastery of a living tradition (not in being taught how presumably I myself was taught), but in their following me now in leapfrogging current practice, thus avoiding how everyone else teaches:

> We shall prove that, by a suitable choice of syllabus and of methods of education, we can teach the citizen everything that he needs to know in order to be able to manage his household, administer his affairs, and employ his labor and his faculties in freedom; to know his rights and to be able to exercise them; to be acquainted with his duties and fulfill them satisfactorily; to judge his own and other men's actions according to his own lights and be a stranger to none of the high and delicate feelings which honor human nature; not to be in a state of blind dependence upon those to whom he must entrust his affairs or the exercise of his rights; to be in a proper condition to choose and supervise them; to be no longer the dupe of those popular errors which torment man with superstitious fears and chimerical hopes; to defend himself against prejudice by the strength of reason alone; and, finally, to escape the deceits of charlatans who lay snares for his fortune, his health, his freedom of thought and his conscience under the pretext of granting him health, wealth, and salvation. (233–34)

There are two hundred years, but only a short ideological jump, between Condorcet's plan for banishing all ignorance with a year or two of the right kind of schooling and the very first call from the College Strand of the English Coalition for producing students "who are able to reflect critically on their own learning" (Lloyd-Jones and Lunsford 25), and hence able to question the validity of their teachers. The result is the ultimate critical pedagogy, a teacher-proof method of freeing students from all educational biases, even those inherent in the teachers themselves and hence in the very curriculum being taught to the students in question—unless, protestations notwithstanding, such rigorous and rigid self-questioning (of everything but self-questioning) results in making students clones of their teachers.

Current classroom practice is thus regularly reduced to an uncritical extension of a benighted, reactionary tradition, presumably the source of all our troubles in the first place. "What are seen as 'normal' or 'assumed' or 'obviously true' views or practices—even 'always already' principles," Elbow recites as the "dominant theme" of the coalition, "must be recognized to be just as much 'special interests' as the views or practices commonly labeled as special interest" (79). In such words we find Stuckey's basic insight elevated to the one universal theme of contemporary language instruction. As a profession, Elbow warns, we have aligned ourselves with "groups in power [who] tend to label smaller groups as special interest, not seeing that they themselves are special interest." Like a serpent with its fangs tightly embedded in its own tail, reformers of language education often seem fixated on a single enemy: the other, that projection of pedagogic practices as represented (or caricatured) by our worst teachers, that is, in a vision of how the unenlightened, how *everyone else*, continues to teach reading and writing.

Empowerment

It is new pedagogic practice, one labeled as *critical*, that provides the one clear break with the past. A critical pedagogy, in compelling students to question authority and tradition, thus becomes *the* exception to the reactionary nature of current language instruction, the one form of revolutionary practice that furthers the broad

democratic ideal of more even distribution of power and wealth by giving students from lower social groups with relatively less power and wealth one tool they can use to help correct the system: critical language learning, or critical literacy, as a means of political empowerment. "As students learn to reflect on their own practices in reading and writing," Elbow writes, "they will become more self-aware, more independent and strong as readers and writers" (51).

Self-reflection, as the first step in self-empowerment, must start with language educators themselves, the audience of the English Coalition. While there is nothing in Elbow's report as blunt as Stuckey's warning that English teachers may be just another special interest group, we are repeatedly told that "nothing must be taken as normal, neutral, disinterested, inevitable, necessary, objective" (79). Yet the effect of this warning is to alert us more about the trustworthiness of "others"—Cretans generally—than about the trustworthiness of the current speaker, than about *our* trustworthiness, than about the inherent duplicity of reason and language itself. We are urged to be wary readers of everything, to recognize that all people need "to take charge of their reading and writing processes and not be told what's right by virtue of authority" (79), hence, in theory at least, to question the basis for the selection of the sixty English teachers who formed the English Coalition Conference. What, we need to ask, was the real purpose—the hidden agenda—of this conference? "After all," concludes Wayne Booth in his foreword, "it is only when we teachers engage in reflection on what we want to learn and why, only when we 'take responsibility for our meanings,' that we become models of what we want our students to become" (xii).

The explicit message here is to question everyone, starting with one's teachers, and thus presumably, beginning with the very producers of the coalition report. What qualities did these sixty educators have that identified them as "representative"? What benefits did they receive for their efforts? And, on a deeper level, how did the eventual consensus they arrived at—the pervasive distrust of tradition, literary and otherwise, already noted—reflect their own individual and collective historical situations, for example, within a profession once historically dominated by men of European descent and now one of the more conspicuous places within the national economy providing opportunities to women and people of color (although, perhaps significantly, predominantly in the lower

professional rungs), or within the larger picture of the role of an emerging professional class in a late-capitalist economic order that at times seems to totter on the brink of collapse itself, balanced as it seems between the need for ever more efficient economic production and ever more wasteful consumption?

Important questions, few would deny—and questions that will be addressed below—but questions promoting skepticism of the English Coalition findings that few readers, including those most accepting of the call for placing critical analysis at the center of language study, are themselves likely to pursue in any systematic fashion, and indeed questions that, if passionately pursued, would lead to a radical skepticism ("All argument is special pleading") that might end up undermining most of the specific reforms advocated by the Coalition Conference as well as the possibility of any long-term, systematic pedagogic reform. Or to take a somewhat different tack, why do we assume that radical skepticism by teachers or students will lead to democratic reforms within education, especially when comparable skepticism in the body politic seems as often as not to be a breeding ground, not for egalitarian reform, but for populist, anti-intellectual, and reactionary attacks on any and all systematic efforts at such reform? Current political skepticism often seems aimed, not at the sources of repression and inequality (corporate especially), but at government itself, the media, the liberal establishment, Washington insiders, intellectuals and experts generally, or anyone or anything else seen as hostile to populist, often reactionary notions of "personal freedom." Why then the assumption that skepticism nurtured by rigorous critical analysis leads away from rather than toward the latent anti-intellectualism seemingly indigenous to American life—that is, why do we assume that radical skepticism is an especially useful pedagogic tool in countering the divisive, right-wing, neopopulist forces that are never far below the surface of our social existence and seem to thrive in the open forums of radio talk shows?

One response to such questions is the observation that the call for basing language education on a new critical practice is far less radical than it seems, entailing the overthrow, not of all teachers and all practice, but only the "bad" practice of "other" teachers. Indeed, the entire organization and production of the English Coalition Conference can be seen as growing out of the desire to thwart such radical skepticism, mainly by producing an authoritative

utterance—to codify the "good" practice of "good" teachers—and hence an utterance capable of changing the practice of others in the profession. Here we see a common phenomenon: the complex connection between skepticism and authority. It is no accident that the Cretan uttering the "universal" truth about fellow Cretans is a philosopher, someone whose business is generating truth, and not, for instance, a merchant with the clear ulterior purpose of selling something. Likewise, the coalition represents the work, not of commercial vendors with products to sell, but of career educators selected for possessing the experience that would seem to give them the capability of rising above local self-interests.

Just as we can play the role of logician and see the contradictory, self-destructive nature of the Cretan assertion, we too can be social scientists concerned with rooting out the self-interest in the coalition participants themselves. In both cases, however, we have other, likely stronger, instincts at work, including the desire to believe and to trust. Do not most readers focus on the phenomenological claim of the text in both situations—taking what the coalition has to say about language education largely on its own terms, as a universal assertion about the needs of students and the necessity to reshape the curriculum, treating the call for self-reflection less as a guide for dealing specifically with its own text than as a claim for how to deal with the profession as a whole, that is, as a critique of existing practice and not as a metacritique, a critique of critique? Are not readers of *Democracy through Language* supposed to ignore the self-reflective part of the coalition's own message, ignore the call to see its own work as a plea for a true populist, anti-intellectual critique of motives? Readers are not to be radical skeptics themselves—questioning in Rush Limbaugh fashion the motives of Elbow and others, seeing their efforts solely in terms of their own possible professional aggrandizement. Instead readers of Elbow's book are to focus on the issues he raises about the conclusions of the English Coalition—the broad-based, authoritative, consensus-driven effort to restructure language instruction itself. *Being critical* in the context of language reform, it turns out, is not the neutral term it appears; it has to do less with the generic ability to raise questions, especially about other people's motives, than with the ability to raise the right kind of questions, in this case, those aimed at supporting widening democratically inspired reforms of existing pedagogic practices and institutions.

Belonging

The coalition's own privileging of critical pedagogy (the importance given to the reader exercising control over the claims of all texts) seems not to be fully supported by our actual practice of reading nor, if we look more closely, by the original paradox of the Cretan philosopher. The initial critical control that leads to our resistance to the philosopher's authority (here because of the fact that he himself is a Cretan) is after all based on comprehension of a prior phenomenological claim (that all Cretans are liars). Without the phenomenological claim about the mendacity of Cretans, there seems to be no basis for action and hence control, although the validity of this knowledge is quickly vitiated by our willingness to act on this insight, putting us into the endless cycle of claim and control that constitutes, not just the original paradox, but what has been called the hermeneutic circle: here that critical control requires understanding that is itself precritical. Once in the circle of this paradox, there seems to be no way out, no way to privilege control over claim. What is doubtful, however, is if we ever really get entangled in such a paradox in the first place, whether the tension between phenomenological claim and critical control is based on anything more than a logical sleight of hand.

As in the case of Stuckey's warnings about writing teachers, as readers we regularly receive—and then freely heed or reject—not paradoxical puzzles from logicians, but real warnings about Cretans from other Cretans, from philosophers about philosophy, from politicians about politics, and, in the case of the English Coalition Conference, from English teachers about English teaching. "Cretans lie!" we are told . . . by Cretans; "Don't trust politicians!" we are told . . . by politicians. "English teachers have ulterior motives!" we are told . . . by English teachers. "Readers need to scrutinize authors of books!" we read in books. All would-be paradoxes, to be sure, but statements that in practice rarely strike us as such. Instead, claim and control seem to operate in a radically unbalanced way: it is when we are most taken in by the phenomenological claim of the text, when we are convinced of the untrustworthiness of Cretans or politicians, or of the oppressive nature of language education, that we are most trusting of the philosopher, the politician, or author making the claim—and, ironically, the least likely to be critical ourselves and apply in this instance the radical skepticism necessary to

reject the specific assertions each is making. Conversely, the more we exercise critical control over the text—enacting the claim of the text by raising questions about the philosopher's place of origin or about the authors' motivations (where they were trained, the conditions of their employment, etc.)—the less trusting we become of the author and the less likely it is that we would ever take the phenomenological claim of the message seriously in the first place.

In practice, in other words, our reading of any text seems to be dominated, in turn, either by its seductive claim or our desire to exercise control over it: we are more critical about texts and assertions when we are less enamored and more suspicious of the person who utters them. But even this explanation is likely too simple in assuming that critical control is the opposite of phenomenological claim. Instead, such control is perhaps better seen as our operating according to the claim of another assertion, one that is less visible, but finally not necessarily more critical or objective. It is naïve to fall prey to the logical structure of the paradox that requires us to see our rejection of the Cretan philosopher as a higher, more critical response and not just as another effective way of condemning Cretans generally as liars (effective in coating our original dislike of Cretans with the patina of logic). In actual practice, our skepticism about someone else's motives, while often taking the form of a logical argument, does not in fact guarantee that we are really acting more rationally, more critically—a Republican attack on a policy advocated by a Democratic president, that is based on questioning the president's motives for advocating such a policy, is not necessarily more critical than a fellow Democrat's support of that same policy. "In how many ways does love distort our judgment?" writes the great antimodernist, antireformer, Giambattista Vico. "In how many ways does hate impede it? He who loves praises the deficiencies of his beloved as if they were virtues. He who burns with hatred sees her good qualities as if they were abhorrent" (*On Humanistic Education* 70).

The paradox of the Cretan philosopher collapses with real readers with real feelings (about Cretans or about Bill Clinton), with readers who are predisposed, based on their experiences prior to encountering this particular assertion (the "paradox"), either to trust or distrust Cretans or the president—predisposed, in Hans-Georg Gadamer's term, to "pre-judge" Cretans, politicians, writing teachers, or anyone else. Those who dislike Cretans are predis-

posed to accept wholeheartedly the phenomenological claim of the assertion: "Yes, I agree with you; Cretans are liars—I've known it all along," and in so doing fail to exercise critical control over the assertion. Yet such a response is no more emotional than that of the supporters of Cretans who also never reach the stage of critical control, seeing the Cretan philosopher from the outset as a disreputable spokesperson, if not a traitor, and consequently rejecting the philosopher's phenomenological claim out of hand: "I don't believe you for a minute—philosophers are all liars!"

Too often, the call for a new critical pedagogic reform takes on the status of objectivity (becomes "critical") only in the context of a specific political agenda, as skepticism directed toward present arrangements for redistributing wealth and power—and even this may not be adequate since various right-wing activists groups cast as *critical* their own activities aimed at regaining control of their lives, which they see as having been centralized by government and other institutions associated with the left. Within the reconstructed English classroom, critical pedagogy then takes on the status of objectivity as discourse that echoes one's own predisposition or, put positively, critical pedagogy takes on the status of objectivity when readers perceive it as grounded in a more basic sense of belonging with the "right" side, in what Gadamer refers to as a larger, "sustaining agreement" (*Reason* 136), a condition that Gadamer sees as always present whenever we want to understand something that, in his phrase, "anticipatorily joins" us with the object of our inquiry.

Our "critical" response to Stuckey and the findings of the English Coalition Conference, therefore, is more likely grounded, not in applying to their work the same critical scrutiny they would have us apply to others, not in skepticism and questioning and thus not in critical analysis itself, but in our sense of belonging to groups whose self-image is enhanced by their findings, that is, by our phenomenological or life history in this world. What is crucial in determining our response to an act that we would deem "critical" seems to have less to do with logic and abstraction than with the strength of our emotional attachment to the claims embedded in the "critical" texts themselves. No form of critical practice, we need to realize, can itself ever fully escape claims of *belonging*—our having a host of allegiances, many unanalyzed and all related to our sense of acceptance in the world and hence

feeling of well-being. There can be no critical practice, in other words, that is ever fully critical.

Accordingly, the strongest champions of Stuckey or of the English Coalition Conference come, not from the most critical or most suspicious readers, but from those readers who are inclined to agree with the phenomenological claim each makes based largely on a prior affiliation with what each asserts—a key aspect of belonging that Gadamer in *Truth and Method* identifies with *pre-judgment* or *prejudice*. "Ideal readers," accordingly, are not those who are most suspicious of the authors themselves (most critical) but those who most strongly share the suspicions of the authors, in the case of Stuckey or the English Coalition Conference because perhaps at a deep, unconscious level identifying with this common criticism of established practice (how others teach) enhances their own sense of the superiority of their own teaching practices, grounded as those practices are in the superiority of their own intentions: here are teachers truly committed to social justice and hence not like other, traditional teachers who are committed to other, more selfish concerns. The prior emotional commitment here is grounded less in critical objectivity than in more important matters of self-esteem, an issue sharpened by the fact that the attachment to the marginalized in society felt by so many college writing teachers may well reflect their own sense of being marginalized within the larger profession of English studies dominated for most of this century by mostly male literature professors, people whose professional ethos seems to entail a far lesser commitment to social justice.

There is no paradox, no logical tension in Stuckey's rhetorical claim that literacy education is little more than a vast patronage system for teachers—"Are we helping those in need of economic and social opportunity, or those (including ourselves) who wish to maintain their own economic and social advantage" (viii)—since this is less an appeal for critical resistance in her readers than for cheering, less a matter of the empowerment of critical readers than the seduction of the emotionally inclined, namely teachers who share Stuckey's own sense of alienation within a profession that has not done as well as it might for women and minorities (leaving many in low-paying, part-time positions), and thus professionals who welcome the implication here of the prospects of a better, more ennobling pedagogic practice.

Likewise, we can ask, where would we expect to find the strongest resistance to—or the most *critical* analysis of—the claims of Stuckey and the English Coalition? Surely not from the left or from those trying to follow the new message of critical literacy and gain a higher level of critical control of their texts (as this text may at least claim to be doing)? We would expect such resistance from conservatives of various kinds, those with stronger, phenomenological claims, emotional binds, to other pedagogic practices and traditions, to the traditional ("bad") current practices both directly and implicitly under attack in the appeal to the new practice of critical teaching. It is this prior affiliation, grounded in an emotional attachment to other ways of teaching, and not in a rational application of critical techniques, that is likely to lead mostly traditional critics of current reforms to question the motives of reformers from the outset—perhaps seeing the overall reform of language education as grounded in a broader, left-wing political agenda that they may oppose. Critics of Stuckey, for example, may resist the very attachment to social reform that motivates her defenders, not sharing her well-founded resentment of the historically poor treatment of women in the profession or her passionate concern for helping marginal students in poorly funded writing programs. Such critics might see the *real* issue in Stuckey's larger allegiance to broader social change, and as a result oppose her program for reform, not on its merits, but categorically, that is, without a fair, detailed hearing. It is precisely such moral combat, waged by both the left and right and based on the suspicion of motives, that leads to the posturing about symbolic values that so often passes for contemporary public debate, in education no less than in politics.

In a world of posturing over symbols, the paradox of the Cretan philosopher and the more general notion of logical paradox can both be dissolved in a larger, more powerful interpretive strategy, one that posits an implicit distinction between real practice (how others teach or, in the case of the Cretan philosopher, how others lie) and an ideal practice embedded in the text itself and that somehow escapes its own logical limits as a speech act. The paradox of the Cretan philosopher can thus be seen, not as a paradox at all, but as a strategy for social reform based on first affirming and then overcoming the gap between *what is real* (Cretans as they

are today) and *what is possible* (how much better, more truthful Cretans can be). Opposition, Bruce Robbins argues in his *Secular Vocations*, is now "central to professionalism," in a key phrase that he quotes from Stanley Fish, "constituting by the very vigor of its opposition the true form of that which it opposes" (105). English studies is now a profession that defines itself by that which it wants to become, and hence, largely by opposition to what it is.

In this light, the general thrust of the efforts to reform English studies can be seen as an extension of what Nietzsche calls "the fundamental will of the spirit" (*Beyond* §229) to seek, neither insight nor truth, but agreement and accord. Only rarely, Nietzsche would contend, and never easily, is an individual able to overcome the need for affiliation, and thus able to stand apart from the group, to strike out on one's own. "In all taking things seriously and thoroughly," Nietzsche writes, there is always a strong antisocial element, a raising of personal satisfaction—albeit an intellectual one—over the group's sense of its common purpose: "in all desire to know there is already a drop of cruelty" (*Beyond* §229). In this sense, the pedagogic notion of the reader's critical control of a text is better seen not as an alternative to its phenomenological claim but as another, higher, form of attachment, an attachment, not to what currently exists, but to the promise of something better, the possibility of a yet-to-be-attained ideal: the new breed of Cretan who ("like me") tells the truth, the new breed of writing teacher who ("like me") actually helps students. What gives power to the findings of the English Coalition has less to do with readers' thinking critically than with their identification with its ennobling vision of the profession as a central player in expanding democratic opportunities, underscored by Booth's prefatory reference of our common mission, the assertion that we are "not just a profession with a set of assumptions and prejudices, but a *vocation*, a *calling*, a *commitment*" (x)—all appeals, like critical thought itself, based finally less in reason itself than in universal, utopian notions like justice and liberation.

The Limits of Control

The task before us in this work, simply stated, is not to reject the phenomenological claim about critical control that now exercises