REVIEW:
Theory, Practice, and the Disciplinary Cross-Narrative

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Were some to judge these books by their respective covers and titles, the three under discussion here might appear disparate, unconnected—each speaking to a different audience within the large field of composition studies, if it is perceived that each one of them speaks to the field at all. These contributions do, however, share several significant traits: first, the reminder that good theory undergirds good practice; second, the often-too-unimplemented truth that rhetoric, history, and composition practice must be intertwined, and actively so; and, third, that the ongoing project of defining a “field” in composition studies must critically engage important and often contested narratives of genre, language, and privilege—a history, theory, and practice that, as Sandra Gustafson contends regarding the field of American literary history, “cut[s] across the narrative,” in that instance, “of a national literary tradition” (967). Similarly, and taken together, these strong, worthwhile

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books cut across existing disciplinary and interdisciplinary narratives of composition studies to reintegrate rhetoric, composition, and practice.

The first of these compelling (and often demanding) reads is by David Bleich: *The Materiality of Language*. Put simply, Bleich and his work demand our attention—and rightly so. Indeed, Bleich’s extensive body of accountable, clear scholarship and his unyielding commitment to students speak to the heart of composition as a “teaching subject,” to borrow Joseph Harris’s words (xv), and this erudite and readable monograph continues that project. *The Materiality of Language* is Bleich’s eighth book; *Know and Tell*, published in 1998 and of significant value to composition studies, clearly delineates Bleich’s proposals for writing pedagogy, a set of practical procedures that challenge our field’s “heartbreakingly narrowed” allegiance to argumentation. In email correspondence earlier this year, Bleich writes that in the 1990s, “our profession caved in to corporate ideology [. . .] and now, in my view, the profession of writing pedagogy is flopping aimlessly in the desert of technological obsession, having lost the inspiration all of us get from our love of language.”

And this is the impetus for *The Materiality of Language*, a complex, foundational work that fully extends a piece Bleich published in *Pedagogy* in 2001 titled “The Materiality of Language and the Pedagogy of Exchange,” another provocative and useful study that is central to rhetoric and composition. In the book itself, Bleich eloquently links crucial issues of language with, significantly, their implications for our students and the way we choose to teach them.

Little or nothing that impedes student access to language is sacred to Bleich. In a tour de force that covers disciplines ranging from the sciences to the humanities and that attacks long-held forms of gender and academic bias, Bleich takes on rarely challenged, well-known theorists, philosophers, compositionists, linguists, even noted textbook authors—do read not only the book, but also the footnotes—in urging readers to return to the importance of language and its centrality to authority and access. The purpose of *The Materiality of Language* is clear from the start:

I consider that all people share a common interest in achieving access to language: people want to be in a position to learn it thoroughly, cultivate it, and use it to enhance their lives; and they expect that others will participate in mutually respectful exchanges of language. This has rarely been the case; access to language has been extremely hard to achieve for most people for most of history. (14)

And the introduction (subtitled “The Contested Subject”) affirms the central quest in the study: “I wanted to understand why the issue of language has been the site of so much dispute, so much acrimony, and so much ignoring and repressing of the experiences that all people have” (2). Chapter 1, “Premises and Backgrounds,” puts forth various definitions of material and the varying contexts for Bleich’s discussion, where he notes, “To recognize the materiality of language puts one in a position to
present language as transparent, because sometimes using it that way meets local needs, as in the instructions for assembling furniture” (23). Chapter 2, “Received Standards in the Study of Language,” affirms language as contested subject matter, a subject matter that “followed received standards that resisted change” (33). With a discussion ranging from the rise of humanism to the work of Noam Chomsky (perhaps not surprisingly, Chomsky is not spared), Bleich further implicates the university’s limiting “the study of language in ways that comply with the hierarchical governance of the university and society.” Further,

Many academic men who oppose such governance—and Noam Chomsky is one of the best known among them—collaborate with its perpetuation through a language-constrained, dogmatic ideal of scientific truth, thereby ignoring or cordonning off or repressing the materiality of language. (84)

Further, and significantly, in Materiality Bleich invites readers to join the wide-ranging conversations certain to be provoked by this scholarship, to challenge his assumptions and arguments throughout: “Many of the frustrations of the male scholars discussed in this book are the results of their distance from the understanding that women—who play a principal role in teaching all people how to use language—have as much (or more) to contribute to the study of language use as men do.” And yet, Bleich exhorts us as readers—all but directing us as readers and teachers to become full participants in airing the book’s assertions—to discuss and even dispute them: “[B]ecause these are political issues readers are invited to test them” (14). While implicating the role of history and the university in denying the authority and privilege that access to language provides, Bleich announces, “Those in a position to teach and grant access to language teach instead the need to deny its materiality—and, through this denial, restrict public access by protecting its various subject matters from inquiries into their uses of language” (20). Chapter 3, “Materiality and Genre,” examines materiality from nominalism; genre as a language function; Wittgenstein’s “second opinion”; and Austin and speech action—to name only a few of the sections in this chapter—to reveal “academic resistance to materiality,” that “although it has remained stable, the university as an institution collaborated with institutions and values that have endangered the majority of populations. The resistance to Whorf’s, Bakhtin’s, Austin’s, and Wittgenstein’s works emerge from this traditional attitude towards language and knowledge” (135).

I cannot possibly do justice here to the sweep and depth of Bleich’s arguments in Materiality, so I will offer the equivalent of sound bites with no spoiler alert: Chapter 4, “The Unity of Language and Thought,” reaches to the eighteenth century to query Enlightenment values, and the work of Jacques Derrida and Julia Kristeva. Chapter 5, “Materiality and the Contemporary Study of Language,” and Chapter 6, “Recognizing Politics in the Study of Language,” build on the previous chapters,
revealing the “struggle” of recent Western philosophy to “recognize the political character of language” (228), using the important work of Robin Lakoff and others (and the experience of Anita Hill and the O. J. Simpson trial, among other examples) to recast the study of language, all leading to Part Two of the book: “Language in the University.”

Chapter 7, the first in Part Two, is titled “Frustrations of Academic Language,” featuring a compelling discussion of argument and its place in the academy (and, by implication, in writing courses). With whom does the frustration rest, you might ask. Bleich notes, “Over the centuries of university life uneasiness within the community of scholars and teachers has been perpetuated by the disparity between the conventions of university language uses and the freer, inventive uses of vernaculars outside each university.” Moreover,

> It is customary to think that the problem of limited access to the language of universities no longer exists. But today’s version of limited access is not a significant departure from how things were when Latin was the only language that counted and when most people outside the university were illiterate. (259)

Here, Bleich takes on Freud, affirming that while one may want to “pay attention” to Freud’s “acknowledgement of the involuntary exclusion of women from civilization, a comprehensive reading cannot overlook the transcendent role played by civilization” (274). Significantly, Bleich rebukes what he believes is Gerald Graff’s—and scholar-teachers’ in composition, I might add, so we must pay attention—“near worship of argument as a solution for teaching the use of language in universities.” This “worship,” asserts Bleich, makes it possible to limit debate and create a situation by which different viewpoints are repressed: that is, “[a] situation in which all students—members of the academy—may contribute different points of view is not controllable by university sponsors” (287–88). Indeed, where academics “ridiculed the ‘five-paragraph essay’ that ninth graders brought to the university as their writing skill [. . .] now so-called college writing is equally reducible to ritual of a thesis, sentence, a claim, a warrant, and a conclusion.” Bleich cites a popular textbook that “counts this as a fundamental principle” (285) and argues, “Teaching argument as [proposed by one, if not more, prominent thinkers] instructs students how to comply with [. . .] unseen constraints” (288). Current teaching of argument, its “near worship,” is oversimplified and without nuance.

Chapter 8, “The Protected Institution,” and Chapter 9, “The Sacred Language,” provide further evidence of the historical, religious, and university sources of “censoring heresies” (330). Subject matter itself was not a threat to institutions; rather, heretical subjects were challenges to authoritative language. From here, Bleich moves to other disciplinary and world contexts: science (Chapter 10, “Language Uses in Science: The Heir of Latin”); a chapter on “Language and Human Survival”; and
one titled “Literature and the Contested Subject,” where Bleich notes, with satisfaction, “The reduction of censorship has coincided with increased access of women to academic life” (487).

As readers, will we rail against several of Bleich’s assertions in *The Materiality of Language*? Certainly. When Bleich concludes Chapter 8 by noting, “The special language was always needed to enact hegemony over learning and study and to retain the traditional style of protection,” (330) what, we may ask (or not), shall we do instead? (Hint: See Bleich’s *Know and Tell*, published in 1998, a comprehensive program for writing pedagogy that the current book implies.) Bleich’s authoritative voice and almost exhaustive scholarly project are meant to be just the start of many vigorous conversations, which, I suspect, he believes that we as teachers and academics have abandoned and must begin anew.

Just as Bleich invokes the continued relevance and importance of reading and rereading that which has come before to reveal current, vexed practices—and the complexities and institutions that have brought us to these points in time—so, too, does John Gage in a valuable edited volume *The Promise of Reason*, a reassessment of Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca’s *The New Rhetoric* (*TNR*). But where Bleich cuts a scholarly swath across history, philosophy, rhetorical tradition, and more, Gage has gathered a group of international scholars—a particular strength of this volume, not incidentally—to reconsider and affirm the ongoing relevance of this milestone, published in 1958 as *Traité de l’argumentation: La nouvelle rhétorique*.

Gage’s volume collects versions of papers that were presented at a 2008 conference at the University of Oregon: “The Promise of Reason: *The New Rhetoric* after Fifty Years.” Writes Gage in a footnote within the introduction, the essays “do not indicate a sudden flourishing so much as they represent a coalescing of ongoing research in the field of argument studies from linguistic, pragmatic, rhetorical, and philosophical perspectives.” But, Gage concludes, this work “suggests that international and interdisciplinary interest in *The New Rhetoric* and the study of argumentation will continue to grow” (6).

Indeed, Gage’s collection of essays might well be placed in conversation with Bleich’s *Materiality*. In the lucid and helpful introduction, Gage notes the following:

> The kind of reason they [Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca] sought was not the pure form desired by analytic philosophers but the less formal modes of reasoning, and their attendant modalities of speech, described for centuries by rhetoricians. They sought an understanding of rhetorical reasoning, or argumentation in the broadest sense, to resist the brute force of violence on the one hand and the brute force of validity equations on the other. (1)

Write Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, as quoted in Gage, “Only the existence of an argumentation that is neither compelling nor arbitrary can give meaning to human freedom” (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 514). Gage’s volume also points to a
variety of significant directions for current and future influences of TNR, a primary and persistently useful source—and possibly one for the rehabilitation of argument that Bleich, in Materiality, so bemoans in its current state.

Gage groups the essays and then divides them into four sections: “Conceptual Understandings of The New Rhetoric,” “Extensions of the New Rhetoric,” “The Ethical Turn in Perelman and The New Rhetoric,” and “Uses of The New Rhetoric,” ensuring that the volume is useful for those well versed in TNR and the less knowledgeable alike. As Gage explains, “Some [. . .] key terms have been and will continue to be scrutinized, complicated and applied” (5). The four essays in the first section, in Gage’s words, therefore, “are devoted primarily to questions about how to understand the specific intentions and key concepts of The New Rhetoric” (19).

Noemi Perelman Mattis, Perelman’s daughter, opens the volume with a “human and historical context for the essays that follow” (5). And clearly, the rise of Nazism, and Perelman’s experience of anti-Semitism and the Nazis, provided a particularly urgent context from which TNR would spring, a context that should be all too comparable to our vexed times.

The sixteen essays in this volume are complex; all of them are worth the effort and are meticulous and useful in rebooting a perspective on TNR, again, in times of complexity parallel to those that helped to germinate TNR. I will mention each essay in the collection, however quickly, for the volume brings us the work of some valued, familiar names (Warnick, Fahnestock, and Crosswhite, for instance) and less familiar scholars. For one, I concur with Gage’s assessment that Barbara Warnick’s essay “provides an appropriate beginning for the scholarly studies in this volume because it argues for the epistemological integrity of The New Rhetoric” (19). Writes Warnick in “Empiricism, Securement, and The New Rhetoric,” “Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca’s position has consistently made uneasy those who seek an objectively valid truth criterion for the acceptance of situated argument” (21). She continues to explain, “Instead of devising a formalist account of the workings of argumentation, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca studied arguments in use, scrutinized their features, identified their components, and developed a general account of how they function to promote audience adherence” (23). Warnick situates TNR by delineating the four major “scheme categories” of the book, concluding that the authors’ approach to “studying argument as enacted can [. . .] enable us to better understand modes of influence that are not grounded in a conventional logical framework but instead rely on other situated conventions specific to the social context in which they occur” (27).

In particular, Jeanne Fahnestock’s essay, “‘No Neutral Choices’: The Art of Style in The New Rhetoric,” takes as its subject the language of argument throughout TNR: “Language choices encode selected objects of agreement and constitute techniques of argument, in this case a scheme of association” (30). Fahnestock’s conclusion is important regarding TNR’s significance concerning language:
It wrests attention from language as decoration or as the badge of unique literary merit in an exclusively aesthetic dimension. It does not reduce rhetorical stylistics to effective communication. (44)

Indeed, notes Fahnestock, the authors’ “faith in argumentation and their emphasis on the ethical commitment required of the arguer really extends to the arguer’s language” (44).

Similarly, in “Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca’s New Rhetoric,” David Frank and Michelle Bolduc focus on Olbrechts-Tyteca’s contributions to rhetoric having been overlooked, but argue that scholars collaborating over periods of time “develop relationships that defy [...] proscribed roles.” Along with a discussion of Olbrechts-Tyteca’s development of the “comic of rhetoric” motif (71), Frank and Bolduc extend scholarship on the nature of collaboration, noting, “When the new rhetoric project is read diachronically, Olbrechts-Tyteca’s contribution comes into focus, both in collaboration with Perelman and on her own” (78).

Section Two aims to “share a concern with the question of whether the theory of argumentation in The New Rhetoric may be enriched by connecting it to theoretical perspectives beyond its specific range” (81). Richard Graff and Wendy Winn, for instance, compare Kenneth Burke’s notion of identification with Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca’s idea of communion, arguing, among other issues, for the importance of style. Alan Gross significantly argues that TNR be extended to embrace the visual image using “Gestalt theory and Peirce’s semiotics in order to trace the genealogy of argumentative and narrative presence back to its perceptual base” (100). Roselyne Koren offers a valuable global context, situating TNR in current French language theories.

Section Three is comparative in a different way, with scholars looking at Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca’s work in the contexts of others. For instance, Ray Dearin examines “Perelman’s reflections upon the confusions surrounding the concept of democracy” regarding his contributions to a UNESCO project intended to clarify the meanings of “democracy” (149). Continuing in the strand of comparing Perelman’s work to that of other philosophers are contributions by Linda Bensel-Meyers and Jean Nienkamp; Dearin, Bensel-Meyers, and Nienkamp (using the term RhE-THorICS to “explore the implications of the claim that rhetoric and ethics are two Burkan ‘terministic screens’” [171]) all treat Perelman’s hope for argument based on a variety of equally valued perspectives, emphasizing the importance of “what we do as rhetors, rhetoricians, and moral agents” because “our rhetorical/ethical acts are necessarily value-laden” (179).

Section Four seeks to apply concepts of TNR (although others throughout the volume also include forms of text analysis in “making their cases” [183]). James Crosswhite’s important essay on the pedagogical possibilities of TNR seeks to remove it from more reductive models—such as Stephen Toulmin’s, as he argues. Similarly,
Maria Freddi argues for rhetorical reasoning to foster validity and understanding in the sciences. Paula Olmos, in contrast, looks at establishing agreement in the reality of diverse cultural contexts: “certain borrowed expressions coming from such sources as TV and film provide a good basis for examining the rhetorical potential of *paroemiai* for today’s audiences” (244). And Mark Hoffman looks at the work of Leo Tolstoy with the lens of *TNR* to conclude that “not all arguments are limited to their rhetorical situations” (243).

In all, this impressive volume will send us back to *TNR* itself, and, as does Bleich’s monograph, will potentially revitalize our work as teachers and as thinkers. I envision a discussion among Gage and his contributors and Bleich: why is *The New Rhetoric* and its concern with language absent from *The Materiality of Language*? Perhaps Bleich might attest that the notion of *rhetoric* itself has been co-opted by the academy, that academics’ adherence to rhetoric as a subject removes any concern with language, but the discussion itself—what a conference session that would be!—would be quite worthy.

Rebecca Nowacek’s persuasive arguments in *Agents of Integration* bring us to a study of language and genre across situations and registers. Like Bleich and Gage and contributors, Nowacek is concerned with language and genre. The previous books also share Nowacek’s concern with students, but one might say that this work is to some extent an applied case study of the two other books. That is, Nowacek offers a discussion of genre as it serves to undergird the notion of transfer, “commonly understood as the negotiation of very different social and intellectual contexts” (20). In the interest of at least some disclosure, however, and as several of my colleagues are aware, I am reticent to buy in fully to the notion of transfer, especially when it’s used as an un-nuanced critique of first-year writing (FYW). Years ago, Edward White, among others, was most eloquent in affirming that FYW is not an “inoculation” against students ever writing badly again; indeed, and as a vast body of literature shows, writing is everyone’s responsibility at an institution of higher learning. Similarly, FYW must be part of a comprehensive effort in writing pedagogy. Therefore, when “transfer” adherents suggest that FYW, a one-semester course at most institutions, is somehow culpable for students’ inability to transfer learning, I bristle. (Trust me; I’m not an all-or-nothing defender of FYW, but these arguments regarding transfer often seem a bit spurious.)

Nowacek’s monograph is, in response to concerns such as my own, clear, smart, and eminently useful in articulating the complexities of transfer. To reiterate, the book can be seen as an inheritor, if you will, to the complex conversations resulting from a reading of *The Materiality of Language* and *The Promise of Reason*: while Nowacek acknowledges that her work and her study are located outside of the composition classroom (and a first-year writing curriculum, for that matter), she helpfully reframes the notion of transfer. In doing so, she effectively challenges reductive arguments
early on, and Nowacek is delightfully and purposefully direct: “Previous scholarship takes too limited a view of transfer. Transfer is both more common and more complex than research currently recognizes” (18).

Nowacek develops a theoretical framework for her case study, arguing that “transfer is best understood as an act of recontextualization,” and referring to her students in an interdisciplinary humanities course as “agents of integration,” that is, “a concept that foregrounds the rhetorical dimensions of transfer” (8). In reframing notions of transfer as they are applied to learning, Nowacek employs theories of genre as central to this recontextualization, notably employing the work of Mikhail Bakhtin: “[u]tterances are inextricably linked to their social context, and every social context [. . .] includes repeated social interactions or tasks to be accomplished” (18). Genre, to Nowacek, is the foundation of a pedagogy by which students become these agents of integration. Compelling among Nowacek’s arguments is this:

The word *agency* emphasizes a student’s ability to act and make change in the world; it also directs our attention to the social contexts in which agents operate and the standards by which they are judged. [. . .] To speak of agents of integration as seers and sellers is to *understand transfer as a rhetorical act*: this understanding is grounded in several basic assumptions central to the idea of transfer as recontextualization. (39; emphasis added)

Readers may wonder about the relevance of Nowacek’s study to FYW—usually the locus of much (and to me, problematic) discussion of transfer—because of the scope of this book. As she acknowledges, “The classroom study that informs this book was conducted in a team-taught multidisciplinary sequence known formally as Interdisciplinary Humanities Seminar,” offered to students (who do not take FYW) at a Catholic university on the East Coast. The course extends over three semesters, with a “cohort of students that remains constant,” but with “each new semester” bringing “a new combination of disciplines and professors” (4). But I would suggest that although this learning community replaces traditional FYW at a particular institution with a fairly (I would imagine) predictable population, Nowacek’s study forcefully and convincingly argues for best practice in the long history of writing in the disciplines (WID): that is, even with FYW as a baseline for writing at the college level, she articulates a model where several contexts for writing are available and transparent. Faculty members from several disciplines, and their guidance, are as important as the students’ sense of agency.

Nowacek is equally transparent and accountable in explaining the difficulties of building this particular model at institutions with dependence on graduate students and contingent faculty members; at the same time, she notes, the model of an interdisciplinary learning community also departs from FYW programs. (But why not, I might ask, try to build it in addition to more traditional FYW programs as part of WID?) To her credit, Nowacek offers a useful chapter, “Implications,” that
treats these particular issues while delineating suggestions for more traditional FYW courses that foster genre knowledge among students and their own sense of how this knowledge applies to other contexts. Nowacek’s intelligent framework of students as agents of integration and her application of genre theory—not only to the particular interdisciplinary context of her institution, but also to more traditional first-year contexts—reveals not only the challenges of implementing similar frameworks, but also the opportunities for doing so.

I must say, I find Nowacek’s work to be persuasive and useful, despite my initial resistance to its subject. Her case study is something of a microcosm that illustrates the importance of students learning to write within differing disciplinary contexts and with varying sets of assumptions, a welcome enactment of the maxim of students truly becoming “ready and able writers” (a program-required statement on a composition syllabus of mine years ago). In all, Nowacek’s work invigorates and reawakens debates about transfer and genre, just as Bleich, Gage, and Gage’s contributors refresh and make new the scholarly contexts of language and genre that inform our work.

All three reviewed books are well written, their subjects amply illustrating the vibrant constellation of disciplinary contexts that spark necessary and productive reconsiderations of our scholarship and practice. The work of Bleich, Gage and his contributors, and Nowacek convincingly challenge and illuminate the often disparate and contested approaches and interests within composition and rhetoric. And in very different and yet ultimately in related ways, these welcome contributions reframe our sense of history and practice, contest any sense of a given place of language in the academy (and elsewhere), and reaffirm the importance, the hard work, and the creative and necessarily messy project of best guiding our students, despite the often vexing structures of the institutions in which many in our profession work.

Works Cited