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## The Composition Course and Public Discourse: The Case of Adams Sherman Hill, Popular Culture, and Cultural Inoculation

American intellectuals and educators are dismayed by the crisis in public discourse. With Jürgen Habermas and others, they worry over the "decline of the public sphere" and a "degeneration" in "rational-critical debate." Cultural critics often contrast contemporary public discourse with what seems to be America's golden age of public discussion: nineteenth-century America, before the culture industry or late capitalism, before professionalism, before TV, before the mass media or multimedia.<sup>1</sup>

The usual suspect is modern communications technologies, specifically TV. According to Neil Postman, we should deeply lament "the decline of the Age of Typography and the ascendancy of the Age of Television" (8). Televisual media, he argues, has eroded the public's attention span and shriveled its capacity for rational thought. Looking to the Lincoln-Douglas debates, he maintains that Americans' verbal facility and "attention span would obviously have been extraordinary by current standards" (45). The citizenry has declined, he argues, because citizens watch TV and no longer read: "almost every scholar . . . has concluded that the process [of reading] encourages rationality," while televisual logic short-circuits rational thought in favor of slogans, images, mere stories—in short, entertainment.<sup>2</sup>

The late Christopher Lasch, in *The Revolt of the Elites*, blames not only television for making argument a "lost art" but also the undemocratic leanings of intellectuals and academics. How far we have fallen, he argues, from the Golden Years of the nineteenth century, when serious public argument was practiced by both the citizenry and the media. In those days the newspapers (Lasch singles out Horace Greeley's New York *Tribune*) "were journals of opinion in which the reader expected to find a definite point of view, together with unrelenting criticism of opposing points of view" (163). The beginning of the decline (the nadir of which he hopes we are presently experiencing) began in the progressive era, when intellectual leaders preached the "'scientific management' of public affairs. . . . They forged links between the government and the university so as to assure a steady supply of experts and expert knowledge. But they had little use for public debate" (167). Academics and

intellectuals, Lasch argues, were seeking desperately to gain a voice in public debate. Then, as now, intellectuals and academics were challenging public discourse and public culture, striving to diminish its power over the citizenry.

Today too, academics from rhetoric and composition studies are engaged in a healthful questioning of public argument. Teaching writing, they argue, should make students critical observers of the way their culture seeks to persuade the citizenry to certain positions. Some, such as John Trimbur, fear (quite correctly, I think) that the current decay of public discourse is in part responsible for our students' impoverished notions of argument. "[T]elevision programs such as *Firing Line*, *Crossfire*, and *Nightline*" teach the citizenry and our students the point of argumentation is "to be for one [side] or the other. They've had little opportunity to participate meaningfully in public discourse" (249). For Ann E. Berthoff, argumentation is "a culture-bound skill," which contemporary students fail at because they rarely, if ever, hear authentic argument whereas "Argument was the air you breathed, a hundred years ago" (25).

But American intellectuals and academics have been lamenting the decay of public argument for a long time, *especially* a hundred years ago. *That* crisis was of course created not by TV but by the explosion of print, especially the newspaper and other cheap reading materials that were perceived to be destroying Americans' capacity for critical thought. Therefore, with Michael Schudson ("Was There?") I question whether an exemplary nineteenth-century public sphere really existed. With Lasch I would point out the similarity between that era and our own. Nineteenth-century American academics and intellectuals thought public discussion had been taken to abysmal lows and envisioned the "new university" as one place where the character of public discourse could be challenged and even altered.

A. S. Hill also feared for the communicative and thinking capacities of American college students and conceived the composition course as one place where such pernicious communication might be resisted. Hill criticized the emerging mass media for damaging Americans' consciousness and their habits of discourse; he believed that the composition course could provide students with the "moral stamina" to resist the onslaughts of an alien and powerful popular culture, so that students might be able to "put their real selves behind the pen, and keep them there" (*Our English* 107, 46). Mass culture, for Hill, resembled a kind of infection, against which rhetorical training could provide inoculation, a means of *resisting* mass culture.

It may seem odd to portray Hill in the role of a cultural critic who, like so many contemporary educators, argued that the problem with students could be traced to a dangerous and powerful mass culture that had come to dominate their consciousness. Indeed, Hill sometimes seems to emblemize almost everything wrong in writing instruction. Robert Connors has called Hill, half

seriously, half tongue-in-cheek, "everyone's *bête noire*" ("Writing" 64). And while I concur that Hill, his textbooks, and his followers immeasurably impoverished the teaching of writing, a deeper consideration of his biography and the exigencies of his culture renders a somewhat different, and I hope richer, representation of his motivations. I wish neither to apologize for Hill nor to condemn him further. Rather, I wish to begin an exploration of how composition's origins can be traced to cultural exigencies as they were perceived by the intellectual/academic elite, exigencies that may remind us of those we face today.

Even with the many revisionist composition histories, the boundaries of composition historiography could stand some jostling. This might further complicate the portrait drawn, most notably, by James Berlin, whose work portrayed the architects of American composition as somehow "in league" with much larger malevolent cultural forces. While there no doubt existed some relationship between composition and these forces (who would disagree?), the specific characteristics and the specific power relationships have gone largely unexplored. The connections between "society" (or "ideology" or "culture") and composition, remain as mysterious as ever, where "society" (or whatever) has taken on an eerily omnipotent character.<sup>3</sup> I wish to challenge what has become a false truism in composition history, that "Historians agree," as John Schilb puts it, "composition studies was invented purely . . . to help [students] face the newly specialized demands of higher education and the emerging circumstances of corporate life" (174; see also Gere 37 and Sullivan 223). The story, I argue, is more complicated and more interesting.

Nan Johnson's important work showed how nineteenth-century rhetoric strived to become civically influential and explained how rhetorical theory was well adapted to *intellectual* ideas about what should constitute American habits of discourse, argument, and reasoning. However, her work does not distinguish between the various competing arguments over whose version of discourse should dominate. When she speaks of the "cultural imperatives" of rhetoric, she is speaking of culture in rather hermetic terms: not "American" culture but the culture of the American patrician, educated classes.<sup>4</sup> I suggest that composition history move beyond historiography that interprets the utterances of intellectuals within the narrow contexts of intellectual circles. Instead, these nineteenth-century intellectual ideas might be interpreted as reactions within the larger, heterogenous web of culture, composed as it is of various institutions and various discourses competing with one another. It might become a history that does not depend solely upon what the lives, actions, and words of prominent intellectuals and educators can tell us about American culture, "except as mere windows into a small sector of highly elite culture, of whose nature we seem already to be well aware" (Cayton 597). Histories profit by exploring the larger contexts of intellectual discourse, which is always part of

the contest between conflicting groups over symbolic meaning. The discourse of any discipline—and especially the discourse of a discipline, like composition, striving to be born and legitimized—"competes" with oppositional discourses. In examining the intersections or points of contact between composition discourse and other institutional discourses, we gain insight into the dynamics of how early advocates of college writing instruction strived to forward their versions of what might lead not only to better student writing but also to a less gullible citizenry and a more just society.

It becomes necessary, therefore, to determine the cultural place and import of any discourse by locating it within the interrelationships among other (allied as well as competing) institutional discourses. For instance, Foucault examined the birth of medical discourse as it emerged among competing and allied institutions and discourses. Here I locate the emergence of composition discourse within *allied* intellectual/academic arguments and institutions—namely, the "new university"—that perceived mass culture as dangerously powerful; and I locate it also within the *competing* discourses and institutions—namely, the newspaper—of mass culture itself. In other words, I suggest that composition history, in examining the arguments for the establishment of the institution of composition, should continue striving to recover what social concerns were "at stake." And while I would not suppose that I might name and describe *all* (or *the*) social contexts influencing composition's development, I can point to and describe one important social "crisis" upon which much of composition's work depended—a "crisis in public discourse."

More generally, composition was established during an institutional/discursive battle between patrician intellectuals and the more "dominant" culture of the "plutocracy"—a favorite epithet of the patrician intellectuals for, as they perceived things, the newly powerful philistines. The composition course was one site where "dominant," "plutocratic" discourse was at issue; it was also a site where intellectuals could muster some culturally symbolic leverage. The composition course, in other words, was conceived by Hill as a site where the dominant rhetoric of the plutocracy could be unmasked, opposed, resisted. It was part of a larger effort to vanquish the forms of discourse and argumentation that had been (or seemed to the intellectuals to have been) established by the plutocracy with their newspapers and other low-class, cheap reading. It was a conflict over the nature of symbolic conflict: Patrician intellectuals felt that Americans no longer could respond profitably from genuinely dialectic discourse, and they aimed to change that.

To contextualize my reading of Hill's work, I note three facets of cultural conflict in late nineteenth-century America. First, to use the terminology of historians such as Richard Hofstadter and Alan Trachtenberg, "patrician intellectuals" were frustrated by their fall from grace in America. They

perceived themselves as disenfranchised from public influence and perennially at odds with what Tocqueville had called "the tyranny of the majority." Nothing would have been more distasteful to this class than *fitting in* with American popular culture and its "alien mentality" (Hofstadter 176), which they perceived to be increasingly coercive and increasingly hazardous to Americans' "habits of reflection."

Second, nineteenth-century Americans experienced the most jarring of America's "communications revolutions," which led to radical changes in the nature of American newspapers and in the nature of American newspaper readers. Significantly, Hill experienced this revolution first-hand working for Horace Greeley's New York *Tribune* (1861-1864). With rapidly advancing technologies of printing, paper, and transportation, the period 1833-1860 saw the advent of the "penny paper," which produced "nothing less than a revolution in news" (Mott 215); the newspaper, almost suddenly, was no longer the province of an elite class of merchant and intellectuals.<sup>5</sup> With the telegraph (1849) and the Civil War, news-gathering bodies possessed the means for distributing the news quickly throughout a virtually unified North, thus creating a public that was ever more hungry to know the events of the preceding day. It created also a new class of "newspaper barons," who grew rich from the questionable reading habits of the public. In such an atmosphere of public discourse, post-Civil War intellectuals perennially fretted about public culture falling into the hands of the uncultivated, capitalistic classes—the "plutocracy." By the time that Hill assumed the Boylston Professorship in 1876, it had already become a American cliché that the newspaper had replaced the rostrum and the pulpit. Although journalism historians disagree about the specifics of causes and timing, they overwhelmingly concur that by the end of the Civil War, Americans had acquired their "hunger for the news," and the newspaper had become—unfortunately for America's patrician intellectuals—the center of public discourse.

Third, closely tied to the communications revolution and to the crisis in public authority was a crisis of *self*. As culture and media historian Daniel J. Czitrom notes, the optimism associated with the telegraph—as the "sublime moral force" that would unify public sentiment (11)—was counterbalanced against the fear that "the [electronic] transmission of thought" (10) and other changes in communications technologies were leading to the fragmentation of selfhood, the public self always invading the private self. "By the end of the nineteenth century," argues T. J. Jackson Lears,

the self seemed neither independent, nor unified, nor fully conscious, but rather interdependent, discontinuous, divided. . . . The older conception of the self had been the foundation of the bourgeois world view; the newer one undermined that foundation at

every point. The older conception was solid, the new one insubstantial. (38)

And as Richard Hofstadter has noted, one of the more prevalent and effective attacks against intellectuals was the accusation of "selflessness." Intellectuals were charged with a "lack of self, a lack of capacity for grappling with reality, a lack of assertion, of masculinity" (186). This charge of "lack of self" was one that intellectuals controverted by arguing that, in fact, it was mass discourse and mass values that disintegrated selfhood. Intellectuals, they argued, did not suffer from selflessness; rather, it was the masses, with their mass literacy and mass values, which had lost coherence of self.

The most prominent patrician intellectual to lead the charge against these forces—against the mass media, against anti-intellectualism, and against the kind of citizen-self that resulted from mass-media influence—was E. L. Godkin. The editor of both the *Nation* and the *New York Evening Post* and a revered commentator on American politics and culture, Godkin was enormously influential among intellectuals. He was especially influential at Harvard, where his reputation was so great he was invited by his close friend Charles W. Eliot to become a professor.<sup>6</sup> (Godkin's most *direct* significance to American composition historiography was his involvement as second author of the Harvard literacy reports of the 1890s.) Much like present-day critics of "sound-bite journalism," "McNews," and "News Lite," Godkin periodically blasted the media for impoverishing the critical capacities of the American citizenry. As he complained in the second issue of the *Nation*, in 1865, one of the more serious problems in America concerned the reading habits of its citizenry, who responded so enthusiastically to degenerating public debate and who looked upon "any demand on their reflective powers . . . as a species of extortion" ("The Newspaper" 165). To a remarkable degree, Godkin's media criticism resembles—almost humorously—that of contemporary critics who censure the electronic mass media for transforming the serious presentation of civic issues to money-making entertainment. "Now nothing," wrote Godkin in 1890,

could be more damaging to the *habit of continuous attention* than newspaper-reading . . . , [which] never requires the mind to be fixed on any topic more than three or four minutes, . . . every topic furnish[ing] a complete change of scene. The result for the habitual newspaper-reader is a mental desultoriness, which ends by making a book on any one subject more or less repulsive. ("Newspapers" 202, my emphasis)

In modern terms, newspaper intelligence was *creating* a new kind of reader, a passive reader who now demanded spoon-fed "intelligence" in doses small enough to satisfy her diminishing attention span.<sup>7</sup> The news was becoming difficult to distinguish from what Godkin labeled "entertainment." He concludes a 1890 article with typical intellectual resignation as he imagined a nightmarish future citizenry that had derived its "tastes, opinions, and standards" from newspapers: "what sort of world this will produce a hundred years hence nobody knows" ("Newspapers" 202).

Godkin's comments illustrate intellectuals' widespread fear and loathing of the mass media's cultural power and its infectiousness. The newspaper not only appealed to habitually passive readers but also *created* such readers. As I will illustrate, Hill concurred with Godkin and with general patrician intellectual sentiment that the "new" newspaper was a dangerous force in the arena of public discourse.

Intellectual rancor toward newspapers was deep, acute, and perennial. Intellectuals had vied for public opinion ("opinion moulding," as they called it) with the profit-driven philistines of journalism and politics, and, at least in the popular-public sphere, it was the philistines who clearly had triumphed. Intellectuals felt excluded from public debate and felt, therefore, "condemned to political ineffectuality." Any full-fledged "frontal assault on any major citadel of politics or administration" was impossible, so they "content[ed] themselves with the hope that occasionally they could get their way by acting 'on the limited number of cultivated minds'" (Hofstadter 176, 178).

One of their principal strategies for regaining, or conserving, some social power lay in the modern university. The university's mission had at least two parts: research and teaching. Through research, universities could mount an organized front against common public opinion: It could provide alternative models for what would count as public knowledge and could undertake different models for discussions of public policy. Through undergraduate instruction, universities could reinvigorate an elite class of Americans with values that opposed those fostered by popular public discourse. The composition classroom specifically, according to Hill, could play an important role in remedying the damage done by the mass media: Not only could it oppose public discourse, but it could also prevent students from coming under the sway of an ever-more alluring and "infectious" mass media.

Therefore, I disagree with the idea that Hill's composition theory centered on "adjusting to [a culture] already in the building" (Ried 231) or that Hill and others were somehow unquestionably "in league" with capitalist designs. Intellectuals thought themselves unwelcome and uncomfortable in American society, a society that had taken a horribly wrong turn, a society that embraced execrable values, which were disseminated through an increasingly powerful network of communications.

While I recognize the complexities involved in the concept of "intention," I believe that composition historians need to reconsider the idea that Hill (and others) *intentionally* created the composition course to prepare students to "fit in" with the new "managerial capitalism" or with "society" in general. Some of the cultural histories of composition suggest that the composition course was intended to create docile bodies. But docile bodies—that is, citizens who had lost the ability to think for themselves and who received all their values, opinions, and information from the media—was the very problem Hill believed he was addressing.

The biographical information available on Hill is meager, especially considering his status as Harvard-named professor and chair of his department. His "general folder" at the Harvard University Archives is extraordinarily thin, containing exactly one handwritten document, a grouchy dispatch written to the newly appointed editor of the *Boston Post*, comprising a single sentence denouncing newspapers: ". . . I believe that, in the long run, newspaper wheels require the grease of filthy lucre, as do most things in this worldly world."<sup>8</sup>

While historians often note Hill's journalism background, it is usually suggested, merely, that the telegraphic nature of post-1850s journalism accounts for his obsession with efficiency. Missing from composition historiography is Hill's significance in the history of American journalism. Although he was no giant, one journalism historian gives Hill the major share of credit for inducing Lincoln to come forward with the Emancipation Proclamation when he did, rather than much later (Starr 123-26). Hill was in fact a remarkably successful "newspaper man" during this paradigm-altering period of journalism. On the other hand, he was frustrated with newspaper work (which did his precarious health no good) as he despised his boss, Horace Greeley, and believed his hard work and capabilities should have earned him a better position than "newspaper hack" (for example, Letter to Sydney Howard Gay). He got his chance to rise above "hack" status when, with Henry Villard (famous Civil War correspondent, later a millionaire railroad financier and then benefactor to the *Nation* and *Evening Post*) and Horace White (later in life a leading Chicago editor and a prominent liberal and progressive), he established the "Independent News Room" (Reilly 230-45; Schwarzlose 252-58). The Independent News Room was the first and only newsbroking agency that dared to compete with the New York Associated Press, which held an absolute monopoly over telegraphic intelligence. This monopoly and its robber-baron head, Daniel Craig, held United States editors at its mercy. Most newspaper persons, in turn, despised Craig and his monopoly (Schwarzlose 186-205, 211-23).

The Independent News Room enjoyed a very successful but very brief six months in competition with Craig. Their competition was successful enough that Craig finally endeavored (and probably succeeded) in bringing down the

upstart newsbrokers by disseminating a lie that the three men had propagated a seditious hoax about Lincoln declaring a national time of mourning, including two days of fasting and the conscription of a half-million more troops (Bates 225-30). Disloyalty to the Union was a particularly dangerous charge to make during the "black spring" of 1864, which witnessed a rash of mob violence against "Copperhead newspapers," whose loyalty was uncertain (Mott 358-59). With most journalism historians, I see the efforts of Hill and his colleagues in ideological terms: as part of the often-frustrated campaign to ensure that information flowed freely and did not remain under the control of a single unscrupulous entity, specifically Craig's monopoly.

My point is that Hill was more than someone with "experience in journalism." He was one of the important journalists of the Civil War, when, according to most historians, modern journalism took root, and when newspaper reading became an American habit. Further, there is ample reason for Hill to have despised the ways newspapers worked, especially the newspaper as it was becoming one of the principal instruments in the burgeoning mass media—that is, as the newspaper was becoming more and more a tool of capitalism, a means for amassing huge fortunes by providing Americans with entertainment that was not in their own best interest.

Indeed, as early as 1856, Hill expressed his perception that the newspaper in America and newspaper readership were changing steadily for the worse. Just after passing the bar exam in New York City, at the age of twenty-three, Hill wrote to his Harvard mentor, James Walker (Harvard President, 1853-1860), to solicit his opinion about whether Hill should enter the dubious and possibly dangerous profession of journalism: "Will you inform me whether an inclination to become an editor, which I am beginning to feel is in effect and inclination to throw myself over a precipice—whether, if yielded to, this would be inevitable, moral or mental? [sic]" The letter, full of youthful anguish, goes on to discuss his dissatisfaction with law, his doubts about a literary career, and, most important to my argument, his belief that journalism, *because* it was powerful and in disrepute, *needs* persons like Hill, who possess high moral character and "a fine and vigorous style." While Hill worries whether his moral constitution can withstand the challenge of newspaper work, he portrays such a career choice as morally righteous: "As I perceive the influence which the newspaper is exerting . . . , I debate with myself whether any mission be more noble in this country . . . and whether any [profession] call more earnestly for the right man, with right aims?"

And later in his writing career, Hill, like numerous others of his contemporaries, publicly criticized the mass media. His first such public criticism came shortly after Hill had freed himself from newspaper work (in April 1864) and then recuperated from the latest of his frequent "breakdowns." In the *North American Review*, Hill published a remarkable essay criticizing

newspaper discourse and its pernicious effects. He makes this criticism obliquely, through his scathing review of a book by Horace Greeley, "Greeley's American Conflict," which addresses and condemns (1) Greeley himself, (2) the "newspaper style of composition" (247) and the newspaper's modes presenting the facts, and (3) popular forms of opinion-making, argumentation, and epistemology. Greeley was despised by Hill and, in general, by American intellectuals, especially the elite class of "respectable" journalists, but Greeley possessed enormous popularity in America and possessed enormous power over the public and public policy. (Lincoln remarked in the midst of the Civil War that Greeley and his *Tribune* were "as helpful to me as an army of one hundred thousand men" [quoted without citation by Starr 127].) Furthermore, Greeley had come to stand synecdochically for the new, powerful newspaper, which was run by uneducated, lower-class men who grew sinfully rich from their exploitations of American taste.<sup>9</sup> Thus, Greeley served for Hill as the ideal target for criticizing the new journalism and its control of public discussion and public thought.

These sentiments stayed with Hill, even into his years as Boylston Professor of Rhetoric and as a principal architect of the American composition course. In his rhetorics he was fond of using newspaper prose to exemplify barbarisms, vulgarisms, solecisms, grammatical impurity, and so on, and he speaks in various places of the differences between the "scholar," who is careful and reluctant to accept linguistic change, and the "popular writer," who embraces it without much thought (for example, *Principles* 27). As I will argue momentarily, this attitude toward the newspapers is most explicit in his essays that explain his rationale for teaching writing in college.

The composition course was a novel phenomenon, part of the "new university." Like his Harvard classmate (1853) Charles W. Eliot, who spent a good deal of his time addressing the public, describing and defending the methods and goals of the new university, Hill apparently felt he needed to justify the composition course; and he wrote a series of articles in the 1880s doing just this, for magazines such as *Harper's*, *Scribner's*, and *The Christian Register*, later collected in *Our English* (1888). Hill maintains that sound rhetorical training might endow students with resistance for opposing the all-too-enticing discourse and thinking habits fostered by the newspaper and the dime novel. Even on the first page of this volume, for the epigraph Hill uses a passage from Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* that expresses fear about the effect of the "vicious phraseology" of popular public discourse upon "our style," suggesting further that the remedy to such attacks upon style lies in education.

I suggest we can learn from this volume, which was intended neither for students nor for other academics but for a more general—though certainly upper-crust—audience in order to inform them about the need for teaching writing. It is significant that Hill spends so little time discussing bad writing in

itself (as, for instance, the Harvard reports do) but discusses the social importance of learning to write well. True, we remember Hill mostly for injecting "the doctrine of mechanical correctness" into composition, and, certainly, his textbooks and what we know of his teaching methods seem to focus on such matters.<sup>10</sup> However, there is a relatively coherent social philosophy of writing *behind* those textbooks, which is clarified in *Our English*. For Hill, poor grammar and lack of clarity and cohesion were indeed problems, but they were *symptoms* of a larger, more frightening problem. One problem, argued Hill, was *too much* dry, uncontextualized grammatical instruction,<sup>11</sup> but the paramount problem in student writing was its *homogeneity*, brought on, argues Hill, by a menacing, homogenizing mass media. Hill complains, for instance, of the "tedious mediocrity" of student compositions: "[T]here is a dead level, rarely varied by a fresh thought or an individual expression" (13). Hill wonders what could have brought about this low(ly) order of homogenization among "the picked youth of the country, . . . all with blood in their veins, and brains in their heads, . . . [m]any of [whom] came from the best families in point of culture and breeding, and from the best schools we have" (14). This "tedious mediocrity"—its causes and its remedies—is a major focus of Hill's essays. The "tedious mediocrity" of student compositions is caused by students trying (however consciously) to emulate the discourse of popular culture—what they find in newspapers and in the other trash they read. The student, by immersing himself or herself so fully in popular writing, loses touch with his or her individuality and thus reproduces the cultural verities and cultural forms of writing. The most important goal for the teacher of writing, then, is helping the student to rediscover this real self: "A wise teacher of English will try to make his pupils *put their real selves behind the pen, and keep them there*" (46).

Students do not *lack* the mental powers that are necessary for complex forms of thinking, but in emulating the discourse of popular culture (trying to "outrealist modern realists" [92]) their powers go dormant. Newspapers and novels, writes Hill, are the primary culprits in weakening the capacity for critical thought and expression. The predominance of such reading has homogenized the American mind, and more specifically the minds of college students. "To read nothing but newspapers and second-rate novels," warns Hill, as he seems to echo the fears of other intellectuals such as Godkin, "tends to weaken the powers of attention and of concentration, to diminish, if not to destroy, freshness of thought and individuality of expression, and to relax the mental fibre" (106). "Therefore," while popular reading material tends to relax one's critical faculties, writes Hill, "educated men should *arm themselves* at all points against the numerous foes that beset pure English on every side, in these days of free speech and free press" (78, my emphasis).

In fact, writes Hill, newspapers are defining an entirely new philosophy of composition, one that values conformity, rapidity of composing, and

grandiloquence over individuality, thoughtfulness, and concision. The newspaper reporter (the "news-gatherer") and the modern novelist were defining—for American culture and thus for students—the nature of composing and of the composed product. The ubiquitous and enticing models found in journalism led students to their habitual pronouncement of clichés and their abandonment of individual expression and thought. The articles one reads in newspapers "smack of the mill, the writer sinking his individuality in that of the journal to which he contributes. Even if he had the desire, he has not the time *to be himself*, as he has not the time to be concise" (118-19, my emphasis). The novelist has a "better chance" of expressing her or his individuality, "but he also is in haste to get his wares to market, and is inspired by the idols of the market-place rather than by the spirit within" (119). Concision, then, is not *simply* a matter of efficiency; it was not *simply* the way to conform to a Taylorized society. Concision was also a cultural marker, a sign that the writer possessed a certain degree of cultural capital, a sign that the writer has rejected the style and the audience of the mass media. Concision was a sign of healthy countercultural thinking.

Hill recognizes that "people will not give up reading ephemeral publications" (135). In fact, such reading will most likely continue to grow in degree and in cultural influence, because of changes in the technologies of communication.<sup>12</sup> These changes, in turn, were leading, he seemed to understand, to changes in hierarchies of literacy, and in the nature of authorship and readership. The newspaper was both seductive and dangerous because *anyone* could read it. In fact, intellectuals complained perhaps most often about the fact that newspapers were targeted to the lower classes of America, and newspaper reading was therefore pulling down the entire nation.

Even worse, laments Hill—pointing his finger at the problems of authority created by the explosion of print—almost anyone could *write* for newspapers; too many with too few qualifications are "at liberty to publish" (122). Therefore, rather than turning their backs on the American press, wishing it away, intellectuals should, Hill argues, engage it at its very foundations. Hill echoes the sentiments expressed in his 1856 letter to James Walker when he advocates that "[m]en and women of culture and of high aims must be encouraged to write for the public" (137).

As Nan Johnson has shown, this sentiment of civic duty—that the rhetor is obliged to use his or her abilities to promote the social good—was at the foundation of American rhetoric and composition. Persons who had cultivated the faculty of taste were best able to envision civic virtue, and it was their civic duty to help the rest of society to comprehend that vision. This notion of the civic rhetor was solidly at the foundation of Hill's rationale for teaching writing. But Hill feared that newspaper work, like newspaper English, almost inevitably abrades the better sensibilities of even the most cultured persons.

College graduates have an especially important and perilous duty "because of late years large numbers of them have taken to the pen [that is, journalism] for a living, and because they are *exposed to special dangers*" (138, my emphasis). The temptation to resort to the lowly standards of newspaper English is enormous. A youth can withstand "the chilling influences" of the newspaper room only if "his English is hardy" (137-38).<sup>13</sup> Then the young reporter might use his English, "*not as an end in itself, but as a means to something more important[:]* . . . [his English may be] felt in his little world as a *purifying and inspiring force*" (139, my emphasis).

Young writers must not only be given the *ability* to write well, but must also be endowed with the what Hill calls the "moral stamina" to resist the temptation to allow one's writing to suffer from a kind of disintegration—and disintegration of language was intimately connected, for Hill, to the disintegration of "individuality," of the self (107). When writers fail to "put their real selves behind the pen," they become not themselves, but products of their culture, spouting forth the empty-headed clichés of an empty-headed culture. American culture, for patrician intellectuals, had little to do with one's genuine self, but with what today we might call a "massified" self: "To the extent that [a writer] fails to put himself into his work," writes Hill, "he becomes . . . a mere beast of burden that serves as a common carrier for the thoughts of other men" (65).<sup>14</sup>

For Hill, as for the Scottish Common-Sense Rationalists, for the British Romanticists, and for other nineteenth-century American rhetorical theorists, the ability to write well involved more than erecting a facade of language. Good, coherent, moral writing signified a "good," "coherent," "moral" "self" behind the pen. Thus, Hill insists—he seems, in fact, obsessed with the point—that the writing teacher must allow the student writer to offer forth his or her *true* self, not some imposter self that serves merely as the "beast of burden of other men's thoughts."

According to the Common-Sense school, as for Hill and for Arnoldian English-department apologists, "human nature" was universal among humankind, and the best way to enable students to perceive the nature of human nature was to expose them to the great works of great minds. By coming into contact with the works of genius—the most beautiful productions of what Dugald Stewart called the "natural aristocracy"—persons not only strengthened and refined their faculties of taste but also discovered their "true" nature: "human nature," their "true self." One becomes *more* oneself by coming into contact with the genius of eras past. At the same time, one becomes *less* the product of one's contemporary society, which, for Hill, had everything to do with profit-making and popularity and almost nothing to do with the universal standards of taste, propriety, reason, and virtue.

By helping students recognize the imposter selves that popular culture encouraged them to erect, and by helping students discover and fortify their real selves, composition could help American youth step outside their culture, resist it, and slowly but steadily alter it.

Hill envisioned teaching writing as a countercultural endeavor, one, in fact, that resembles some contemporary goals for the teaching of writing. Hill's theory of cultural studies in composition provides us, I think, with additional insight into the ideological origins of the five-paragraph essay, with its ideal of the mechanically flawless, stable, coherent, autonomous voice. Creating such a voice—such a self—distances the writer from a dangerous world of discourse and thinking that incessantly strives to inhabit the student.

I question both Hill's approach and some "composition and cultural studies" approaches along similar lines, specifically, their goals of what I have called *inoculation*. Just as I question Hill's belief that great works of literature and sound linguistic training could endow the writing student with the "moral stamina" to resist the temptations of culture, I question the idea that cultural theory in the classroom can provide the student with a kind of protective barrier between her and her culture, so that culture cannot gain so profound a grasp on her consciousness. True, we "expose" students to cultural conflict, but we often do so by importing it into the classroom in small, safe doses, usually with an accompanying essay that would help explain away and thus ward off the power of that conflict. While I agree that mass culture is in many respects dangerous, I do not believe that the royal road to combining cultural studies and composition lies in providing students (banking style) with the critical theory to unmask and thus "master" culture.

The "ideal of mechanical correctness" has been rejected by most of Composition Studies, but it is this other legacy that needs continued challenge: the ideal of the autonomous human being behind the pen, who fortifies herself against confusion and against an alien culture *by* writing. I am not suggesting we encourage incoherent meandering, but if we want our students to face and embrace cultural conflict, it should be real conflict, and not just imported, safe conflict. With Joseph Harris, I believe Composition Studies is unique in its capacity for engaging student response, for addressing students as individuals, and for helping them wrestle with the conflicts they bring with them to the classroom. Embracing such conflict leads inevitably to messiness and very often to writerly selves that "fall apart" both mechanically and ethically. Focusing on this sort of conflict may do little to "inoculate" students against the dangerous strains of discourse within their culture, but it can do much, I think, toward bringing them to a healthful understanding of the complexity and confusion of their culture as well the complexity and confusion of their role in that culture.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to Sharon Crowley and Robert Connors, my *RR* reviewers, for reading my manuscript with care and for providing helpful criticism.

<sup>2</sup> Postman's is one of numerous such arguments, of which Lanham provides a thorough critique (Chapters 8 and 9).

<sup>3</sup> Berlin's work, obviously, constitutes an almost magisterial accomplishment, but it is typical of much new historicism that assumes, as Lentricchia argues, a "metaphysics of power" which is impossible to know, let alone to resist (95-97).

<sup>4</sup> One reviewer asked that I define culture as I am using the word. I not only mean not "a particular way of life . . . of a people, a period or a group" (*Keywords* 80) but also wish to suggest Williams's "sociology of culture," which, rather than separating intellectual activities from social and material processes, strives to analyze, "link," and even "unify" such diverse social material processes as communication technologies, the sociology of consciousness, and the sociology of audiences (*Marxism* 136-41).

<sup>5</sup> It was during this time that the newspaper "was established as a capitalist institution" (Tebbel 1974, 180). Cheap dailies created a "great change in [the reading] public . . . [and] caused a shift in the news concept," constituting a "great societal change. The drayman with a newspaper in his hands was far more important social and political unit than he had been the days when his information came down to him from the mercantile and educated classes" (Mott, *American* 243). Schudson writes that the Civil War "pushed the newspaper closer to the center of national consciousness" (*Discovery* 67).

<sup>6</sup> William James said of Godkin, "To my generation, his was certainly the towering influence in all thought concerning public affairs, and indirectly his influence has certainly been more pervasive than that of any other writer of the generation, for he influenced other writers who never quoted him, and determined the whole current of discussion" (qtd. in Ogden 221). Charles Eliot Norton wrote to his friend Godkin (a quotation that is almost ubiquitous cultural histories of this era), "the *Nation* & Harvard & Yale seem to me almost the only solid barriers against the invasion of modern barbarism & vulgarity" (Norton to Godkin, 3 Nov. 1871, cited in Hofstadter 174). See also Mott (1938:3:339, 341) and Tebbel and Zuckerman (122).

<sup>7</sup> "Intelligence" at that time in America referred to the data received via the telegraph; the word seems to have been a hot button for these intellectuals, just as "information" elicits from cultural historians like Theodore Roszak and composition theorists like Josephine Miles and Van Hillard.

<sup>8</sup> Letter to E[dwin] M. Bacon, 6 May 1886, Adams Sherman Hill General Folder, Harvard University Archives. Next to the meager collection of letters at the Harvard University Archives, the Sydney Howard Gay collection at Columbia University has the largest number of Hill letters, all written while Hill was the "Washington man" for the New York *Tribune* during the Civil War. Duke University Archives has the letters Hill received during the Civil War and has drafts of some of his more formal letters. From the indignant tone of many of his respondents, I conclude that Hill's reputation for irascibility is well founded; Hill seems to have relished confrontation and ridicule in his epistles to colleagues as well his superiors. More important to my argument, these letters, coupled with those found in the Sydney Howard Gay Collection and with Civil War journalism historiography, reveal the development of Hill's rancor toward journalism and help explain his theory of teaching writing.

<sup>9</sup> In his letters to Gay, Hill repeatedly voices his disdain for Greeley. On the intellectuals' general disdain for Greeley, see Stewart and Tebbel (230-37) and Emery (229-30).

<sup>10</sup> One of my reviewers requested "more connections between Hill's ideas about culture and his pedagogy." While this is an important project, I cannot begin to satisfactorily address it here. First, it is risky to infer a rhetorician's method/philosophy from the rhetoric she writes. On the other hand, the "English A" class notes taken by Hill's students reveal that classroom criticism of public discourse often reflected Hill's criticism in *Our English*.

<sup>11</sup> Hill complains that "Many teachers . . . act as if they thought it more important that a boy should spell and punctuate correctly than that he should write an essay which is a pleasure to read" (8-9). Hill condemns "frigid correctness"; the "teacher should leave free play to individuality, remembering that an opinion which is a boy's own is worth more to him than the most orthodox dogmas taken at second hand" (31).

<sup>12</sup> Hill acknowledge that the rising supremacy of writing over speaking would foster a paradigm shift in rhetoric. In his copy of Whately's *Rhetoric*, where Whately discusses the issue of "energy,"

"number of words," and the differences between reading and writing, Hill writes in bold marginalia, "the difference between read & spoken discourse." In the same book, Hill writes in the marginalia of Appendix AA (with no stimulus that I can discern), "Necessary for writer to imagine an audience; in conversation, one doesn't [sic]" (underline in original). In fact, contrary to David Russell's assertions (3-7), most everyone involved in early composition seemed to have realized that the medium of writing posed special problems that were different from those of speaking. Compare, for instance, Russell's reading of the "Harvard Literacy Reports" with the sections of the reports that emphasize the shift from mouth to pen (Adams et al. 28: 153-55; 71; 411-12).

<sup>13</sup> This position was typical. In 1888 Godkin wrote to William James that newspaper work was "destructive both in mind and character. I would nearly as soon see a son of mine opening a faro bank or an assignation house. All the influences of a newspaper office on a young man are extremely demoralizing" (*Gilded* 371).

<sup>14</sup> Charles Moore (Hill's student) expresses a similar sentiment in 1855: "For better or worse, the direct authority once exerted by the pulpit has been transferred largely to the indirect influence of the press. . . . The only way this duty can be fulfilled is by sending into newspaper work young men of sound principles and high honor. . . . If a college does not teach manliness where shall we find such a school?" (135).

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