

ONE

THE LURE OF LITERACY

Literacy is not the only problem, nor is it the only solution.

—Harvey J. Graff, *The Labyrinths of Literacy*

We want to believe that every American needs to know how to read and write. The result is that no academic topic seems quite so durable a legislative—and media and popular—concern as America’s apparently chronic literacy crisis: the real or imagined breakdowns in the reading and writing that we consider so central to the successful operation of our democracy. With that sort of presence always looming over Composition, anything can happen.

—Stephen North, *The Making of Knowledge in Composition*

In *Writing from These Roots*, John Duffy defines literacy as a “constituent of rhetoric, a communicative modality, a technical contrivance for disseminating the version of reality preferred by a given institution, culture, group, or individual” (200). Throughout his study he posits a “rhetorical approach” to literacy, noting that such a perspective considers the “ways with words” used “in literacy instruction, especially the imposed and inherited words that shape the ways in which students and teachers think, talk, and write” (201). On the one hand, Duffy sees literacy as a part of rhetoric—the means through which one becomes more persuasive or achieves particular ends. In this sense, literacy may be understood as a discrete act, intended to move a particular audience to a specific type of action. On the other hand, Duffy’s latter statement speaks to a view of literacy that sees it as an end in and of itself. In this broader context, literacy is sometimes characterized as a perspective with complex connections to cultural and political systems and

ideologies. I foreground my study in Duffy's definition of literacy because his characterization of it reveals the complexity of understanding the fundamental nature of literacy as well as the consequences of possessing and providing access to literacy.

Freshman English is caught in a similar position when it comes to defining its aims and understanding its history. In various ways and at various times, compulsory composition is understood as embodying the aspirations of universities more generally. At other times, it is seen as a specific gate-keeping mechanism, an instrument (among many) through which educational aims are achieved. Similarly, the proposals to abolish freshman English that I examine in this chapter treat freshman composition as both the means and the end of higher education. Unlike current understandings of these proposals, which characterize these abolitionists as elitist and committed to the guiding tenets of liberal culture, I argue that contradictory definitions and attitudes about literacy and the consequences of possessing it are these proposals' predominant traits. In neglecting the role of these definitions and assumptions about literacy in the abolition debate, proposals to abolish composition have been evaluated in terms of their ability to realize their stated aims. This is significant: proposals to abolish compulsory composition have failed time and time again, and even though the studies discussed in this chapter are examined in both Connors's and Russell's histories of the abolition debate, they have been largely ignored in English studies more generally. As I argue throughout this book, we may repair a broken and critical connection to composition's past by demonstrating how characterizations and attitudes about literacy stand prominently among other expectations and concerns related to the history of higher education.

In this chapter, I re-read two proposals for the abolition of compulsory freshman English: Thomas Lounsbury's "Compulsory Composition in Colleges" in 1911 and Oscar James Campbell's "The Failure of Freshman English" in 1939. In "Romantics on Writing," David Russell examines both Lounsbury and Campbell; he argues that Romanticism and liberal culture are the driving forces behind these studies. I take up the same studies in this chapter because I wish to show how the New Literacy Studies (NLS) provides a generative theoretical lens through which to consider the Great Debate. By locating, naming, and connecting latent definitions and attitudes about literacy that inform these proposals to theories of language, we better understand why literacy remains composition's most pressing problem *and* solution. Toward this end, I begin by reviewing principal contributors and tenets of the New Literacy Studies. Particular discussions in this field emphasize perspectives and definitions of literacy that function as productive lenses through which to interpret proposals to abolish freshman English. That said, the following discussion is not meant to be a concluding state-

ment on literacy or the NLS in this project. In fact, each chapter of *The Lure of Literacy* attends to attitudes, uses, myths, definitions, and characterizations of literacy.

LITERACY STUDIES AND THE ABOLITION DEBATE

One of the reasons literacy presents so many challenges to English studies is because, despite prevailing wisdom, it does not *belong* to English studies nor to any of its subfields. Literacy is similar to other critical terms like “narrative,” “interpretation,” or “ethics” in the sense that it is simultaneously at home and without a home, always traversing the many fields and disciplines that attempt to pin it down, define it, and give it meaning. However, what makes literacy different from these expressions is that more often than not, teacher-researchers characterize, employ, and understand literacy in terms of the perceived consequences of possessing it. Nowhere are the implications of this move for composition studies more clearly delineated than in Stephen North’s *The Making of Knowledge in Composition: Portrait of an Emerging Field*.

North argues that the field of composition is comprised of distinct communities with incongruent philosophical, evidentiary, and methodological commitments. This methodological diversity reveals a lack of continuity in research and teaching practices, contributing to an overall feeling of “centerless-ness” in the field. Although many scholars criticize North for the artificiality of the methodological communities he constructs, as well as questioning many of his conclusions, North uncovers assumptions about literacy that should influence research and teaching in composition. For instance, in the conclusion to his study, North laments the consequences of assumptions about literacy, noting, “We want to believe that every American needs to know how to read and write. The result is that no academic topic seems quite so durable a legislative—and media and popular—concern as America’s apparently chronic literacy crisis: the real or imagined breakdowns in the reading and writing that we consider so central to the successful operation of our democracy. With that sort of presence always looming over Composition, anything can happen” (375). I believe North refers to the field’s commitment to literacy in this way—in terms of “presence”—because he wishes to highlight the nebulous and vague pressures this learning outcome exerts on composition. North suggests that although literacy, broadly defined, is one of the principal ends of composition theory and application, attitudes about literacy’s powers, purposes, and position in the field remain unacknowledged and misunderstood. To understand more clearly how assumptions about literacy may magnify the sensations of “centerless-ness” that North describes in his study, we must first identify and examine some of the prevailing assumptions that surround literacy and its presumed powers, particularly since these

assumptions are implicit and unacknowledged orientations for many calls for reform and change in composition, especially those calls connected to abolitionism. One of the most problematic assumptions about literacy is informed by speculation about the ostensible consequences of possessing it. In such cases, I argue that literacy itself is misunderstood, and amidst this confusion literacy gains extraordinary power as a symbol.

Little doubt exists that debates over the differences and similarities between oral and literate cultures have, in part, helped to shape scholars' attitudes about literacy in English studies more generally. At the center of this debate is Goody and Watt's "The Consequences of Literacy." In this often cited study, the authors argue that the invention of the Greek alphabet led to specific consequences: most notably, transformations on the cognitive level that are symptomatic of a shift from mythical to logical thought. The authors also claim that this cognitive shift produced a host of other social developments, including, the rise of democratic systems of government; the development of various forms of social and political organizations; and the capacity for technological progress. For Goody and Watt, cognitive capacities in oral societies are best described as lacking objectivity and relying on formulaic and associative systems of meaning making. When describing how oral societies transmit a "cultural repertoire," they write: "In the first place, it makes for a directness of relationship between symbol and referent. There can be no reference to 'dictionary definitions,' nor can words accumulate the successive layers of historically validated meanings which they acquire in a literate culture" (29). In other words, because oral cultures depend entirely on "vocal inflections and physical gestures" to communicate, they are unable to obtain distance from words and their referents.

In this claim, we find the assumption (one of many) that supports the dichotomy that Goody and Watt construct between oral and literate cultures. Oral societies lack the cognitive capacity to gain the type of critical distance that allows for a conceptualization of the world that is represented as separate from the moment. Simply put, oral cultures are forever tied to the present. In arguing for the "general differences" between oral and literate cultures, the authors assert, "writing establishes a different kind of relationship between the word and its referent, a relationship that is more general and more abstract, and less closely connected with the particularities of person, place and time, than obtains in oral communication" (44). With this presumption, the perceived ability to represent cognition as something removed from the present—as being able to achieve more objective, critical, and analytical perspectives—becomes one of the defining qualities that distinguishes literate societies from oral ones.

One of the most instructive examples of how this debate from literacy studies informs composition comes from Mike Rose's "Narrowing the Mind

and Page: Remedial Writers and Cognitive Reductionism.” In this study, Rose attends specifically to the problems posed by “great divide” characterizations of literacy, as well as some of its myths and legacies. Rose’s chief concerns are the “troubling consequences” (287) that stem from applying “strong” versions of literacy (like those relying on a “great divide” or “grand dichotomies”) to the theory and practice of basic writing instruction. In so doing, “adolescents and adults are thought to bear cognitive resemblance to (ethnocentric notions of) primitive tribesmen in remote third-world cultures” (287). The tendency, Rose argues, is for composition instructors who subscribe to “great divide” theories to draw generalizations from exceptional cases. These generalizations lead to disturbing conclusions: basic writers lack the cognitive ability to think analytically; they lack critical distance from their own lives and are thus tied socially and philosophically to the present; they believe printed words are concrete things; they are not capable of thinking abstractly about the world they live in (287). Interestingly, and as I will demonstrate, these conclusions are similar to the critiques of freshman composition that have served as the rationales for many calls for the abolition of the first-year requirement.

In addition to attending to the orality/literacy debate, Rose’s essay also delineates a recurring undercurrent that traverses both literacy studies and composition. When “strong theories” of literacy form the theoretical framework for writing pedagogy, such approaches are often symptomatic of a teaching disposition that is asking too much of literacy. In *National Literacy Campaigns and Movements: Historical and Comparative Perspectives*, Robert F. Arno and Harvey J. Graff write: “To ask of literacy that it overcome gender discrimination, integrate a society, eliminate inequalities, and contribute to political and social stability is certainly too much” (27). In a similar fashion, Rose is cautious in his treatment of literacy, noting that he does not “mean to deny the profound effects literacy can have on society” (287). Rather, he aspires to question the extent to which “great divide” theories of literacy can evaluate and describe those effects. As Rose suggests, the most pressing danger for writing instructors teaching with simplistic conceptualizations of literacy and its consequences is the tendency to assume that merely possessing textbooks, classrooms, technology, and a “trained” instructor is, as Graff writes, “fully sufficient for further development of an individual’s literacy and subsequent education, and, of course, for the advancement of that individual” (27).

Many scholars in the New Literacy Studies take issue with “great divide” characterizations on both theoretical and methodological levels. For example, Sylvia Scribner and Michael Cole’s exploration of the social practices of the Vai people of Liberia, detailed in “Unpackaging Literacy,” questions many of the epistemological assumptions that define “great divide” positions. The

authors argue that, rather than assume universal consequences of literacy, one must investigate the specific social contexts in which literacy is used. As such, Scribner and Cole's methodological approach is significantly different from Goody and Watt's. By combining anthropological field-work with psychological research methods, the authors conclude that "literacy-without-schooling is associated with improved performance on certain cognitive tasks" (136) and that many of the cognitive consequences posited by Goody and Watt are symptomatic of the formal institution of schooling rather than the acquisition of literacy alone. In short, Scribner and Cole question characterizations of literacy that position it as a monolithic symptom of social and psychological change. In so doing, they confront accumulated assumptions about literacy—Harvey Graff calls these the "legacies" of literacy—that inform many of the tenets that support "great divide" characterizations of literacy.

The implications of Graff's work for the compulsory composition debate are most clear in his discussion of the literacy myth. In *The Labyrinths of Literacy*, Graff writes that "Constituting much of what I call literacy's central contradictions, these legacies taken together constitute 'the literacy myth'" (324). Relying on the accumulation of many assumptions about the aims and uses of literacy and inextricably linked with perennial complaints of the "decline" and "crisis" of literacy, the "literacy myth" is a powerful and complex force. Defined broadly, the literacy myth is the abiding belief that merely acquiring literacy guarantees economic prosperity as well as "access to and participation in mainstream institutions" (Cushman et al. 12). In *The Literacy Myth: Cultural Integration and Social Structure in the Nineteenth Century*, Graff defines it more specifically: "Primary schooling and literacy are necessary, it is so often repeated, for economic and social development, establishment and maintenance of democratic institutions, individual advancement, and so on. All this, regardless of its veracity, has come to constitute a 'literacy myth'" (xxxviii). Using a comparative and sociohistorical research methodology (examining, among other things, Canadian census data from the nineteenth century), Graff demonstrates that despite institutionally sponsored efforts to legitimize the myths and legacies of literacy, societies have taken different "paths" toward achieving literacy. Furthermore, they have done so for reasons other than improving their economic and material situations.

Despite the growth of literacy studies in recent years, some scholars question many of the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of this movement. Most notably, in "A Critical Discussion of the 'New Literacy Studies,'" Kate Stephens reexamines the claims of central figures in this movement. In *Stephens's Understanding the New Literacy Studies*, as "exemplified in the work of Street, Heath, Gee, Barton and others, takes a socio-cultural view of literacy, emphasizing the description of literacy practices of

everyday life, and challenging approaches which emphasize decontextualised basic skills" (10). Upon reviewing and critiquing the central tenets of this movement, Stephens concludes her article by proposing an approach to literacy that is, in her words, "normative," and that "allows the particular cognitive importance of literacy, and a valuation of the teacher's role in skill development" (11).

Of particular interest to Stephens are Brian Street's efforts to deconstruct the claims for literacy that constitute what he describes as the "autonomous" model. In "What's 'new' in New Literacy Studies?" (2003), Street explains that his work "begins with the notion of multiple literacies, which makes a distinction between 'autonomous' and 'ideological' models of literacy" and "develops a distinction between literacy events and literacy practices" (77). According to Street, prevailing characterizations and attitudes are based on the assumption that "literacy in itself"—i.e., autonomously—"will have effects on other social and cognitive practices" (77). This model hides cultural and ideological assumptions, and as a result imposes Western attitudes about literacy on other cultures and groups in such a manner that makes literacy acquisition and its consequences appear neutral. "Research in the NLS," Street reports, "challenges this view and suggests that in practice literacy varies from one context to another and from one culture to another and so, therefore, do the effects of the different literacies in different conditions" (77). This perspective, on the other hand, is consistent with the "ideological" model of literacy. For Street, this model represents a more "culturally sensitive" approach that views literacy as rooted in social practices and varying across contexts. As such, attitudes and understandings of literacy from the ideological perspective begin with questions about its nature and the values that shape these understandings. That is, as Street reports, literacy "is not simply a technical or neutral skill," (77) and it is "always contested" (38).

Stephens's and others' criticisms of the NLS, however, oversimplify the complexity and variability of literacy as it relates to issues of attainment as well as more general expectations that shape both theories of learning and public policy. And though Stephens does not say so directly, her objections to ideas that "underpin the 'New Literacy Studies'" (10) leave the impression that she would take issue with the underpinnings of critical literacy as well. Of the thematic commitments related to the New Literacy Studies, critical literacy has enjoyed perhaps the most thorough consideration by teacher-researchers in English studies (this is one reason why critical literacy is not discussed at length in this book).¹ Nevertheless, Ira Shor's "Our Apartheid: Writing Instruction and Inequality" is particularly relevant to my argument because of the way in which Shor brings critical literacy perspectives to bear on questions related to writing instruction.

More than other examinations of compulsory composition, Shor's study succinctly reveals the complex relationship between material conditions surrounding instruction and basic writing specifically. And although Shor acknowledges critical literacy's roots in the work of Antonio Gramsci, Paulo Freire, and others, he also emphasizes that concerns about power relations, language, and education are endemic to the work of composition studies itself (92). He reminds readers that Sharon Crowley, Jim Berlin, Donald Stewart, Bob Connors, Mina Shaughnessy, and Susan Miller have all labored to complicate prevailing and dismissive attitudes about writing instruction. He remarks on how, from composition's inception, unequal power relations have led to a subordination of writing to reading (92). Refuting the claim made by some that compulsory composition possessed a democratizing function, he instead characterizes composition as a "part of the undemocratic tracking system pervading American mass education" (93). Furthermore, he questions specifically the dubious relationship between skills-based conceptions of learning in basic writing courses and maintaining "an unequal status quo" (94). And, in the end, Shor urges us to stop turning a blind eye to the "immoral conditions" surrounding compulsory basic writing—to do away with the "mechanism that functions to ease the growing conflict between corporate and economic policy and a mass of aspiring students who are being deterred from the democracy and from the American Dream" (95).

One implication of Shor's characterization of basic writing is that he suggests that regressive attitudes about literacy (in particular skills-based conceptions) are symptoms of undemocratic practices, unfair working conditions, and the more general immoral conditions surrounding the compulsory composition machine. Proponents of critical literacy have provided ample evidence that this is in fact the case. However, Shor's discussion of basic writing is, in a sense, addressing a larger matter. Regressive, reactionary, skills-based conceptions of literacy are both symptoms *and* causes of the unethical and problematic material conditions that merit our attention. If Shor is right about this, and I believe he is, then we must pay closer attention to how ambiguous and hasty characterizations of literacy *presuppose* the very arguments/conditions that lead to abolitionist polemics in the first place.

To be sure, much is at stake for English studies in rethinking literacy along the historical and theoretical lines posited by Shor's examination of basic writing, Street's ideological conception of literacy, and Graff's research on the perceived "crisis" and "decline" of literacy as well as the myths that make those perceptions possible. One way of rethinking literacy along these lines is by revisiting calls to abolish compulsory composition. Doing so emphasizes the complexity and contradictory nature of the relationship of attitudes about literacy to proposals for abolishing compulsory composition.

As I suggest in my introduction, proposals to abolish compulsory composition have been dismissed by scholars in composition because, in many cases, their arguments are perceived as merely elitist. Although this may be a valid assessment of the following studies, I hope to show how these elitist sentiments are inseparably intertwined with what the NLS terms as autonomous and strong theories of literacy. Histories by Connors and Russell overlook this aspect of these essays and represent abolitionists as resolute in their commitment both to the abolition of freshman English and liberal culture. However, as this next section asserts, these proposals are highly ambivalent and contradictory. They are far from resolute, and the elitist sensibilities associated with them are less significant than the vague and contradictory attitudes about literacy as well as the exaggerated expectations about the consequences of possessing literacy that underline their polemics.

THOMAS LOUNSBURY — “COMPULSORY COMPOSITION
IN COLLEGES”

Undoubtedly, 1911 is a significant year for English studies and the compulsory composition debate. By the time Thomas Lounsbury made the first call for the abolition of composition in that year, first-year English as a university subject was over a century old (Bartholomae 1950). Robert Connors marks this time as a threshold moment, suggesting that by 1910 “most issues in composition methodology were decided, one way or another” (13). James Berlin also sees this period as key, noting in *Rhetoric and Reality: Writing Instruction in American Colleges, 1900–1985* that although the establishment of the Modern Language Association (MLA) in 1883 secured a place for English studies in the curriculum of higher education, it was the development of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) in 1911 that signaled a commitment to theorizing and researching the teaching of writing for high school students. However, in the same year that pedagogical methodologies were coalescing around the development of professional organizations and some continuity and agreement in methodology in composition, one of the first indications of disagreement and dissatisfaction with compulsory composition emerged: *Harper’s Monthly Magazine* published Thomas Lounsbury’s article “Compulsory Composition in Colleges.”

An Emeritus Professor of English at Yale University, Lounsbury worked in philology and linguistics and was one of the first (along with Edward A. Allen, William Mathews, and George Krapp) to question English instructors’ “total acceptance of traditional rigid grammar” (Connors, *Composition-Rhetoric* 150). In *The Standard of Usage in English*, he opposes absolute conceptualizations of grammatical propriety and the writing handbooks that impose such rules on students, arguing that “in order to have a language

become fixed, it is first necessary that those who speak it should become dead" (150). Indeed, Lounsbury's work on grammar, in part, helped to infuse a "descriptive spirit" into philological and pedagogical practices during the early 1900s (150). Such a disposition places Lounsbury in the company of specialists who questioned notions of grammar prescriptivism and also sought to reform teaching practices towards an end that conceptualized linguistics and language in a way that foreshadows modern attitudes about grammar and language. This orientation makes Lounsbury's proposal for abolishing composition worthy of closer consideration.

Lounsbury begins his proposal by suggesting that the problems of freshman composition cannot be conceived fully without empathy. "There is nothing so certain," he writes, "to warp the conclusions of the pure intellect working on this subject as actual experience" (866). Unfortunately, his thesis, which appears well into the article, is little help in determining his principal objections to compulsory composition. In what appears to be an attempt to consolidate his doubts about the course, he notes,

Still, none the less am I thoroughly convinced that altogether undue importance is attached to exercises in English composition, especially compulsory exercises; that the benefits to be derived from the general practice in schools is vastly overrated; that the criticism of themes, even when it is fully competent, is in the majority of cases of little value to the recipient; that in a large number of instances the criticism is and must ever be more or less incompetent; and that when the corrections which are made are made inefficiently and unintelligently, as is too often the case, the results reached are distinctly more harmful than helpful. (869)

Although we appear to have, here, Lounsbury's reasons for a proposal to abolish compulsory composition, this line of reasoning is, in fact, only tangentially related to the themes, evidence, claims, and rationales marshaled on behalf of his position throughout his study. That is, the scope of Lounsbury's complaints about freshman English is so broad that it is not clear if abolishing compulsory composition is actually something that he sees as a solution or the problem. His position seems inconsistent, at times, even equivocal, and his ambivalence, I believe, is indicative of only a vague understanding of the purpose and value of literacy in compulsory composition.

For instance, we may find one source of Lounsbury's ambivalence in the attitudes he expresses about the value of literacy, its relationship to rhetoric, and its role in composition instruction and institutions of learning in general. In disputing the "delusive notion" that "institutions of learning have any monopoly of training in composition," Lounsbury responds with a

question: "Why do men who have never had the advantage of any school training in composition so often express themselves with clearness, directness, and force?" For Lounsbury, the tribulations and successes of Ulysses Grant hold some answers to this question. "It is not probable that General Grant ever had much practice in writing in his youth," he notes; "What little he did have, it is more than probable he did not profit by. But participation in a mighty struggle, the ceaseless pressure of arduous duties and wearing responsibilities furnished him an intellectual training which it was not in the power of the schools to impart. Hence when he came to write his autobiography, he wrote it with a simplicity and consequent effectiveness which no mere drill in English could have wrought" (875).

This passage from Lounsbury is remarkable for several reasons. First, it is perhaps one of the clearest statements of what he finds to be inadequate about freshman English, namely, the drills and other repetitive exercises aimed toward teaching students to write themes. Clearly, Lounsbury finds such assignments to be inefficient and impractical. Second, Lounsbury's anecdote introduces and bolsters a claim that runs throughout his argument, that pain and misery felt through "participation in a mighty struggle" bring about the desired attributes that formal composition instruction only aspires to provide. We see this idea crop up throughout his study, but most notably in yet another reference to a famous American figure: Abraham Lincoln. Lounsbury notes:

It is not likely that the direct instruction in composition he ever received took up much of his time, if indeed it took up any of it. But in his profession he found imposed upon him as a condition of success the necessity of clear thinking, with its usual accompaniment of clearness of expression. But the further education which produced the matchless simplicity and majesty of the brief Gettysburg oration was the outcome of the discipline of anxious days and sleepless nights, the never-ceasing pressure of the burden of care which waited upon the long agony of the Civil War. As a matter of fact, indeed, there is nothing like misery to improve the style." (875)

Here Lounsbury presents a tendency akin to what Mike Rose refers to as a "strong" theory of literacy. Lounsbury's claim is that misery, pain, anguish, and struggle bring about the acquisition of particular cognitive traits and the successful demonstration of "clearness of expression." For Lounsbury, Grant and Lincoln possessed clear thinking, style, and other desirable traits because they struggled through seemingly insurmountable experiences and achieved a "condition of success" in those situations. As such, they possessed the tenacity and willingness to endure various forms of "misery," and in doing

so they gained style and clarity of thought and expression. Lounsbury's assertions are reminiscent of how some basic writers are sometimes misunderstood by institutions of learning and composition instructors more specifically. That is, composition students are sometimes seen as lacking the ability to think analytically and clearly about complex philosophical relationships. Because they are unable to demonstrate successfully these traits in academic conventions or other writing assignments, they are sometimes viewed as lazy or similar to cultures lacking literacy. Such understandings misrepresent the cognitive potential and capacities of basic writers as well as non-literate cultures, perpetuating "great divide" conceptions of literacy. The presence of such thinking in this proposal to abolish English is significant because it demonstrates a notable consequence of possessing a "strong" conception of literacy or exaggerated understandings of literacy's powers.

Some might argue that Lounsbury is not talking about literacy at all. Instead, Lounsbury simply wants students to gain experience, endure hard work, and achieve clarity in thought and expression. After all, by invoking abstractions like "clearness of expression," "matchless simplicity," and "style" he is actually (and perhaps unknowingly) discussing tenets of nineteenth-century Scottish rhetoric.² Lounsbury, however, is very clear about how he feels about rhetoric specifically, noting, "It has a value of its own; but it has not the kind of value which is often mistakenly claimed for it. For as grammar is nothing but the generalization of the facts of utterance, so rhetoric is nothing but the generalization of the facts of style" (875). On the one hand, the distinction between rhetoric and grammar that Lounsbury draws is clearly a move intended to anticipate rebuttals to his proposal. Given his complaints about freshman English, a reasonable response to Lounsbury would simply propose an alternative to theme-based writing pedagogy, perhaps something grounded specifically in rhetoric (and in many cases this is what happened in universities). On the other hand, when we examine his attacks on rhetoric more closely, we find that literacy and the ostensible consequences of possessing it are very much at play in his diatribe. He writes:

I call to mind a young man who before beginning his Commencement oration went carefully through the whole of Whately's treatise on rhetoric as a preparatory exercise, and was much astounded to discover, after finishing it, that he could write no better than he did before. (875)

Lounsbury's proposal is indicative of an overly simplistic conception of human cognition. This perspective coupled with recurrent distinctions between rhetoric and grammar, oratory and writing, and the importance of pain and pleasure in the process of literacy acquisition demonstrate a

quintessential characteristic of being caught in the literacy myth: According to Graff, “The point is that we are in the grips of the ‘literacy myth.’ We do not know precisely what we mean by literacy or what we expect individuals to achieve from their instruction in and possession of literacy” (*The Literacy Myth* 323). When we examine more closely the ways that Lounsbury articulates the aims and problems of freshman English in 1911, we find inconsistent understandings and definitions of literacy as well as unrealistic consequences of possessing it. When we treat these strong conceptualizations of literacy as evidence used to argue for the abolition of compulsory composition, it becomes clear that Lounsbury does not know precisely what he expects individuals to achieve from composition instruction.

It is easy to dismiss many of Lounsbury’s claims, especially since so many of his musings on freshman composition are, on the level of tone, quite cynical and ironic. However, it is precisely Lounsbury’s disposition that caught the attention of Thomas Percival Beyer in 1912 when he published his response to Lounsbury in *The Educational Review*. Appearing in the “Discussion” section and titled, “Anent Compulsory Composition in Colleges,” Beyer is clearly conflicted about Lounsbury’s proposal. On the one hand, he finds it “the most readable essay on a technical and polemic theme that I have seen in a long while” (77). Furthermore, Beyer is “grateful to Professor Lounsbury” for putting the “classic argument against English in the most cogent way possible” (84). Yet, he objects to the central assumptions driving the essay and the position in which those assumptions put teachers of composition. It is important to examine Beyer’s response to Lounsbury because even though he takes issue with most of Lounsbury’s assertions, the two scholars share much in common when it comes to the assumptions they make about the powers and place of literacy in compulsory composition.

Beyer is suspicious of theme-based pedagogies, agreeing with Lounsbury that drills in compulsory composition fail in their aims of creating literary geniuses—he calls such assignments “illogical and absurd” (84). However, he questions Lounsbury’s assumption that colleges of the time “retain freshman composition in the required list because they still see the vision of Utopia populated by a nation of Carlyles, Goethes, and Tolstois” (78). He asserts that he has never “heard of a college that set out to produce a race of literary artists.” On the contrary, he knows “of a few, at all events, that are striving to send out men—just men, and perhaps, a leaven of women” (78). Indeed, Beyer’s statement points to divergent attitudes about the aims of freshman English as well as opposing understandings of the purposes of universities at this time. However, what he proposes as a solution to the dilemma presented by freshman English is not so different from the ambivalence and assumptions driving Lounsbury’s proposal.

In the end, Beyer seems dismayed by Lounsbury's critiques and resents the implications of his article. "Since no honest man could continue to draw a salary for wasteful work," he writes, "the dilemma presents itself that I am either a knave or a fool. I am a fool if I believe in my work; I am a knave if I do not, in which case I think I am a greater fool than ever for not getting out of it" (84). Despite such feelings he concludes that "composition taught in a sensible normal way does not bore the average freshman, and does contribute to the art of living" (84). For Beyer, a "sensible" and "normal" approach to composition instruction is less systematic, opposed to the "state of extreme mental busy-ness" imposed by theme writing.³

Start with description. Teach observation a few weeks, hammer home just about three principles: fidelity to nature, selection of detail, and the value of verbs and words denoting action as well as specific instead of generic terms. Then send him out to describe the people on the street-cars, a football scrimmage, a scene in a play, the chatter of blackbirds in the wild rice, or how it feels to swim or row or race, and I defy the dullest teacher in Christendom to prevent a freshman from sitting up and taking notice. Later he can find delight in narrating some of his own thrilling experiences, or constructing a complication about a young man, his duty, and his sweetheart; and, finally, he can even be induced to tell what he thinks about "College spirit" or "Eligibility rules in athletics." (83)

Although this approach, according to Beyer, realizes one aim of freshman English—to teach students "to describe a person, a picture, a view, with a fair degree of accuracy, and even present a coherent reason for the particular faith that may be within him" (83)—this alone is not enough. What college students need "more than anything else" are "Between-Times" (86)—the "occasional half-hour of real loafing, and inviting the soul." However, according to Beyer, there are limits to this loafing. If students write nothing, "the soul that he gets glimmerings of will remain a spiritual embryo. It will never be fixed, and he will never gain confidence in it" (86). Thus, in one sense, freshman English and the requisite drills and tasks that constitute the course are the problem: "With a daily theme prodding him, he can never wait for an idea, but writes drivel and grows cynical" (86). But at the same time, freshman English is the solution because without the course students remain intellectually and spiritually undeveloped.

Even though Lounsbury and Beyer are on opposite sides of the abolition debate—Lounsbury opposes the requirement and Beyer seems to desire reforming the teaching of composition—both of their arguments are sustained by an abiding belief in the power of literacy to bring about profound

cognitive and spiritual transformations. Their exchange highlights the ways in which ambiguous definitions of literacy and exaggerated expectations of possessing it motivate proposals both for and against compulsory composition. Taken together, these essays are an early example of how the debate over compulsory composition involves much more than disagreements over pedagogy or the aptitude of students and instructors. From the perspective of the NLS, we may understand the attitudes about literacy that underline these studies as linked to a tradition of characterizing literacy in a way that exaggerates its powers. This move is based on simplistic assumptions not only of human cognition but also of the role of cognition in the relationship of literacy to teaching, learning, and educational reforms. In addition to demonstrating that myths of literacy are ever-present in the defining positions of the abolition debate, Lounsbury and Beyer are particularly interesting because of how they reflect pressures brought on by the trend toward academic specialization and other educational reforms of their time.

By 1911, the year in which Lounsbury published his essay on freshman English, higher education was entering a time marked by the rise of academic hierarchies, professional associations, unprecedented growth, and other consequences of academic specialization. Although compulsory composition was the focal point of many scholars' antipathy during this time, the impact of academic specialization underscored and complicated attempts to bring about lasting reform and change in the humanities more generally, not simply in the teaching of freshman English. The historical context surrounding Lounsbury's argument must be considered alongside the central arguments of his proposal. In this next section, I sketch a brief history of academic specialization with Lounsbury's proposal in mind. I do this to demonstrate that in the case of calls to abolish compulsory composition, exaggerated expectations of literacy's powers and other myths of literacy overlap with specific institutional pressures and educational reforms from the history of higher education.

CHARACTERISTICS AND CONSEQUENCES OF ACADEMIC SPECIALIZATION

The abolition debate and the proposals that constitute this conversation are compelling in part because they are often spirited in tone and grandiose in scope. However, twenty years before Lounsbury's study, we find proposals for larger educational reform that dwarf the implications of calls to abolish compulsory freshman English. For example, in 1891, "Pitchfork Ben" Tillman, a gubernatorial candidate locked in a spirited campaign, wanted more than the abolition of the teaching of freshman English (Veysey 15). As part of his plan to get elected, Tillman promised to abolish the entire

University of South Carolina. Of this time, Laurence Veysey notes, "It was in such an unfriendly climate as this that the American university initially had to make its way" (15). What made the climate particularly interesting for composition was something far more complex than the whims of policy makers. John C. Brereton notes in *The Origins of Composition Studies in the American College, 1875–1925* that several factors stand out as principal influences on the development of universities at the turn of the century.⁴ However, it is the period of academic specialization (1870–1920) that was the most consequential pressure shaping the development of freshman composition as well as the critiques of the course.

The trend toward academic specialization was a series of transinstitutional reforms that led to an increase in the variety of subjects and the dividing of departments into an extensive selection of fields and subdepartments. In *The Emergence of the American University*, Laurence Veysey observes most strikingly that this period was marked by considerable confusion, variety, and divergent attitudes about the perceived benefits and consequences of specialization.⁵ Consequently, "a distinct and 'cultivated elite' of professors, schoolmasters, authors, clergymen, and others remain isolated from mainstream American life" (51–52). We may understand Lounsbury as one of these "cultivated elites" who seems agitated by the way that academic specialization has attenuated the influence of literary approaches in the teaching of composition. Furthermore, that Lounsbury's proposal to abolish compulsory composition appeared in *Harper's Monthly Magazine* rather than one of the many academic journals emerging at this time is significant. I believe that this is evidence of both his resistance to the trend toward academic specialization as well as his need to articulate his frustrations with freshman English to a wider, more mainstream audience. After all, although many of his colleagues (like Beyer) disagreed with aspects of his proposal to abolish compulsory composition, the *Harper's* audience may well have shared something in common with Lounsbury: namely, an abiding belief in the literacy myth.

During the early stages of academic specialization, the direction, purpose, and ostensible function and nature of American higher education was determined by conflicts "first along the lines of competing academic goals, then over questions of academic command" (Veysey viii). As such, when Veysey remarks on the "difficult times" from which the American university emerges, he refers to a period marred by confusion and a diversity of perspectives and experiences. As universities transformed in response to the pressure to become more intellectually segmented, writing instruction became "confined to well-defined courses" (Brereton 9). In Lounsbury's eyes, because freshman English emerges from this period of academic specialization, it was a distinctly "modern" consequence of educational reform. "Work

of the sort now implied by it," he writes, "was then a novelty in American institutions of learning. The attention at present paid to English language and literature is not only modern, it is late modern. Knowledge of it as a requirement for entrance is even more modern" (866). It is revealing that for Lounsbury modernity becomes a matter of degree when it comes to the requirement of freshman English (it is not just modern but "more modern"). Just as important, however, is the fact that Lounsbury shifts his focus away from criticisms about how English is being taught to whether it should be taught at all. His reference to a time when such work is a "novelty" is clearly an attempt at broadening the scope of his argument to account for a history that he feels is being forgotten. This history is the story of English studies' struggle to gain respect and prestige—to become a discipline in the new university.

Nowhere in its history is the attempt at gaining institutional prestige and respect more clear than in English departments' commitments to the precepts of philology. To put it bluntly, English had a difficult time gaining a respected place in the research university. Several notable histories of English attest to this fact. Arthur Applebee's *Tradition and Reform in the Teaching of English: A History* and Gerald Graff's *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* both speak to the challenges that English faced and the ways that philology simultaneously attenuated and magnified the project of gaining disciplinary status. Admittedly, this issue is well-traveled ground, especially in the most cited histories of higher education and English studies.⁶ However, in the context of this study, exploring the role of philology in the rise of English departments provides a greater stage for my discussion of literacy. By this, I mean, regardless of whether scholars argue for or against compulsory composition, literacy functions as an aim in both approaches. I emphasize the history of philology here because it is a necessary part of exploring how particular theoretical commitments in the history of English have helped to construct literacy as an aim, end, and foundation for the discipline.

PURSUING PRESTIGE: PHILOLOGY AND THE RISE OF THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

In addressing the influence of philology in the formation of English departments, historians have emphasized several aspects of this process. In *Professing Literature*, Gerald Graff sees the rise of philology and the "professionalization" of the discipline of English as inextricably linked. He notes, "the advance guard of professionalization was a German-trained cadre of scholarly 'investigators,' who promoted the idea of scientific research and the philological study of the modern languages" (55). The importance and

rapidity of the move to align the aims of English with scientific research cannot be understated when considering philology's impact on the field. According to Graff, as early as the first meeting of the Modern Language Association, H. C. G. Brandt (a Hamilton College Professor of German) proclaims "our department is a science, and . . . its teaching must be carried on accordingly" (qtd. in Graff 68). Motivating Brandt was a concern that if teachers of language failed to understand their departments as science, that "any body" would feel they could teach English (68). "By introducing scientific methods," Brandt asserts, "we shall show before very long that every body cannot [teach English], that the teacher must be as specially and as scientifically trained for his work in our department as well as in any other" (qtd. in Graff 68). Brandt's statements underscore the ways that the scientific underpinnings of philology function to dignify the work of English at this time.

Writing in "Secularization and Sacralization: Speculations on Some Religious Origins of the Secular Humanities Curriculum, 1850–1900," James Turner explains that philology was cultivated in Germany in the eighteenth century and transplanted to the English-speaking world in the early nineteenth. Providing a "powerful paradigm of knowledge well into the second half of the century," philology led to a unique approach to college instruction, "belonging to neither the antebellum classical curriculum nor the twentieth-century liberal arts" (83). What is remarkable about the impact of philology on English instruction, despite arguments to the contrary, is the extent to which this theoretical commitment traversed multiple subdisciplines simultaneously. In "Literary Study and the Modern System of the Disciplines," John Guillory notes that by the 1890s four disciplinary practices—philology, composition, *belles lettres*, and literary history—exist simultaneously in departments of English (35). And while an overarching influence of the formation of English studies "was driven by the development of a principle of scientificity" owing primarily to precepts of philology, this "arrangement," as Guillory notes, "did not prevail in the long term" (35).

Ultimately, because philology failed to figure inquiry into literature on scientific grounds, it paradoxically "weakened its claim to scientificity" (36). Moreover, philology's predicament was compounded by the conditions and consequences of academic specialization, resulting in a more limited "definition of philology as a study of language" (Applebee 26). This narrowed scope and understanding of its aims coupled with increasingly "lofty goals" and "pedantic textual criticism" led, in part, to the somewhat negative image that it possesses today (26). In many ways, the failure of philology holds the most pressing implications for this study. Gerald Graff reminds us that philology "proved a dismal failure only in relation to expectations that few of its early proponents were attempting to meet" (68). What survived of

philology was a “larger cultural vision,” a way of thinking about language and the university that aspired to reconcile seemingly incompatible directions for teaching and research within English departments. It met a desire, a “nostalgia for the past, especially the European past and the Middle Ages,” but it also satisfied a need for “facts, for accuracy, for the imitation of the ‘scientific method’ which had acquired overwhelming prestige” (Wellek qtd. in Graff 68). Whereas the rise of philology is evidence of the distinct ways in which departments like English undergo a process of intellectual segmentation during this period, it is important to remember—as Veysey discusses—that behind the conflict of philology’s humanistic and positivistic impulses, a process of bureaucratization and standardization also accompanies academic specialization. This aspect of specialization is also inextricably linked with the fiscal health and unprecedented growth of universities at the turn of the twentieth century.

By 1911, consequences of academic specialization were becoming impossible for professors like Lounsbury to ignore, especially with respect to the number of students attending university (and his own composition class) as well as the amount of money flowing through his institution. In the *Organization of Knowledge in Modern America, 1860–1920*, Alexandra Oleson and John Voss report that in 1899 the thirty-four largest gifts pledged to public causes totaled \$80 million; of that amount, more than \$55 million was given to institutions of higher learning, more than \$5 million to libraries, and almost \$3 million to museums (xi). Meanwhile, according to the authors, the number of undergraduates in American universities increased from 52,300 in 1870 to 156,800 in 1890; 237,600 in 1900; and 597,900 in 1920 (xii). The type of university (in the nature of its work and in its students’ demographics) that Lounsbury inhabited in 1911 was almost unrecognizable in comparison to the university where he began teaching 25 years before he made his proposal to abolish compulsory composition. Certainly, the changes he witnessed in universities influenced his decision to call for the abolition of compulsory composition. However, Lounsbury’s article is highly ambivalent and conflicted about whether abolishing compulsory composition addresses the problem of providing adequate writing instruction for growing numbers of students. This ambivalence may be symptomatic of the fact that support for the trend toward specialization was waning in the 1910s and 1920s. In fact, in *The Making of the Modern University: Intellectual Transformation and The Marginalization of Morality*, Julie A. Reuben asserts that although surveys of college and university presidents in 1901 characterize the elective system as a “fixture” in colleges, by 1920 the trend seemed to reverse (231). Searching for ways to articulate the relevance of their work and to establish some sense of coherence and continuity in curriculums, some professors and administrators in the early 1920s became highly

critical of specialization. In its place “liberal culture” becomes, as James Turner calls it, the “new buzzword of undergraduate general education” (79). In the abolitionist argument of Oscar James Campbell, we find evidence of the pressures imposed both by the trend toward specialization and by liberal culture on general education courses like freshman composition.

OSCAR JAMES CAMPBELL—
THE FAILURE OF FRESHMAN ENGLISH

Unlike Lounsbury’s “Compulsory College Composition,” which was published in *Harper’s Magazine* and taken seriously enough to spark a rebuttal from Beyer in the *Educational Review* in 1912, Oscar James Campbell’s proposal was met only with reformist arguments and dissent (Connors 8–9).⁷ Despite such criticism, Campbell’s “The Failure of Freshman English” is one of the few proposals discussed by all existing histories of the abolition debate, as well as by most respected histories of composition. In this section, I discuss aspects of Campbell’s study that have been overlooked by historians of writing instruction. In particular, I show how Campbell’s essay depends on what Ruth Finnegan and others from the NLS describe as a “Great Divide” conception of literacy. As I discussed in the first part of this chapter, “great divide” conceptions of literacy are indicative of a theoretical assumption about learning that inaccurately elevates those possessing literacy to positions of dominance over those that do not. By attending to the role of Campbell’s attitude about literacy, we understand better how the rhetoric of abolitionism depends on generalizations that accompany the literacy myth.

Campbell is a compelling figure for historians of composition and the abolition debate because of his use of metaphor and the hostility of his rhetoric. He begins his tirade on freshman English by comparing compulsory composition to a monster, specifically a “Frankenstein” which was created by a former colleague, Barrett Wendell, and has gone awry. He chides the course for forcing “teachers of English to attempt what they know is impossible and [building] up false ideas and false hopes of the educational process which vitiates undergraduate work in almost the entire curriculum” (178). As contemporary as his assessment might sound to us, such sentiments should not be confused with progressive understandings of literacy; in fact, more than any other proposal to abolish freshman English, Campbell’s study is marked by inconsistent and contradictory conceptions of literacy. For example, Campbell asserts, “Only through the books of ages remote from his own can an individual completely emancipate himself from the provinciality of time and place” (183). Which is to say, without “works of literature” in the tradition of liberal culture, students are like primitive creatures, unable to gain the critical distance and cognitive skills to objectively understand