

BOOK REVIEWS

Between Politics and Ethics: Toward a Vocative History of English Studies, by James N. Comas. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2006. 208 pp.

Reviewed by Rasha Diab, University of Wisconsin–Madison

Comas' book offers a provocative reflection on the centrality of the ethical and political vocatives in English studies. The book "attempt[s] . . . to rethink our relations with the past, relations formed in the acts of reading and writing . . ." (x) where writers feel compelled to communicate and engage a community of writers/speakers. As such, his book departs from traditional critical, institutional or disciplinary historiography, which "pre-supposes a totalization of the past such that it, as a whole, may be immured (in pace requiescat) and forgotten" (x). Rather, Comas centers his book on the vocative, spaces—if you will—where writers are called by words (from the past). These textual overtones organize his examination of the intellectual landscape of English studies with a renewed interest in ethical and political imperatives and disciplinary turns. Yet, as he alerts us, this interest is neither new nor spurring enough questioning about the relation that binds, subsumes, or opposes politics and ethics despite the proliferation of the terms, describing disciplinary shifts (x-xi).

The meanings and dialectic between politics and ethics unfolds as the *topos politikos* (the place of politics) and *topos êthikos* (the place of ethics) are examined. These *topoi* organize the book's exploration of how the discipline defines itself, its methods, canon and the ethos of a scholar as a cultural critic. The study of these dimensions of disciplinary formations organize two sets of chapters: Part 1 focuses on *topos politikos*, comprising chapters 1 and 2, whereas Part 2 addresses *topos êthikos*, covering chapters 3 and 4. The conclusion proposes the possibility of facing both the rhetoricopolitical nature of English studies and its ethical dimension from the "uninstituted space," where the co-existence or complementary nature of these dimensions can be examined (127).

Topos Politikos begins by thrusting readers in an emblematic, dramatic scene from Sophocles's *Antigonê* that encapsulates the dialectic of ethics and politics, foregrounding the limits of the political. Thus, cogently and quickly, Comas demonstrates the perennial nature of the political/ethical dialectic and exigence as a call for examination, (internal) deliberation, and judgment. This vocative is manifested by *Antigonê*'s Chorus's uptake and recognition of political authority represented in Kreôn's edict and *Antigonê*'s moral obligation to bury her dead brother (3). Comas explains

that the “Chorus’s realization that this conflict . . . reopens a fundamental division within its own mind . . . a dilemma that undermines the foundation of its judgment and thus disturbs its autonomy . . .” (4). This conflict calls forth an examination of the potential contradiction of ethical and political imperatives (5). As such, this scene anticipates and frames the book’s exploration of the role of politics and ethics as formative influences on the act of writing criticism, evolving subject position of the critic and writing disciplinary histories.

Three case studies ground and powerfully elucidate productive and generative tensions emerging through layers of call and response, catalyzing disciplinary articulations. The first case study precedes what is known as the political turn of the eighties. Consequently, it dispels the “idea of a “political turn” [that] has swayed English studies from the politics of the past, from the ways in which past critics perceived and responded to sociopolitical exigencies and conditions” (9-10). The first case study centers on the controversy inspired by Robert Gorham Davis’s “The New Criticism and the Democratic Tradition,” published in the *American Scholar* (1949-50). Davis’s article and its reception addressed and negotiated “the institutional and political dimensions of problems of studying and teaching literature” (13).

The second case study (chapter 1) zooms in on recurring common places like change, expansion and fragmentation of English studies. These were manifest in Jonathan Culler’s *On Deconstruction*, exploring the expansion of English studies, as well as “enunciatory rhetoric” (36)—demonstrated in Edward Said, W. J. T. Mitchell and J. Kristeva’s calls and Spivak’s response in a symposium organized in the early 1980s about the politics of interpretation. Their calls/responses reflected an investigation of the politics of interpretation, the role of politics—as a *kairotic* moment – in criticism, possibilities of the uptake of this exigence within academic institutions as well as the subject position of the writing of criticism.

Chapter 2 is devoted to the third case study of the rhetoric of canonization, meaning “institutional modes of address and reception that lead to the canonization of work in theory” (43). To illustrate the rhetoric of canonization, Comas revisits the reception of Northop Frye’s *Anatomy of Criticism*, where he communicates the urgency of a crisis state questioning the legitimacy of the cultural practice of criticism, which mandated its defense (59). More importantly, besides the aforementioned literary crisis, there was the educational crisis of the late 1950s that resulted in the National Defense Education Act (NDEA). Both crises “transformed Frye’s argument into a pressing issue for the discipline” (68), explaining its canonization.

In part 2, Comas shifts from an exploration of the political mode of academic legitimacy to investigate the institutional locus of ethics (chap-

ter 3). Surveying connections between ethics and the pedagogical project of training citizens since antiquity, Comas foregrounds some works addressing the ethical dimension of English studies. These included Berlin's *Rhetoric and Reality*, Graff's *Professing Literature*, Booth's *The Company We Keep*, and Swearingen's work on the "ethical questions about the nature of rhetoric" (76). Comas maintains, however, that interest in ethics didn't result in "an integrated movement" (77) and "the indistinct relationship between rhetoric and ethics" (101) contributed to this. Comas's critique of Geoffrey Harpham's account of the renewed interest in ethics powerfully uncovers layers of ethical calls and responses. In *Critical Terms for Literary Studies*, Harpham considers "ethics" a fundamental reorientation, a point of departure from what he called the "Theoretical Era" of 1968-87. However, his account—as Comas demonstrates—fails to pinpoint the plurality of meanings of "ethics." "Ethical failure" and possibilities are articulated in Comas' reflections on Booth's *The Company We Keep* as it engages literature situatedness in contexts reflective of their historical and political legacies (82-84). In contrast to Booth's ethics, which is always political, Miller's *The Ethics of Reading* addresses ethics as a relation between the reader and the text. Booth and Miller's uptake of the ethical dimension of their work are starkly different—as he explains.

The central issue of chapter 4 is this difference in orientations to ethics. Comas traces the emergence of ethics in the marketplace of English studies, noting that "[e]thics . . . is never far from teaching and the philosophy of education," central concerns for rhetorical education since antiquity (87). He points to how ethics has been related to postmodernism as a critique of modern thought and of "the increasing influence of market logic in the shaping of academic professions" (88). If the political turn "proffers the profession's intellectual work as a project of politics," what kind of imperative does the ethical turn pose? Comas responds adroitly, noting a confluence of ethics as a theme and ethos as an enunciation. Bataille's engagement with an intellectual community and Burke's reflections on the "ethos of the critic" elucidate well the emergence of an intellectual community and ethos of a writer of theory and criticism respectively.

Ethical engagement and ethos become formative influences in the conclusion as he explores ethics as a relation between an individual and a group, as character and a "subjectivity . . . related to its places of habituation, a word designated by the Greek word *êthos*" (97), and "as a state of existence that reveals an essential and fundamental relationship to the other" (99), forming an intellectual community. All are crucial dimensions for acts of composing texts and subject positions from the uninstituted space, which Comas calls criticism.

Comas poses a perennial question for composition studies: How do political and ethical imperatives authorize the writing of criticism? He

successfully provokes readers' interest as he explores the formative force of ethics and politics in the development and articulation of professional ethos in English studies including composition and rhetoric. Comas skillfully provides an occasion to, on the one hand, revisit (disciplinary) history and, on the other, listen to and reflect on our calling as writers, members of a community. Despite the prominence of the *topoi politikos* in composition and rhetoric, its detailed examination is eclipsed in Part 1 by literary case studies. This calls for further exploration of the *topoi politikos* in relation to composition and rhetoric. However, in part 2 Comas addresses the intersection of politics and ethics, focusing on figures like Burke and Levinas who impact the field in multiple ways. Yet, detailed analysis of specific events or historical moments authorizing critical writing in composition and rhetoric was direly needed. This could have included revisionary writers whose vocatives “[turn] an attentive ear” to absences or omissions.

Another key contribution is manifest in Comas's cogent parallel exploration of decisive dimensions of the writing of historiography, including a nuanced attention to layers of internal and external contexts and plurality of ethical and political imperatives. In addressing these imperatives, processes of composing a disciplinary ethos and creating an intellectual community, Comas elucidates forces, locations, and modes of engagement that deeply impact the act of writing and its reception.

Madison, Wisconsin

Rural Literacies, by Kim Donehower, Charlotte Hogg, and Eileen E. Schell. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2007. 240 pp.

Reviewed by Jordana Stephens Berry, Georgia Perimeter College

In *Rural Literacies*, Kim Donehower, Charlotte Hogg, and Eileen E. Schell provide insight into the myths and realities surrounding rural literacy. Each author draws upon their hometowns—in the rural South, the rural West, and the Great Plains—to provide examples for their individual chapters that illuminate multifaceted literacies of people in these places. The authors offer ideas for incorporating the concept of rural literacies into our composition classrooms. The idea of a place-based pedagogy that includes a critical analysis of rural literacy (along with suburban and urban ones) is furthered through pedagogical examples in the final chapter of the book. For composition instructors who guide their students in critically examining urban and/or suburban texts (and their ideas about