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# Review: James N. Comas's Between Politics and Ethics: Toward a Vocative History of English Studies

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works, emerging after many began reading Burke systematically, and thus coming "out of order" in some sense for Burkean scholars. "Burke had trouble finding a publisher" for this short work, and its focus on aesthetics seemed out of place for its time to many (87). Yet George and Selzer show its importance in the development of Burke's thought. It remains not widely read in graduate schools, I fear, but George and Selzer may remedy that oversight.

If I had to drum up a reservation about the book, as reviewers are wont to do as a sort of professional responsibility, I might wish there were more on *Counter-Statement*. That is perhaps the strangest of Burke's books, a sort of Frankenstein's creation, although not a monster, pieced together largely from some previously published material and without the strong central argument of some of his later work. For that very reason I could wish that this volume had more to say about it, although it is not ignored by any means.

Scholars across many disciplines who study and use Burke will find this an indispensable study. Scholars of the social, political, and intellectual history of the United States, and in particular the momentous decade of the 1930s, will find the book of value whether they are Burkeans or not. These scholars combine the best of several methodologies and perspectives to create a must-read volume for many in the academy.

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**James N. Comas. *Between Politics and Ethics: Toward a Vocative History of English Studies*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2006. ix–xiv + 180 pages. $55.00 hardcover.**

This is a provocative book in which James Comas gives serious attention to the importance of ethics and politics in the formation of our disciplinary identities. The book challenges English studies as a vocation, a calling. But the *vocative* sense Comas emphasizes is not that of *calling* as an occupation or profession. Nor are his claims primarily concerned with the *vocative* as an authorial address to the reader, what he calls the "rhetorical liaison between writer and reader" (ix). No, Comas's *vocative* refers to a speaker or writer responding to the "call of writing" not by speaking but by listening, not by speaking to a hearer in the future but by listening to a writer from the past: "I shall be interested in how

writers, primarily writers of criticism, listen to the words of other writers, words necessarily from the past" (ix).

Comas finds this sense of *vocative*, appropriately enough, in the past writings of influential thinkers such as Georges Bataille and Emmanuel Levinas. Bataille is "called by words from the past" and discovers his vocation as a writer in an attentiveness to "the call of words from the dead." Comas characterizes this dimension of Bataille's writing as vocative rather than rhetorical ("affecting an audience"), and he describes Bataille's—and by implication his own—relationship to the past as "vocational" rather than "critical" (x). Levinas provides another vocative model with his conception of an ethics opposed to both rhetoric and politics. Here, however, Comas is more rhetorical in his vocativity than his philosophical progenitor, as we will see.

With the introduction of Levinas, Comas reintroduces the primary dialectic of his book's main title: *Between Politics and Ethics*. Achieving the goal announced in his subtitle—moving "toward a vocative history of English studies"—requires Comas to reevaluate the relationship of the so-called "political turn" to the more recent "ethical turn" within literary and composition studies. But how does one judge the political and the ethical within academic disciplines and beyond? "Is ethics subsumed by politics; is politics subsumed by ethics; are politics and ethics opposed to one another?" (xi). And how do politics and ethics relate to epistemology and rhetoric within disciplinary formations? These are Comas's questions as he struggles to make sense of contemporary English studies, first by more carefully articulating the problem of judging ethical and political claims (Introduction) and then by presenting disciplinary case studies involving political topics (Part One) and ethical topics (Part Two). The Conclusion offers something like a resolution of the problems the book has explored.

Comas sets up his book's structural "clash of an uneasy dialectic between politics and ethics" (xi) by extending the recent interpretive history of Sophoklês' *Antigonê* within critical theory. Comas suggestively turns the play's conflict between Kreôn's political claims and Antigonê's ethical claims into an allegory for the relationship between politics and ethics in today's academy. He puts his readers in the place of Sophoklês' Chorus, observing and judging Kreôn's political authority and Antigonê's moral duty, and asks "from what space can we think about the dilemma of politics and ethics?" (5).

From his analysis of *Antigonê*, Comas takes the elements and model for his inquiry into the current conditions of English studies. Though he emphasizes that this inquiry addresses both literary and composition studies within English, the case studies he presents are primarily from literary criticism and theory. It is within the disciplinary history of criticism and theory that he places his analyses of the political and ethical turns. In his case studies, Comas analyzes both the

rhetoric of his chosen texts and their rhetorical contexts, especially their historical, political, and institutional dimensions. In turn, he examines a neglected 1949–50 *American Scholar* controversy over the New Criticism and its political ideology; the 1982 *Critical Inquiry* issue on the "politics of interpretation," which Comas sees as a key event in establishing the political turn; the earlier reception of Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* as theory within the post-Sputnik crisis in American education; the publication of J. Hillis Miller's *The Ethics of Reading* (1987) and Wayne Booth's *The Company We Keep* (1988), very different versions of a new ethical turn; and the deferral of ethics in the work of Kenneth Burke.

These are all interesting, informative case studies, and most of them illustrate the institutional kind of disciplinary history that Comas advocates. Curiously, though, what these institutional case studies do not explicitly illustrate is a *vocative* stance as opposed to a *rhetorical* one. Indeed, the *vocative* as a term nearly vanishes in Parts One and Two, while the *rhetorical* becomes more and more prominent. Comas refers to his own "rhetorical perspective" in analyzing past academic debates (29), and he talks about the "enunciative rhetoric" employed by some of the participants in the controversies he so ably describes (36, 59). He also proposes "an examination of the rhetoric of canonization, that is, the institutional modes of address and reception that lead to the canonization of work in theory" (43). But perhaps, unlike his versions of Bataille and Levinas, Comas does not intend to oppose the rhetorical (affecting audiences) to the vocative (listening to the past), but rather to see the latter as an overlooked aspect of the former.

In any case, Comas's rhetorical, institutional histories chronicle first a political turn and then an ethical turn within English studies. How exactly do the two differ? Obviously their characteristic concerns are not identical, and Comas helps us distinguish them by providing various past definitions of *ethics* and *politics* from which we might extrapolate: *Politics* refers to collective power relations while *ethics* addresses the individual's relation to an other. But beyond these differing definitions, Comas emphasizes the contrasting historical nature of the two turns. For Comas the political turn represents a more unified, extensive, wholesale transformation of disciplinary identity within the humanities. This transformation includes both a general redefinition of academic legitimation as centered on the political and a specific grounding of the political in an ideological critique of traditional humanism. Comas contrasts this conceptual unity in the political turn with the "multiple conceptions" of ethical criticism found in the ethical turn (82). But, one might ask, was the political turn ever so conceptually unified? Whether it historically was or not, Comas might reply, its legacy has been more hegemonic. That is, Comas does seem right in claiming that there has

been a more decisive and complete turn to the political compared to the ethical within English studies. The evidence for this claim includes a deeply felt rhetorical requirement to defend or explain one's political stance in intellectual work. From the cultural left, individual scholars are asked to define their specific politics; and from the cultural right, scholars are challenged to defend why politics (especially left politics) is even relevant to humanistic teaching and research.

So from where might we judge the ongoing legacies of the political and ethical turns within English studies? In his conclusion Comas proposes the name *criticism* for the "noninstituted space" from which we judge our disciplinary rights and duties, our political commitments, and our ethical responsibilities. How is such criticism to be enacted? Not through an overemphasis on politics, not through following "today's hyperpolitical critics." And not simply by imitating some of the "new ethical critics," who too easily separate or conflate ethics and politics (127). Instead, Comus argues for establishing "theoretical communities," "virtual" collectives with other critics. How are these to be achieved? By engaging with other critics as they engage with their predecessors and contemporaries in "a fashioning of intellectual identity, a merging of thought and being" (126). That is, the space and time of criticism are established through a vocative rather than a rhetorical relation to one's critical past, a listening to others that responds to their call by calling them to speak. Such a vocative relation results in the forming of "intellectual identity," what we might call one's interpreted being: who and what you interpret yourself to be, including how you interpret yourself through others' interpretations of you. Here others' interpretations are, of course, virtual, since most of one's interlocutors cannot speak back directly because they are in the past.

But the past can be made to speak by way of one's openness to previous critics' writings, especially past interpretations of what it means to be a critic engaged with other critics. Such "impossible communication" between past and present Comas terms *necrographia*, a kind of writing in the present that establishes a community with dead critics (121). Comas communicates this way with Bataille and Burke, who do the same respectively with Nietzsche and with Flaubert, Pater, and Gourmont. In establishing theoretical communities with past critics, present critics work out their intellectual identities as self-compositions as "critics," compositions that are inseparable from the "formation of intellectual relationships with other critics, that is, through the writings of those critics." Thus Comus suggests that "the actual writing of criticism" be understood in its "performative dimension" that "enacts a community with other writers and thereby serves as the source of the critic's self-understanding" (126). Whether one accepts this critical resolution or not, Comas certainly provides his readers

with an insightful historical and theoretical exploration of politics and ethics within our current disciplinary identities.

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**Christopher J. Keller and Christian R. Weisser, eds. *The Locations of Composition*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007. ix + 315 pages. $29.95 paperback.**

When I finished reading Christopher Keller and Christian Weisser's edited collection, I felt as though I were channeling both Charles Forte and Dick Orkin. Forte (later Lord Forte), the baron of small roadside motels in Britain, was asked about the reason for the success of his establishments. He famously answered, "Location, location, location." Orkin, a disc jockey for WCFL in Chicago, in 1966 created the satirical character of Chickenman, a bumbling avian crime fighter, the episodes about whom replay daily on the 60s channel on XM Radio. When the Winged Warrior's presence is announced, rhythmic voices shriek, "He's everywhere! He's everywhere!" To Keller and Weissner, the polysemous term *location* seems, as it was to Lord Forte, key to the success of the enterprise—in this case the enterprise of composition theory. To Keller and Weissner, moreover, location is, well, everywhere, everywhere, just like Chickenman.

Don't mistake these tongue-in-cheek associations for a lack of appreciation for the work of Keller, Weissner, and their contributors. The *Locations of Composition* is a very good collection—with some chapters more successful and accessible than others, as is frequently the case with such volumes. The editors' goal is to bring together scholarship that offers "a more critical scrutiny of how we define and are defined by our understandings of space, place, and location . . . in an attempt to further our understandings of how space, place, and location enmesh, problematize, and shape the field's work" (1). *Enmesh* seems the most operative verb in this goal, since Keller and Weissner cast a very large net in order to catch all the meanings that "location" might hold for contemporary composition theorists. Contributors to *The Locations of Composition* consider the "seats," the "situations," of writing in places ranging from classrooms, to entire campuses, to workplaces, to neighborhoods and entire cities, to cyberspace, even to textbooks and particular rhetorical *topoi*, which are, of course, literally