KAIROS AND THE SUBJECT OF EXPRESSIVE DISCOURSE

In his important essay, "Kairos: A Neglected Concept," James Kinneavy asks, "What happens when kairos, that is, situational context, dominates a composition program?" (95). In order to pose an answer to this question, Kinneavy then describes the epistemological, ethical, social, rhetorical, and aesthetic changes that could result from a kairos-based composition program. Key among these changes would be the shift in focus from the text to the situational context and its particular set of ethical issues, the need to frame the social context of the writer and reader, increased emphasis on disciplinary modes of inquiry, and increased emphasis on enabling students to find a realistic audience. In this essay, I want to ask and explore two related but more specific questions: What happens when kairos is applied to the theory of expressive discourse and to the practice of teaching it? And why is kairos an appropriate concept for trying to reunderstand or reiterate expressive discourse?

These questions come from two main concerns: expressive discourse is still perceived by some as theoretically and practically problematic in composition; kairos is still a neglected concept. What connects these two general concerns is my belief that the concept of kairos, and sophistic rhetoric in general, provides compelling ways of reunderstanding both expressive discourse and the arguments that have challenged it. In order to get at these reunderstandings, I will first review some of the ways in which the theory and practice of expressive discourse have been challenged by composition scholars such as David Bartholomae, Lester Faigley, and Jeanette Harris. Then, based on the work of Mario Untersteiner, John Poulakos, James Kinneavy, and Michael Carter, I will explain how I believe the concept of kairos provides a response to these critiques, and how it could provide an alternative way of conceptualizing and teaching expressive discourse. Specifically, I'll argue

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that expressive discourse is discourse that focuses on the writer *but not* to the exclusion of the audience and the constraints and contradictions that make up the rhetorical situation. Additionally, I will suggest that because it is a kind of writing particularly capable of calling attention to the non-rational aspects of writing (or of decision-making in writing), expressive discourse can be taught as a way to complicate and enrich students’ understanding of both the processes and products of writing.

It is important to note here that what I am arguing for is an additional approach—rather than *the* approach—to understanding and teaching expressive discourse. My goal is not to invalidate other approaches, but rather to provide one approach that specifically addresses the opposition (be it real, illusory, or both) that has been created over the past two decades between expressive discourse and critical/rhetorical theory. In order to illustrate this particular approach, I will briefly discuss some contemporary personal writing. I will also look at Kinneavy’s theory of expressive discourse in order to call attention to the important similarities that exist between Kinneavy’s phenomenological approach to expressive discourse and the concept of *kairos*, particularly as it is explained by Poulakos. These similarities reveal a more complex—a more social—theory of expressive discourse than critics (both of expressive discourse and phenomenology) have acknowledged or allowed. Moreover, they illustrate how *kairos* can be productively applied to the critiques of expressive discourse as well as to current discussions of subjectivity, namely those that reject the reduction of subjectivity to an epiphenomenon.

**WHAT ARE THE CRITIQUES OF EXPRESSIVE DISCOURSE?**

Some critiques of expressive discourse have been around for more than twenty years, and this longevity lends them a kind of veracity or stability. In general, these critiques seem to cluster around four main arguments: 1) Theories of expressive discourse are based on vestiges of realism, humanism, or Romanticism; 2) Theories and practices of expressive discourse imply, if not depend on, an erroneous conception of the relationship between the self and language; 3) Expressive discourse encourages solipsistic kinds of writing that are indebted to bourgeois individualism and to capitalism. Because of this indebtedness, expressive discourse cannot teach the socially constructed and negotiated discourses of the academy; 4) Finally, as a category, expressive discourse does not exist.

Most critiques of expressive discourse in composition follow from the claims made in numbers two and three (though I will argue that they are linked to number four in an important way). In *Fragments of Rationality*, for example, Lester Faigley contends that to teach expressive discourse is “to ask students to write authentically about the self.” It is to assume that a unified consciousness can be laid out on the page. However, since a unified consciousness cannot, in fact, be laid out, students must resort to appropriating voices of moral authority and making “clichéd pronouncements” (128). David Bartholomae similarly defines and critiques expressive discourse in “Writing With Teachers” when he claims that when students are given expressive assignments they are being asked to “imagine that they can clear out a space to write on their own, to express their own thoughts and ideas, not to reproduce those of others.” Giving such an assignment, he believes, reveals the desire for an “institutional space free from institutional pressures, a cultural process free from the influence of culture, an historical moment outside of history, an academic setting free from the academic” (64). Bartholomae condemns expressive discourse (whether it’s written by academics or students) as a form of sentimental realism—as writing that is based on the trope of the real, the details of private life, and the world as seen from a single, authorizing perspective. Because he believes that it is corrupt, Bartholomae does not think that we should teach students “to celebrate what would then become the natural and inevitable details of their lives” (71).

I agree with Faigley and Bartholomae. Importantly, however, I want to qualify this agreement: I believe that their characterizations are possibilities but not necessary realities of expressive discourse. Specifically, I agree (following basic assertions of psychoanalytic theory) that it isn’t possible to express a unified consciousness. Moreover, I think that teaching practices based on this possibility can be corrupt and ineffective; that is, I think that it is possible for such practices to encourage students to produce vapid, moralistic prose. In other words, such practices can oversimplify the sometimes complex task of writing about the self and its experiences by implying that since everyone has experiences and emotions, everyone has the resources to write about them. In some cases, such an approach draws too clear a distinction between the individual and the collective, thereby potentially neglecting the hegemonic forces that affect writers’ experiences, as well as their desire to write about those experiences. This neglect can make personal writing a difficult and artificial task for some students in that it does not provide them with adequate reasons for writing about—or even becoming sufficiently interested in—their lives. For example, I have found that in some cases, realist assignments (to borrow Bartholomae’s terminology) convey limiting and problematic expectations to students, namely that their prose should be clear and vivid, and their meaning honest, engaging, and easily comprehensible. Take for example the following assignment from the sixth edition of *The St. Martin’s Guide to Writing*: “Write an essay about an event in your life that will be engaging for readers and that will, at the same time, help them understand the significance of the event. Tell your story vividly and dramatically” (51). In order to meet
these expectations, it seems to me that students often choose to write about the experiences that they can recall and describe most clearly and easily, i.e., proms, athletic competitions, vacations, and so on. While there are, of course, student essays that handle such topics well, others are perfunctory, giving the impression that their writers are reluctantly going through the motions of the personal narrative with little investment, little at stake, and not much taken into consideration beyond the apparent veracity and significance of the experience. It is for these kinds of writers—the ones who seem uneasy about the truth-conveying or realistic expectations of some assignments—that I offer a more explicitly social, critical, and rhetorical approach—a kairos-based approach—to expressive discourse. As I will explain, such an approach would seek to foreground institutional pressures, the influence of culture, and the significance of historicity in an effort to complicate expressive discourse and thereby free students from naïve truth-conveying expectations. In other words, it would attempt to focus writers on their experiences as well as—in light of specific situations in order to acknowledge the multiplicity of truths and the libidinal investments operating within these situations.

In order to explain how kairos could provide such an alternative approach to expressive discourse, I first need to address the claim made in the fourth critique—the claim that, as a category, expressive discourse does not exist. This claim is the thesis of Jeanette Harris's book *Expressive Discourse* which began, she explains, as an attempt to define expressive discourse. After five years of work, Harris's conclusion is that “the term cannot be adequately defined and does not accurately describe a category of discourse” (ix). And in an essay published before the book that reviews the roles of expressive discourse in current composition texts, she writes that “our perception of expressive discourse is, at best, vague, and at worst, distorted” (“The Role of Expressive Discourse”).

In both the book and the essay Harris identifies three major influences that have contributed to our perception of expressive discourse: the early rhetorical expressionists, the discourse theory of James Kinneavy, and the discourse theory of James Britton. According to Harris, the early rhetorical expressionists (Elbow, Macrorie, Coles, Murray, Stewart) are primarily pedagogists, not theorists. As such, their work focuses on practices—ways of encouraging students to write freely and authentically—rather than on discourse theory or analysis. In her explanation of their influence, Harris says that the rhetorical expressionists “viewed writing not as a rhetorical act or a practical means of communication but as a way of helping students become emotionally and psychologically healthier and happier, more fulfilled and self-actualized” (28). Because these were practices designed to achieve personal rather than rhetorical goals, Harris points out that we cannot assume that the writing produced in an expressionist classroom is expressive discourse. To my mind, this recognition of the difference between expressionist writing practices and an expressive theory of discourse is critical. Harris, however, goes on to include expressionist writing practices (exploratory kinds of writing such as journal entries, freewrites, and reflective writing) in her analysis of expressive discourse on the grounds that they “have become identified with expressive writing as a category of discourse” (30).

This identification is unfortunate. More specifically, I think that it is, in part, responsible for Harris's conclusion that since “we cannot satisfactorily define expressive discourse or specify its distinguishing characteristics, then we should perhaps question whether, in fact, such a category of discourse actually exists” (“The Role” 8). But how can a kind of discourse be adequately described or designated with such ill-defined criteria as historical association? In other words, I think Harris's inclusion of exploratory writing (what I am calling expressionist writing practices), in her analysis, based on its identification with expressive discourse, is problematic. In her essay, Harris lists this kind of writing as one of the three types currently categorized as expressive. She does note, however, that in Kinneavy's theory of discourse, exploratory writing falls under reference discourse. Later in her book, exploratory writing becomes “generative text,” which isn't a form of discourse but instead a form of text that is not distinct from the completed text that it becomes (94). Exploratory writing, therefore, is not a kind of expressive discourse. Paradoxically, though, its inclusion in her analysis helps lead to her conclusion that, as a category, expressive discourse does not exist.

Unfortunately, even those who advocate the teaching of expressive discourse unintentionally identify—or confl ate—expressionist writing practices with teaching expressive discourse. A section of Candace Spigelman's "Teaching Expressive Writing as a Narrative Fiction" provides an example of such a conflation. In the essay, Spigelman argues that we should teach the expressive essay as narrative fiction; that is, we should "enable students to appreciate the fictional potential of personal expressive writing" by understanding "truthful" as honest exploration of roles and voices rather than as revealing naked realities (132). The problem isn't in her overall argument. In fact, I find her reunderstanding of truth compelling in terms of its relationship to *kairos* and sophistic rhetoric in general. However, when giving background, Spigelman unselfconsciously mixes critiques of expressionist writing practices and pedagogy with those of teaching expressive discourse. She begins her review with critiques made by "those who object to the teaching of personal expressive writing in composition classes" (122). "Still others," she continues, "argue that an expressive approach to writing valorizes an asocial, non-collective individual and that it divisively pits the individual against the group" (122). Spigelman's
use here of “still others” reveals her non-recognition of the differences between critiques of teaching expressive discourse and critiques of expressionist practices and pedagogy. As an example of these “others” she references James Berlin’s “Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Class.” She doesn’t recognize, however, that in this essay Berlin is not criticizing teaching expressive discourse per se, but instead the ideology that he sees behind the pedagogy of expressionist rhetoric. He argues, for instance, that the goal of expressionist rhetoric is to discover and express the authentic self. For Berlin, it is in this goal that we find expressionist rhetoric’s ideological nature: “Discovering the true self in writing will simultaneously enable the individual to discover the truth of the situation which evoked the writing, a situation that, needless to say, must always be compatible with the self, and this leads to the ideological development of the scheme” (485). In short, Berlin found expressionist rhetoric— but not necessarily expressive discourse—problematic because it was too solipsistic to foster effective political and social action.

By making this distinction in Berlin’s work between expressionist (often exhibited in expressive writing practices) and expressive discourse, I am certainly not implying that Berlin advocated teaching expressive discourse. Nor am I attempting to deny the relationship between practices and ideologies. I am, however, arguing that these relationships are not inevitable. Assuming inevitability results in oversights or confusions such as Spigelman’s, which in turn result in (or represent) the unfair transference of the problems of expressionist practices, pedagogy, and ideology (as they have been characterized by scholars such as Harris and Berlin) to expressive discourse. Put another way, I think that the conflation of expressionist pedagogy and exploratory writing with expressive discourse is responsible for some of the critiques (i.e., Faigley’s and Bartholomae’s) that still surround expressive discourse in that it suggests that in order to teach expressive discourse, one must use expressionist writing practices. Since this is not the case, expressive discourse needs to be both theoretically and practically disentangled from the Romantic and humanistic baggage associated with expressionist pedagogy.

A KAIROS-BASED APPROACH

As I said earlier, a kairos-based approach to expressive discourse would try to shift the focus of personal writing from the writer’s experiences and emotions to a broader perspective that explicitly concentrates on the rhetorical situation—that is, on the ways in which the audience, generic conventions, and social and individual forces affect the writer’s rhetorical choices. The purpose of this shift is to change the criteria and re-understand some of the reasons for teaching and writing expressive discourse.

In an interview with Roger Thompson, Kinneavy defines kairos as “the right time and due measure” (75). As he and other scholars who have written about it acknowledge, though, kairos is a much larger, richer, and more complex—if not protan—concept than this definition implies. Thompson writes, for instance, that in the interview “Kinneavy makes it clear that kairos is central to understanding language’s persuasive force because it accounts for certain elements of the rhetorical act that are ultimately beyond the rhetor’s control” (74). In his essay, “Stasis and Kairos: Principles of Social Construction in Classical Rhetoric,” Michael Carter explains kairos and its role in sophist rhetoric in terms of these elements. His account begins with the Pythagoreans and Mario Untersteiner’s belief that kairos functioned for them as a fundamental law of the universe (101). For the Pythagoreans, the universe was a collection of agonistic relationships (binaries) that were brought together by kairos. The universe was created, they believed, through this kind of kairiotic harmonization. Thus kairos was a generative principle. For the Pythagoreans, Carter explains, kairos was more than the sense of rightness. Rather, it involved the “conflict and resolution of form and matter that initiated the creation of the universe and all that is herein” (102). This was true, in particular, for Protagoras, whose rhetorical philosophy, according to Untersteiner and Carter, “was an application of kairos to the problem of finding truth in a relativistic world” (Carter 103). Carter further explains that for Protagoras, the goal of rhetoric was to determine which argument “has the greater probability of truth within a community of listeners” (103). This generative aspect of kairos was a major influence in sophistic rhetoric.

In addition to Protagoras, Empedocles—a Pythagorean and one of Gorgias’s teachers—was an important influence on the sophists. Empedocles’s belief that meaning is found through the synthesis of contradictory beliefs (dissoi logos) and his belief in probable knowledge also helped provide the basis for the relativistic epistemology upon which Gorgias and other sophists built a rhetoric (102). According to Untersteiner, Gorgias argues in Helen that all forms of logos are deceptive but not necessarily false. All logos, that is, persuasion, is deceptive because it means arguing for one particular version of truth despite the knowledge that others exist (Carter 103). “The form impressed on a logos or its opposite,” says Untersteiner, “is the work of kairos, and the result is precisely apate [deception]” (Carter 111). Kairos, then, was a way for choosing which truth to argue; it was a “principle of rhetorical generation” (Carter 104). John Poulakos supports this notion of kairos in his belief that it “constitutes a prompting toward speaking and a criterion of the value of speech” (Poulakos 41). Carter interprets Poulakos to mean that kairos “is the conflicting elements within a situation that create the impetus for a rhetorical act and it is the appropriateness to the situation that determines the value of
the speech.” Hence a double role for kairos: first, the need for rhetoric to take into consideration and be guided by the situation; and second, the reason or impetus for the discourse (Carter 104).

Although kairos is not a term that scholars outside the fields of rhetoric and composition and speech communication regularly employ to understand writing and speaking acts, I believe that sometimes it is kairos, or a kairos-like principle, that critics are talking about when they speak of the seduction of personal writing. Take for instance the following passage from Rachel Blau DuPlessis’s “Reader, I married me: A polygynous memoir”:

No innocence in the autobiographical. What with its questions of saying “I” and the issue of “what I” and how that “I” negotiates with various “selves”, and the question how much (a lot) is unsaid or repressed. With resistance to the cheerful myths of disclosure; with suspicion of narrative in the first place, and no self-justifying memories to legitimate “me” rather than anyone else . . . . Finally, don’t like to take some, or any of “me” as exemplary, which is after all, one of the casts of the autobiographical essay . . . one can hardly write a sentence straight; it all rebounds. Even its most innocent first words—A, The, I, She, It—teem with heteroglossias...If you choose to believe this is memory; it is also fabrication once it is words...To “develop” (express, expound) is to distort, says I, at my most anti-expository...I am already leaving things out. Memoir is seduction...I am both pleased uncomfortable to be telling you all this. (97-98)

That DuPlessis is connecting personal writing to a nonfoundational epistemology is hardly obvious: the writer of expressive discourse must deal with the question of “what I”; once memories are put into words, they are fabrications; whole truths can’t be told; memoir is seduction. What’s important about this passage is that DuPlessis is describing what personal writing is, what it means to write memoir or autobiography. And what that means, because of the impossibility of one truth, is deception—choosing between competing memories and meanings in order to respond to a specific situation. Perhaps what’s most important about DuPlessis’s position is that even though she uncompromisingly acknowledges the “dangers” of personal writing, she doesn’t disqualify it as a legitimate kind of discourse. Specifically, she calls our attention to the baggage of bourgeois individualism, to the lure of self-authorization, and to the nonreferentiality of language without concluding that the whole enterprise of expressive discourse is bankrupt, unethical, or irredeemably Romantic.

By and large, I think that this perspective is underrepresented, if not missing, in composition studies. To oversimplify, it seems that positions on expressive discourse tend to be polarized. Some theorists, for instance, cannot get past what has become a kind of poststructural impasse: Expressive discourse is based on the belief in the unified self; since the self is not unified, expressive discourse has no basis. On the other hand, some doggedly believe that the personal narrative is the obvious first step, if not the staple assignment, in a composition course: Students should be allowed to write about what they know; since they know themselves, they should write personal narratives and essays. As with all binaries, this either/or situation misrepresents what is possible, as well as what exists. For instance, it seems that often composition scholars point to the work of writers such as E.B. White, May Sarton, Jane Tompkins, and Joan Didion in order to shore up their critiques of personal writing by illustrating the kind of Romantic, humanistic tradition it represents. There are, however, writers whose work is more self-critical about this tradition, writers whose work seems to be highly aware of, if not inspired by, the impossibility of “real” self-knowledge or absolute sincerity. Take, for instance, the memoirs and autobiographical criticism of DuPlessis, Nancy Miller, and Harold Brodkey. Like the sophists, these writers act even though they cannot be sure that what they say is true. As a result, their writing is much more situated, kairotic, and self-reflexive than that of, say, White or Sarton. In his memoir of illness and death, This Wild Darkness, for example, Brodkey questions everything that he has to say about sickness and dying. His acceptance of death is countered by his fear of it; his soft-heartedness is countered by his stoicism; his resentment toward his disease is countered by his appreciation for it. “Everyone is more interesting in my death,” he writes. “I cannot be bothered with my death except as it concerns my books. When I write it out like this, it is a pose, but inside me, it is very real, very firm, this state, for a while” (176). There obviously isn’t room here to look closely at these memoirs and narratives in order to demonstrate how their writers are deceiving us but not lying to us. I’ve brought them up, though, in order to suggest that, at least, not all expressive discourse is, to again use Bartholomae’s terminology, sentimental realism, and, at the most, that the conceptions of expressive discourse that are commonly used to dismiss it are incomplete representations of the personal writing and criticism that exists.

A KAIROS-BASED APPROACH TO EXPRESSIVE DISCOURSE

In light of this discussion, the question now is: how can kairos provide an additional way to understand and teach expressive discourse? More specifically, what would change in a kairos-based approach? First, at the theoretical level, the notion of kairos allows for an understanding of expressive discourse free from unfavorable stereotypes of expressionist practices, pedagogy, and ideology. Disentangled from such characterizations, expressive discourse would not as readily be associated with Romantic notions of self-discovery
or self-actualization. Second, expressive discourse assignments would not so frequently be relegated to the beginning of English 101 as a way to make students comfortable with writing. Instead, expressive discourse could be considered a way to teach the rhetorical situation—it could be used as a way to teach students that what gets written in a personal narrative isn’t simply what happened to the writer and how she felt about it, but rather the kairotic result of both her rational and non-rational decisions: Which version should I write? What events should I include? Which gaps should I fill in? Which details should I embellish? Which emotions should I emphasize? By encouraging students to realize (1) that there are multiple answers to such questions and (2) that the appropriateness of one answer over another is not obvious and is to some extent situation-dependent, a kairos-based approach could demonstrate the impossibility of one truth and of telling the “whole” story. Teachers could, therefore, use expressive discourse in combination with other kinds of assignments to teach not only the social negotiation of disciplinary knowledge, but of personal experiences and emotions as well. While such an approach to expressive discourse would not seek to teach students that experiences and emotions are not real and meaningful, it would attempt to illustrate that what qualifies as real and meaningful is contingent. Besides potentially making students more self-critical (as well as situation-critical) writers of expressive discourse, the advantage of this approach is that it might also make them more ethical readers of expressive discourse; that is, it might make them readers who do not assume, because they have read a writer’s memoir, that they can completely know or understand the writer’s experience.

This global change—distancing expressive discourse from ideas of self-discovery—leads naturally to practical changes, or changes in the kinds of expressive discourse assignments given. For instance, rather than asking a student to vividly describe a significant event, a kairos-based assignment might ask her to use personal writing to respond to a more specific rhetorical task within a concrete situation, thereby shifting her goal from presentation (trying to vividly present her experience and feelings to readers) to persuasion (trying to use her experience and feelings to influence readers). In order to achieve this goal, the student would be encouraged to consider how and why particular experiences and emotions meet or do not meet the rhetorical requirements of the assignment. By explicitly asking her to engage in this kind of consideration, a kairos-based assignment would allow (or induce) the student to make rhetorical choices based more on the rhetorical situation than on her feelings and experiences, possibly making her writing more a process of inquiry than of presenting, since the elements of the rhetorical situation are probably less apparent than her feelings and experiences. In this sense, then, kairos-based assignments would ask students to figure something out, to consider multiple viable options–meanings, logos, truths–and make a decision based on the situation, based on kairos.

In explaining the non-rational aspect of such a decision, Carter says that “if a person demands absolute truth as a basis for action, he or she will be brought to a standstill, the veracity of each logos being diminished by its opposing logos. Action, therefore, is inevitably non-rational because it must be taken despite the knowledge of opposing positions” (105). In this regard, the concept of kairos—the indeterminacy upon which it is based—characterizes postmodern experience and illuminates the connection between that experience and expressive discourse. Put another way, without multiple, sometimes opposing positions, truths, or logos, kairos cannot exist, and neither can kairotic expressive discourse. Just as it was kairos that guided the sophists’ decision to argue one truth over another, it would also be kairos that allowed the student-rhetor to choose which logos to argue. And the timelines, the appropriateness and rightness of that logos would depend precisely on the fact that there was more than one logos available to her. In other words, kairotic expressive discourse ultimately depends on the tension, conflict, and deception that accompanies a nonfoundational epistemology.

In part, it is this relationship to nonfoundationalism that suggests kairos as a promising way of reconciling expressive discourse with some of the critical theories that have challenged it. The rhetor, for instance, would not imagine that he was clearing out a space in which he could express his thoughts and feelings. And he would not see his thoughts and feelings as independent, axiomatic, right, or even genuine. Rather, as Poulakos explains, the rhetor in a kairos-based rhetoric “concerns himself with the particular and the pragmatic; his way is not that of an abstract absolutism created in the spirit of a priori truths; rather it is that of a relativism of concrete rhetorical situations to which situationally derived truths are the only opportune and appropriate responses” (42). Observing the two principles of kairos, timeliness and appropriateness, he says, “does not confine reality within a dogmatic scheme but allows it to rage in all its contradictions . . .” (42). By adopting a kairos-based approach, then, teachers could help some students avoid the kind of vapid, moralistic prose that Faigley bemoans. They could shift students’ focus from themselves—that is, from what they already know and want to say about themselves—to the constraints and contradictions that are part of the rhetorical situation. By asking students to consider the situation in order to choose a meaning teachers are potentially creating tension or conflict; they are potentially creating a situation in which expressive discourse can be kairotic.

That the student’s subject position would be partially determined by the situation responds to the common charge that expressive discourse encourages solipsism. If, in fact, we were able to help students write kairotic personal
narratives or essays, their texts could be informed by the kind of qualifying self-consciousness or tentativeness that is part and parcel of a nonfoundational epistemology. Importantly, I am not suggesting that teachers encourage students to be overly skeptical or non-committal. Rather, I think that if their narratives can be the result of tension or conflict—that is, if students have had to self-critically consider the veracity of more than one truth or logos—then what they write is going to be more nuanced, balanced, or diversified. In other words, they might be less inclined, indeed less able, to write from a single, uncontested, authorizing perspective. According to James Baumlín, this kind of social constructionist conception of writing and subjectivity is one of the ways classical theory is distinguished from modern theory: while modern theory tends to emphasize the lonely element of writing, classical theory, he says, “emphasizes writing, and selfhood, as an awareness of, reaction to, and accommodation of the personalities and interests and words of others” (178).

KAIROS AND DESIRE

Here I want to suggest some possible connections between James Kinneavy’s phenomenological theory of expressive discourse and the concept of kairos. Perhaps surprisingly, I believe that by allowing for (if not encouraging) a psychoanalytic conception of the subject, these connections challenge criticisms of expressive discourse as a theory and practice based on a unified, self-present model of subjectivity. In order to make these connections, we have to rework or supplement Kinneavy’s theory, taking advantage of its ambiguities and pushing it in directions that Kinneavy perhaps did not intend. Generally speaking, this argument is based on the idea that discourse which focuses on the encoder (expressive discourse) does not ignore the world and the rhetorical situation and, in fact, cannot help but to be involved in the world and the rhetorical situation. In addition, and perhaps more importantly, this argument is guided by my belief that kairos, as a generative principle of choosing among multiple meanings based on rational forces, non-rational forces, and the situational context, is fundamentally involved in the discursive formation of subjectivity at any one moment.

Kinneavy’s phenomenological theory of expressive discourse is based on the work of Husserl, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Cassirer, and Gusdorf. From their various self-models Kinneavy creates a composite model upon which he bases his theory of expression. In this composite model the self is constituted by three different kinds of consciousness: a Being-for-Itself, a Being-for-Others, and a Being-in-the-World. Being-for-Itself has three dimensions: past, present, and future. Being-for-Others is the awareness of other consciousnesses that gives the self ‘objectness.’ The third dimension, Being-in-the-World, arises from the self’s consciousness of the world, and it involves the future dimension of Being-for-Itself. As Kinneavy explains it:

The third dimension of my being derives from my consciousness of the world, for my view of the world gives me another view of myself. Since the For-Itself, as future, is the sum total of what I would like to be, the sum total of my “possibles,” I need some instruments to help me become this aspect of myself. These possibles are the “something which the For-Itself lacks in order to be itself.” They are precisely, a lack being, a negation. To achieve this being, I view the world as a set of instruments which can help me move toward my goal. (399; Kinneavy’s emphasis)

Because of this lack, the For-Itself must necessarily involve itself with the world and with others in order to attain selfhood. According to Kinneavy, this involvement, this “carrying out of a project,” is the essence of the act of expression. “Expression,” he says, “involves some process of externalization or action dictated by the presence of a goal to be achieved. This notion of expression is not therefore a simple discharge of emotion or a relaying of impressions; the emotion must be directed toward an aim” (401). Although Kinneavy does not explore the notion that ideology plays an important role in determining writer’s aims, his explanation does not prohibit this idea. In other words, Kinneavy does not assert that the writer’s feelings and thoughts are the only forces at play in expressive discourse. In fact, if we add to his explanation the fact that ideology does participate in determining rhetorical goals, then his idea that externalization is dictated by a goal becomes a kind of dialectical conception of expression. In other words, the For-Itself cannot attain selfhood through expression without the world—without the consciousness (the subjectivity) that Being-in-the-World gives it. One component of this dialectical conception of expression (if we grant that Kinneavy’s ideas do not preclude it), then, is the ideological component. The other, according to Kinneavy, is emotion. There is, he says, “a fundamental substratum of emotion or feeling or ‘attitude’” involved in each of the three dimensions of consciousness. In fact, for Sartre, Kinneavy explains, “A satisfied For-Itself would no longer be a For-Itself. The For-Itself is desire” (400). And for Kinneavy himself, the emotional component, the “value aspect,” is what drives the self to expression. “For desire,” he contends, “implies that the self is ‘involved’ in its views of the world and the Other” (401).

Here Kinneavy has used the terms “emotion” and “desire” interchangeably. In order to push his phenomenological theory in a psychoanalytic direction, I argue that rather than reading the two terms synonymously, we should substitute “desire” for “emotion.” Kinneavy’s definition of desire as the self’s...
involvement in its views of the world and the Other justifies this change, as well as highlights the distinction that he makes between emotion as something someone simply discharges and emotion as what motivates someone to express—as what partly determines the projects he or she will commit to and the basis for his or her engagement with the world. To my mind, this distinction—this definition of emotion as desire—is vital for two reasons. First, it opens the possibility of a psychoanalytic theory of the subject within Kinneavy’s phenomenological theory of expressive discourse by suggesting that there is a kind of emotion—desire—that is not present to the subject in any expressible way. Rather than what we express when we speak and write, this desire accounts for why we attempt expression through speaking and writing, or to put it in Kinneavy’s words, it accounts for the “the basic impetus to the act of expression on the part of the self” (401). In Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, this “basic impetus” to express is understood as the subject’s attempt to regain the wholeness lost in the passage from the Imaginary to the Symbolic. As such, expression in psychoanalytic theory always registers the subject’s lack, incompleteness, or status as split. Secondly, then, this distinction allows us to recognize the connection between Kinneavy’s theory of expressive discourse and kairos—the “phenomenological/psychoanalytic” component of kairos. In “Toward a Sophistic Definition of Rhetoric” John Poulakos advances the following:

Rhetoric is the art which seeks to capture in opportune moments that which is appropriate and attempts to suggest that which is possible… [T]his definition intimates that rhetoric is an artistic undertaking which concerns itself with the how, the when, and the what of expression and understands the why of purpose. Further, this definition links rhetoric to a movement originating in the sphere of actuality and striving to attain a place in that of potentiality. (36)

This definition, Poulakos says in his conclusion, “posits that man is driven primarily by his desire to be other, the wish to move from the sphere of actuality to that of possibility” (46). As Poulakos’s definition indicates, rhetoric begins with kairos—with capturing the opportune and the appropriate. It then moves, based on the assumption that one’s desires are his/her main driving force, to the suggestion of the possible. In this conceptualization, kairos is the non-rational act of choosing a meaning to argue based on both the situation (actuality) and desire (the possible). It is a concept, then, that has both social constructionist (as Carter argues) and what I am calling phenomenological/psychoanalytical aspects. As such, I think kairos permits a more careful and nuanced conceptualization of expression and expressive discourse. As a generative principle, kairos allows us to see the rhetor as coming into a temporary existence as a result of both the rhetorical situation and her/his desires and commitments.

More specifically, as a principle of situationality, kairos illuminates the role of social, cultural, and ideological forces in the rhetor’s generative decisions. As a phenomenological/psychoanalytic principle, kairos illuminates the role of the rhetor’s libidinal investments and engagements—what she/he sees as possibilities—in her/his generative decisions. In this regard, then, kairos can provide a way of theorizing the subject (as well as the act) of expressive discourse that potentially avoids both the reduction of the subject to a discursive effect and the humanistic conception of the subject as whole, autonomous entity. Given some of the reactions to poststructural and postmodern conceptualizations of the subject as an epiphenomenon or ideological pawn, such a theory would itself be a kairotic response to the critiques surrounding (and misrepresenting) expressive discourse.

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Notes

1 By acknowledging my partial agreement with Faigley and Bartholomae, I am not endorsing the label “sentimental realism” (or any other reductive, monolithic title) as an accurate description of the variety of theories, pedagogies, and practices advocated by so-called expressivists such as William Coles, Peter Elbow, or Donald Murray. Rather I am acknowledging and addressing the possibility that some theories and practices of expressive discourse are based on foundational beliefs such as realism, and that in some instances such beliefs do not yield fruitful results.

2 The following assignment, also from St. Martin’s, conveys the same expectations: “Write an essay about a person who has been important in your life. Strive to present a vivid portrait, one that will let your readers see the person’s character and the significance of the relationship” (105). Assignments such as these potentially encourage students to write about topics that they already understand and value—the events and experiences that they feel are the most real and most important in their lives. Often, though, the events and experiences that are most real and most understandable are also the most over-determined, i.e., the ones made real and understood for them by their culture. Some students, on some level, realize this over-determination, I think, and feel unchallenged, if not defeated, by it.


4 Understandably, this dimension of Kinneavy’s theory, and of phenomenology in general, is most problematic because it is partly predicated on the idea of free will.

5 Specifically I am referring to arguments like the one Marshall Alcorn makes in “Changing the Subject of Postmodern Theory: Discourse, Ideology, and Therapy in the Classroom.” Alcorn argues that discourse is an extremely heterogeneous substance that can operate, on the one hand, as ideology but also, on the other hand, as the “material embodiment of human emotion, of emotionally
charged thinking, and emotionally intense identification” (341). Thus he argues that some poststructural and postmodern theories of subjectivity oversimplify the relationships among language, the subject, and ideology; they do not sufficiently account for the roles of libidinal investments and emotions (even if these things are not entirely distinct from ideology) in their discussions of subjectivity, ideology, and writing. I believe that the same oversimplification is characteristic of discussions of expressive discourse and its relationships to subjectivity and ideology.

WORKS CITED


