The "New Rhetoric" in the Training of Teachers of Composition

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In his essay "In Lieu of a New Rhetoric" (College English, October 1964), Richard Ohmann wrote that "rhetoricians have lately taken to using the phrase 'new rhetoric' as if it had a reference like that of the word 'horse,' rather than that of the word 'hippogriph.' I am not at all sure that the wings have done more than sprout" (p. 17). More than four years have passed since those words were published, but Mr. Ohmann might as easily have written them today. Many scholars (Mr. Ohmann among them) are, of course, advancing on different fronts in the direction of a new rhetoric, but they have yet to decide among themselves whether there is a target area which they can all occupy in comfort. Essays illustrating the diversity of the rhetorical frontiers being explored today have appeared in publications ranging from two numbers of CCC (the October 1963 number grouped articles under the heading "Toward a New Rhetoric," and the October 1965 number used the heading "Further toward a New Rhetoric") to a collection of essays by Martin Steinmann, Jr., called New Rhetorics (1967) and Francis Christensen's compilation of his essays under the title Notes toward a New Rhetoric (also 1967). Besides Christensen's own analyses of sentences and paragraphs in terms of levels of generality and texture, we have had essays by Edward Corbett and Richard Hughes testifying to the relevance of classical rhetorical theory in the present day, a piece by Kenneth Burke asserting that rhetoric seeks to "identify" (bring closer together) the positions of writer and reader, an explanation by Robert Gorrell of how a writer must in the course of his essay discharge the commitment he makes to his reader at the beginning, a sociologist's survey of how usage and pronunciation differentiate social classes in England, and brief models by Josephine Miles and Richard Ohmann for the analysis of prose style—to name just a few of the many forays in search of a "new rhetoric" that appear in these publications.

Indeed, an observer might be tempted to suppose that, since the word "rhetoric" is an honorific term these days, scholars use it, as the semanticists would say, to purr over their latest models for the analysis of prose or their newest theories about the teaching of composition. When we see an essay that promises to tell us what "rhetoric" or the "new rhetoric" is, we should probably check to be sure that the writer is not just offering what Charles Stevenson (in the essay reprinted by Mr. Steinmann) calls a "persuasive definition"—that is, trying to win favor for a theory by identifying it with a word that brings warm approval to whatever the word touches.

Still, even if their investigations take them far from each other, students of rhetoric in this decade have some accomplishments to purr about, particu-
larly several that draw attention to parts of the composing process or features of discourse that had previously gone unexamined. These accomplishments ought to affect the training of teachers and therefore have implications for the specialist in English education.

The first of these accomplishments is to force teachers to acknowledge the importance of "pre-writing" in the administering of assignments in composition. For the classical rhetorician, "pre-writing"—if that is at all a synonym for "invention"—consisted of looking about for data and arguments that would support a proposition or lead to a decision about an issue. The teaching of invention seems to have begun at the point where the subject to be discussed had already been perceived as a choice among possible courses of action or among possible judgments that might be made about some facts (for example, whether or not a particular act constituted murder). The rhetorician of the nineteen-sixties defines "invention" much more broadly. For him, "invention" includes the whole process of coming to terms with an experience, of defining a writer's perspective on what he sees, of deciding what is important enough to the writer to warrant his discussing it. To invent is to discover, not instruments for use in establishing a case, but relationships among data and convictions about data that the writer will want to express because he is convinced of their importance. This view of "invention," unfortunately, has been slow in finding its way into our texts on rhetoric, most of which still appear to suggest that the only work the student needs to do before writing is to select a topic of interest to him and narrow it so that he can treat it thoroughly in the space available. James McCrimmon's latest edition of Writing with a Purpose gives (in the first two chapters) somewhat greater importance to "pre-writing" than do most texts and advises the student in some detail about ways of breaking down a large subject into an orderly group of manageable subtopics, from which the student can choose the one that attracts him most.

The most important work on "pre-writing" to date, however, is that of Gordon Rohman at Michigan State University. His experiments, which forced students to master the full details of their experiences, to meditate about their general ideas until they could perceive in their imaginations a concrete manifestation of those ideas, and to search their memories for analogues to present experiences, demonstrate the increased interest and competence in writing that students can demonstrate after they learn how to "invent" material that matters to them.

What Professor Rohman's experiments have to say to those preparing to teach composition is not yet clear. Not all teachers would want to build the kind of tightly structured course in composition that he taught to his sophomores at Michigan State. But his work demonstrates that teachers are going to have to think much more seriously than they are now accustomed to about how the student can discover ideas about his experience for composing into essays. Teachers, and those who prepare them for their jobs, are going to have to shift some attention from the organizational soundness and stylistic decorum of pieces already written and concentrate more than many now do on ways for the writer to discover what he really wants to say, as well as on what data
he needs in order to put his views across convincingly. Such an emphasis may be much the best place to begin teaching writing to our disadvantaged students, who need first of all to recognize that they can find something to say which their readers will consider important. This recognition, in turn, may help them to develop the self-respect that will encourage them to want to learn.

In teaching the discovery of fresh ideas, Mr. Rohman seems to have learned much from psychologists such as Jerome Bruner and Rollo May, who are investigating the phenomenon of “creativity.” If Rohman is right, the work of these men may help us develop students who can indeed put the details of present experiences together with recollections of the past in fresh, illuminating, and arresting papers.

If some of the new generation of rhetorical theorists are looking at what happens as the mind seeks an idea to write about, others are seeking ways to assess precisely the effectiveness with which a writer expresses his ideas, so that the writer, in revising his piece or writing his next piece, can profit by his successes and failures in communicating. Such evaluation is possible, these theorists contend, through an analysis of “feedback” from the audience after the speaker or writer has completed his task, or indeed while he is still performing it. The results of communication, the “feedback,” require interpretation, and the preferred interpretation is quantitative. This group of rhetoricians—they are found more often in departments of speech today than in departments of English—looks for ways to “measure” the effectiveness of communication, often by testing the responses or the changes in attitude exhibited by the audience hearing the communication. The essay by Carl Hovland and others that Martin Steinmann reprints in New Rhetorics demonstrates that tests of attitude change may reveal the effects of different patterns for arrangement of material in writing. Hovland and his colleagues presented different versions of an argument advancing the same thesis to different (but comparable) test groups; the versions differed in organizational plan and sometimes in the data provided. Some of the essays, for example, explicitly recognized and sought to refute arguments opposed to the thesis; other gave minimal attention to opposing views. The researchers tried to determine which essays produced more noticeable, and more durable, changes of attitude in their readers, and then they tried to draw conclusions about the value of particular strategies on particular occasions. There are not yet enough of such studies to support a prediction about the future value of “scientific” experiments to determine how different strategies change attitudes, but the approach used by Hovland may characterize future studies of rhetoric in oral communication. It would be premature to urge teachers to familiarize themselves with the literature on attitude change and techniques for measuring it, but those responsible for training teachers should be aware of the contributions that sociologists and psychologists may be able to make on topics in communication where judgment up to now has largely rested on intuition and aesthetic values.

These comments may seem to imply that psychologists who are interested in how ideas are generated and how attitudes shift under the influence of words are taking over the “new rhetoric.” But if psychologists are influencing
current thought about rhetoric, they do not yet dominate it. The principal innovators in rhetoric—the men whose work prospective and active teachers must come to know—are those who have widened and deepened our understanding of how language works in written (and oral) discourse. These are not only, and perhaps not chiefly, the generative grammarians, whose work helps us to understand the syntax of English, or the historians of language, or the dialectolists, important though their contributions to English teaching have been. The valuable innovations in rhetorical theory have come, instead, from demonstrations that even the language of discursive prose is, or can be, "dramatic."

Those who have demonstrated the value of a "dramatic" approach to the rhetoric of written prose include, of course, Walker Gibson and Wayne Booth. (I would add Reuben Brower to the list, by virtue of his book *The Fields of Light*, even though that book deals with fiction and poetry rather than non-narrative prose.) These men have established the value of regarding prose (including fiction) as the product of an encounter between a speaker, a listener, and a subject—an encounter in which the speaker creates an identity and expresses an attitude toward his subject and his listener by the language he uses. In "The Rhetorical Stance," Wayne Booth argues, partly by implication, that the process of finding ways to induce an audience to believe one's thesis deserves less to be honored with the title of "rhetoric" than the art of confronting a listener and even a subject as if they were participating in a live discussion. Mr. Booth evidently accepts Mr. Gibson's demonstration (in "The Speaking Voice and the Teaching of Composition") that a writer by the very act of writing casts himself in a role almost as does a character in a play—a role defined as much by his language as by the substance of what he says. Mr. Gibson, like Mr. Booth, is implicitly redefining "rhetoric" to focus attention not on what the speaker *does* to his listener but rather on what the speaker, in responding to his experiences and the presence of his hearers, *is*.

In this view of rhetoric, language is studied not just for its impact on the listener; language is more than tropes and schemes and other listable devices employed to produce an effect in the listener's consciousness. Instead, language is the disclosure of one image of the writer's self; that self is, itself, an artistically important creation. A student of rhetoric, thus defined, examines the features of language that help establish the identity of a writer, or speaker, in the hope of learning to control both the image of himself that emerges from his writing and the impression he gives of his attitude toward subject and listener. At its best, when encouraged by a skilled teacher, this kind of study can lead to papers in which the listener hears a living voice—dramatic utterances, soliloquies, resulting from the writer's immediate involvement with his subject and his desire to make his listener experience the writer's reaction to that subject. If authenticity and conviction are virtues in a piece of writing, these are the virtues toward which this new "dramatic" rhetoric moves.

This rhetoric makes demands on the teacher, and the teacher's teacher, that older rhetorics do not make. Principally it demands a highly developed sensitivity to the workings of language: to the different semantic values and
emotional resonance of words nearly synonymous, to the different emphases or even different habits of thinking implied by alternative ways of ordering the parts of a sentence, to the relationships between speaker and listener implied even by the speaker's preference of one pronoun to another, and so on. This rhetoric largely takes for granted the possibility of presenting essentially the same cognitive meaning in different linguistic forms; it directs attention to the total group of consequences that follow from choosing a particular linguistic form in preference to another. The teacher, and the teacher's teacher, must be able to say what these effects are and to identify quite precisely what causes them to occur. A knowledge of the best of modern grammar—and, more broadly, of how language works semantically, philosophically, psychologically—seems to be essential equipment, at least for the teacher's teacher.

But conceptual knowledge about language by itself will not be enough. The new dramatic rhetoric focuses on language in action in discourse, and the teacher must be skilled in perceiving what action is taking place. In other words, the teacher—and this surely applies even more to the person who trains him—must be a perceptive reader, capable not merely of identifying the thesis and supporting observations in a piece of writing but of judging the principle of organization and evaluating the linguistic and semantic choices made by the writer. This new rhetoric, if it is one, demands of teachers much the same kind of sensitivity in dealing with discursive prose that the so-called new criticism demands of them when they discuss poetry, fiction, and drama. The teacher needs background knowledge about language and the logic of organizational plans, but he needs even more the competence to illuminate a piece of writing by discerning analysis of its language and tone.

It is still too early to say whether a genuinely new body of rhetorical theory is developing, or whether we are rediscovering an older rhetoric and reinterpreting it for an age in which discourse serves many purposes other than to advance the work of courts and senates. There is not much doubt, as Professors Corbett, Hughes, Duhamel, Schwartz, and others have demonstrated, that studying classical rhetoric helps enough in our understanding of written and spoken discourse to make some knowledge of classical rhetoric desirable for teachers and trainers of teachers. But, even though they are still fragmentary and disconnected, the discoveries accumulated during the last twenty years about the workings of discourse argue vigorously that, in order to train today's teachers effectively, we need to help them understand more than we have done in the past how a writer generates ideas, how he can measure the effect of his work on his readers, and how, by his semantic and linguistic choices, he can in his writing create for his readers (his "listeners") a dramatic character.