Interpretive Conventions

Mailloux, Steven, Mailloux, Steven

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APPENDIX

Reader-Response Criticism
and Teaching Composition

Are rhetoric and poetics separate and discrete fields of study? Although rhetorical theorists from Aristotle to Kenneth Burke have pointed out the overlap between these two areas, detailed discussion usually centers on showing their distinctiveness. The common ground of rhetoric and poetics is a "no-man's-land, the limbo of the faithless, for no self-respecting aesthete will vulgarize his subject by glancing, even momentarily, at rhetoric, and the rhetorician, though generally much more comprehensive in his viewpoint than the aesthetein, is so beset with the 'practical' discourses of history (both past and present) that he seldom has time to concern himself with poetry." 1 Extended entry into this no-man's-land is long overdue, and especially so now that English departments are becoming more aware of their dual responsibilities to teach composition and promote literary study. A sharp distinction between rhetoric and poetics encourages us to view these duties as two completely separate functions. Actually, the study of literature and the teaching of writing are closely related and mutually illuminating. In fact, recent trends in literary criticism suggest that a rapprochement may be taking place between literary and composition theory; shared paradigms are now emerging. In this Appendix I will outline these developing areas of shared theory and practice, emphasizing the role of reader-response criticism as a growing bond between rhetoric and poetics.

Observation and interpretation always proceed within ac-


My enormous debt to Professor Winterowd's insights in composition theory will be evident from my many references to his work below.
cepted paradigms, whether in physics, medical research, compo-
sition study, or literary criticism. Since the 1940s, New Critical
formalism has clearly served as the dominant paradigm in
American criticism and theory. This "objective" approach (in its
purest form, at least) viewed a literary work as an artifact, cut off
from both authorial intention and reader response. It rejected
"external" criticism and restricted its analysis to the work in and
of itself. Many New Critics specialized the text, viewing its parts
in relation to the artistic whole, a tightly organized network of
structures. This American New Criticism provided little of
interest to rhetoricians. It not only ignored the audience, a cen-
tral concern of rhetoric; it also actively discouraged talk about
readers through its condemnation of the Affective Fallacy.

In recent years there have been many reactions against New
Criticism. In one such reaction, a model of literature as com-
munication challenges the established model of literature as
aesthetic product. Those critics using this revitalized communi-
cation model practice the Intentional and Affective Fallacies
with impunity. This new paradigm of criticism has much more
to offer the composition teacher than did the old formalist
paradigm, and it is here that we can begin to see the recent
overlap of rhetoric and poetry most clearly. Two contemporary
critical approaches that work within the model of literature as
communication are textual-biographical and reader-response
criticisms.6

Recent textual-biographical critics view art as process, not as
product. This may at first seem contradictory to our usual no-
tion that textual editors are interested only in establishing a
product, the intended text for a critical edition. But such a por-
trayal is incomplete. As we saw in Chapter 4, the scholarly editor
establishes his text based on the "author's final intention," and

Rosen, "Thomas Kuhn, Interpreters, and English Studies," College English,
40 (1979), 764-71, and Grant Webster, The Republic of Letters (Baltimore:

7. For another vigorous advocate of the communication model for literature,
sSee Mary Louise Pratt, Toward a Speech Act Theory of Literary Discourse
(Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977), especially her attack on the
contextual fallacious model assumed by intrinsic criticism and structuralist
theory, pp. 72-75.
this criterion must be viewed not only in terms of the textualist's interpretation of the intended conventional responses but also in light of his historical knowledge of the author's whole composing process. In fact, the textualist sees the literary work itself as a process, a series of intentional acts by the author. When a critic studies a work from this textual-biographical perspective, when he practices what has been called the "New Scholarship," he revels in the Intentional Fallacy, bringing to bear his total knowledge of the author's composing process (including extant forms of the text) and the relevant biographical events that affect that process.

From a complementary perspective, recent reader-oriented critics have also viewed art as communicative process. As M. H. Abrams puts it: "Since the late 1950's . . . there has been a strong revival of interest in literature as a public act involving communication between author and reader, and this has led to the development of a rhetorical criticism which, without departing from a primary focus on the work as such, undertakes to analyze those elements within a poem or a prose narrative which are their primarily for the reader's sake." Abrams cites the work of Wayne Booth in his  
*Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961) as an example of this type of criticism. During the 1970s, reader-response critics extended (and transformed) this rhetorical approach: Wolfgang Iser in phenomenology, Jonathan Culler through his theory of reading conventions, and Stanley Fish in his affective stylistics.

Whereas the textual-biographical critics view literature as a series of acts by the author, reader-response critics view it as a series of acts by the reader. Fish's criticism, for example, is "an analysis of the developing responses of the reader in relation to the words as they succeed one another in time," and, as we saw in Chapters 2 and 3, this temporal reading model emphasizes the series of acts that
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the text requires the reader to perform: judging, questioning, finding answers, assuming perspectives, solving puzzles, and so on. Or as Iser writes: we "look forward, we look back, we decide, we change our decision, we form expectations, we are shocked by their nonfulfillment, we question, we muse, we accept, we reject; this is the dynamic process of recreation" in reading. By describing these actions, reader-response critics discard the Affective Fallacy and join the New Scholars in rejecting the chief prescriptions of American New Criticism.

Whereas the old New Critical paradigm was hostile to any synthesis of rhetoric and poetics, the new paradigm that views literature as a temporal act of communication provides much encouragement for a rapprochement between literary criticism and composition theory. Like textual-biographical critics, composition theorists stress the importance of viewing the composing process as a series of acts by the writer. And like reader-response critics, these rhetoricians suggest paying considerable attention to the reader while writing and analyzing discourse. These shared concerns and perspectives should encourage more exchanges between current rhetoric and poetics, exchanges that will benefit both disciplines and English studies as a whole.

A simple view of the composing process based on the traditional rhetorical categories— invention, arrangement, and style—will further illustrate the fit between composition theory

and recent literary criticism (primarily reader-response approaches). In what follows I will oversimplify the composing process and fall into such heresies as implying a form-content split. My point, however, is simply to provide a clear framework for examining some additional parallels between literary criticism and composition.

The goal of the composition teacher is to give the student writer alternative choices at every stage of the composing process. For example, in the area of invention (the generation of subject matter), the student has at least two alternatives: brainstorming and heuristics. Brainstorming is an unsystematic way of asking questions about a topic, while heuristics are systematic ways of asking questions. Literary critics often use heuristics in their analyses of literature, and such "critical" heuristics can be employed in teaching composition. For instance, Fish's heuristic is simply the rigorous and disinterested asking of the question, what does this word, phrase, sentence, paragraph, chapter, novel, play, poem do? The student writer can use this same question to generate comments about any piece of discourse, including his or her own essays. An even more powerful heuristic can be found in the critical method of Kenneth Burke (whose writings have found an admiring audience among recent literary critics). Students can easily use the terms of Burke's Pentad—act, agent, agency, scene, and purpose—to generate questions about any human action. Clearly, then, literary criticism can provide resources for the composition teacher at the stage of invention.

Once subject matter is generated, what choices of form are available to the student? Again, literary theory provides some useful models for the composition teacher. To Burke, form is "the psychology of the audience"); it is "an arousing and fulfillment of desires. A work has form in so far as one part of it leads a reader to anticipate another part, to be gratified by the se-
In its emphasis on the reader and temporal sequence, Fish's "structure of the reader's experience" is similar to Burke's theory of form. Fish describes the specific ways the author arranges his reader's activities, what acts the reader "is being moved to perform" and the order in which he is moved to perform them. At the level of arrangement, a temporal reader-oriented criticism encourages the composition teacher to make student writers aware of the expectations they set up in their essays and sensitive to their own ordering of the reader's responses.

The level of style provides another area where literary and composition theory interact. Again, the notion of choice can serve as our central concept: what sentence structures are available to the student writer? Two kinds of stylistics are relevant here: pedagogical and aesthetic. "Pedagogical stylistics," as the term implies, deals with teaching students to develop style, for example, using sentence-combining exercises; aesthetic stylistics refers to the study of style within literature. When we view style as choice, pedagogical stylistics becomes a matter of providing students with syntactic alternatives. Aesthetic stylistics, on the other hand, becomes a method of analyzing a text in terms of alternative choices among available structures. Empirical studies have shown that pedagogical stylistics can improve a student's syntactic fluency, his or her ability to combine syntactic units into more complex forms. No such strong claims are made for aesthetic stylistics. However, some aspects of aesthetic stylistics do have contributions to make to composition.


14. But see the contrast drawn above in Ch. 3, pp. 69-70.

15. Stanley E. Fish, "What Is Stylistics and Why Are They Saying Such Terrible Things About It?" in Is There a Text in This Class?, p. 92.


17. See Frank O'Hare, Sentence-Combining: Improving Student Writing without Formal Grammar Instruction (Urbana, Ill.: NCTE, 1973).
Take the following example from one of the most informed composition texts now available:

As we shall see, a major problem in student writing is the tendency not to put separate ideas together via the syntactic devices of the language. Here is a beginning paragraph from a freshman essay:

My greatest love is the love of my possessions. I feel like a king when I am amongst my possessions. But my possessions are not material possessions such as a beautiful new automobile or an enormous new house. Rather, my possessions are the wonders of nature: the beautiful, snow-capped mountains and the deep, crystal-clear lakes.

I think most readers would say that is either immature or awkward or both. One alternative to it is the following:

I feel like a king when I am amongst the wonders of nature, for they are my greatest love and my greatest possessions: snow-capped mountains and deep, crystal-clear lakes rather than material things such as a new automobile or an enormous house.

I would argue that it sounds more mature, perhaps even more intelligent, than the first sentence, yet the idea content of both is essentially the same.

Winterowd's purpose here is to illustrate the usefulness of pedagogical stylistics (in this case, embedding propositions within propositions). As he further argues: "The reason that most readers would prefer the sentence is simply that in the grammatical possibilities of the language have been used to put closely related ideas together in the neat syntactic package of a sentence."

By focusing on the syntactic choices, however, Winterowd ignores larger rhetorical strategies. If we examine these sentences from the perspective of reader-response criticism, a form of aesthetic stylistics, we see that the structure of the reader's experience is radically different in each case. Though sentence may sound syntactically "immature," it is certainly more rhetorically "sophisticated" than sentence. In the freshman essay (consciously or not) has withheld the specific name of his "greatest love." After the first sen-

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Winterowd, Contemporary Writer, pp. 308-09.
tence, the reader naturally jumps to the conclusion that "pos-
sessions" refer to material things. The second sentence offers
nothing to contradict such a conclusion; it suggests the image of
a king in his treasure room. (I distinctly remember my impres-
sion at this point during my first reading: not only does this
student lack syntactic fluency but, more important, his values are
clearly superficial and undeveloped.) The contrastive but begins
the rhetorical reversal. The third sentence contradicts the
reader's previous conclusion; the writer's greatest love is not
material possessions. The final sentence not only provides a new
equation (possessions = nature), but it also forces the reader to
repudiate his previous condescending attitude toward the
writer's value system. Such a reversal makes a rather com-
nonplace statement into a rhetorically forceful corrective. Win-
terowd's "more mature" rewrite of 71 manifests none of these
rhetorical strategies: because no information is withheld, the
reader jumps to no false conclusions and makes no mistaken
judgments about the writer. Does 72 have more embedded
propositions than 71? Yes. Is it more rhetorically sophisticated?
No.18

In terms of their controlling paradigms and in view of shared
models for invention, arrangement, and style, rhetoric and po-
etics are becoming more closely related in current theory and
practice. This statement implies a theoretical justification for a
historical point I made at the beginning of this Appendix: liter-
ary criticism and composition theory can be parts of one
homogeneous discipline of English. Indeed, literature specialists
have the potential to be the best qualified teachers of composi-
tion. But I would like to stress a further point. Not just any
English professor can teach writing, even if he or she has ac-
cepted the model of literature as communicative act. It is clear
that composition teachers are becoming specialists within the En-
glish Department (not just second-class citizens). There is now a
growing empirical and rhetorical body of knowledge that all

18 Brook Thomas provides further arguments for the use of reader-
response criticism in the teaching of writing—see his "Re-Reading, Re-Writing,"
C
tie 11, No. 3 (1981), 1-6.
serious teachers of composition must master. Nevertheless, as I have tried to show, composition and literary study need not be antithetical functions within our discipline. A synthesis of rhetoric and poetics will go a long way toward curing the English Department's split personality.

21. See Tate's collection of bibliographical essays cited in n. 8 above.