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The basic issues of the "new" rhetoric include (1) the ways in which contemporary rhetoric is "new", (2) some of the problems facing contemporary rhetoric, and (3) the relation of rhetoric to the teaching of English. Two factors contributing to the concept of a "new" discipline are a revival of interest in classical rhetoric and the development of new approaches to rhetoric based on information from related disciplines. Basic among the current problems is the tendency to confuse the rhetoric that is a theoretical study of discourse (including subjects like logic, semantics, linguistics, and psychology) with the rhetoric that is a summary of precepts about writing and speaking. A teaching rhetoric should differ from either of these in that it must attempt to describe the choices available to a writer, explain the effects of the different choices, and, at the same time, be comprehensive enough to take account of all aspects of composition. More emphasis on rehtoric is needed in the training of teachers at all levels. (LH)

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Very Like A Whale—
A Report On Rhetoric

ROBERT M. GORRELL

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Very Like a Whale—A Report on Rhetoric

ROBERT M. GORRELL

HAMLET. *Do you see yonder cloud that's almost in shape of a camel?*
POLONIUS. *By the mass, and 'tis like a camel indeed.*
HAMLET. *Methinks it is like a weasel.*
POLONIUS. *It is backed like a weasel.*
HAMLET. *Or like a whale?*
POLONIUS. *Very like a whale.*

RHETORIC IS VERY LIKE an umbrella. Under its expansive shade, more or less comfortably, cluster a variety of subjects —semantics, logic, usage, style. Rhetoric is very like an arch. It spans widely, bridging psychology, linguistics, sociology, philosophy. Rhetoric is very like a dynamo. It is the machinery for generating the ideas and language of communication. Rhetoric is sometimes very like a whale, with its mouth open, sweeping the ocean. Rhetoric is also very like a jelly fish.

The seminar authorized last year by the CCCC Executive Committee, to be organized by the chairman, met December 11 and 12 in Denver to discuss rhetoric.[1] The seminar was prolific of metaphors. But we did not attempt to reach conclusions or to formulate pronouncements or recommendations. We centered our attention on a series of previously circulated questions, which we had all thought about. We found, perhaps, more new questions than answers to those we already had. We began the discussions with feelings of humility—which were reinforced by our proceedings. I have a transcript of our discussion, but I am not attempting a summary. The comments that follow are my own, influenced by the seminar but not necessarily reflecting it.

First of all, to add a metaphor, rhetoric is very like a chameleon. And in its relation to the whole subject of English, whatever that is, it is very like linguistics eight or ten years ago. That is, as linguistics was, rhetoric is the word, or at least is becoming the word. Like linguistics, it is possibly threatened more by its friends than its enemies. Like linguistics it means many different things to different people, and often it means very little. Often it is only a reflection of the current fashion in book titles, titles which frequently are irresponsible in describing contents. Like linguistics, rhetoric is gaining status as the new cure-all for the problems of teaching English. The "new" rhetoric is plaguing the academic conscience. It seems to me, therefore, important to consider the following: (1) some senses in which rhetoric may be "new"; (2) some problems and directions of contemporary rhetoric; and (3) some relations of rhetoric to the teaching of English.

[1] Participants in the seminar were Wayne Booth, University of Chicago; Virginia Burke, University of Wisconsin in Milwaukee; Francis Christensen, University of Southern California; Edward P. J. Corbett, Creighton University; Robert Gorrell, University of Nevada, chairman; Albert Kitzhaber, University of Oregon; Richard Ohmann, Wesleyan University; James R. Squire, University of Illinois; Richard Young, University of Michigan; and Karl Wallace, University of Illinois. In preparing this paper I have been influenced by numerous comments from the five reels of recording tape which the conference produced, but I do not pretend to express either consensus or the individual views of participants.

I suppose that any writer thinks of his rhetoric as "new" in some ways, or he could hardly justify writing it. George Campbell, as well as Kenneth Burke, used the word "new," with reason, I think. Some of the current vitality of the notion of a new rhetoric results from analogy with the new mathematics or the new grammar. Certainly the "new" rhetoric has gained some status; articles are beginning to question its existence—"the chimera of a new rhetoric" and the like. I think, however, that there are legitimate reasons for considering the new rhetoric as more valid than analogy and more substantial than myth.

One major reason for the development of a new rhetoric is the need, especially as it has been disclosed through recent investigations by CCCC and others of Freshman English and the teaching of composition generally. The "philosophical" rhetoricians of the eighteenth century revived interest in classical rhetoric but also from the 1760's on made significant adaptations, broadening the domain of rhetoric by relating it to belles lettres and by approaching the nature of rhetorical invention through the psychology of the day. Their view persisted in the nineteenth century; but as it was adapted and made "practical" in the textbook rhetoric of writers like John Genung or Alexander Bain or Adams Sherman Hill, it often approached absurdity. Philosophical observations about the nature of discourse were more and more commonly translated into dogmatic proscriptions concerning style and usage, so that I. A. Richards in 1936 could expect a good deal of sympathy with his description of the "present state of Rhetoric" as "the dreariest and least profitable part of the waste that the unfortunate travel through in Freshman English."[2]

Actually, by the time of Richard's comment, rhetoric as a serious study had tended to disappear from all but the title of the freshman course. Looking cynically at what was happening in the classroom —and what often happens still—one would find a variety of related subjects replacing rhetoric and the study of composition surviving mainly in the assignment and criticism of the weekly theme. Invention had become largely a matter of assigning a book of readings, presumably to provoke thought or stimulate ideas for writing. Disposition was likely to be drill on the form for an outline. Elocution or style was likely to be mainly workbook drill on usage. There was obviously, and still is, need for a new rhetoric.

One evidence of the development of a new rhetoric is a revival of interest in old rhetoric. Recent studies have suggested that classical rhetoric has value beyond its historic interest, that it can still be the basis for a working approach.[3] Anthologies of rhetorical studies have begun to appear, reprinting selections from some early rhetorics which are not readily available.[4] The reprints of "landmark" texts by the University of Southern Illinois Press are symptoms of interest, and more such reprints are needed. Journals of the speech associations reveal an active interest in classical rhetoric among scholars of speech, much of their important work virtually unknown in departments of English. Certainly one kind of new rhetoric is a revived and revised classical rhetoric.

More dramatic are approaches to rhetoric which grow from new knowledge or new techniques in related disciplines—

[2] *Philosophy of Rhetoric*, New York, p. 3.

[3] For example, see Edward P. J. Corbett, *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student*, New York, 1965, or Dudley Bailey, "A Plea for a Modern Set of Topoi," *College English*, XXVI, (1964), 111-17.

[4] Among them are Dudley Bailey, *Essays on Rhetoric*, New York, 1965; Joseph Schwartz and John A. Rycenga, *The Province of Rhetoric*, New York, 1965.

linguistics, psychology, anthropology, and others. Daniel Fogarty finds the roots for new rhetorics in the work of Kenneth Burke or I. A. Richards or the general semanticists,[5] all of whom owe a good deal to psychology and other related disciplines. Structural and generative grammars have enabled Richard Ohmann and Francis Christensen to develop different approaches to rhetorical analysis.[6] Indeed, current discussions of transformational grammars take an essentially rhetorical attitude in their emphasis on the processes which generate sentences.[7] Kenneth Pike's development of tagmemics grew out of his work in linguistics and anthropology, and the use of the terms *particle, wave,* and *field* in rhetorical theory by Pike, Richard Young, and others at Michigan developed from an analogy with physics.[8] There may be no new rhetoric, but new rhetorics are developing. If rhetoric is becoming very like a camel, it is like a camel with many humps.

The participants in the seminar generally welcomed the prospect of a variety of new rhetorics, partly recognizing the inevitable but also seeing this trend as the logical approach to fundamental problems of rhetoric. Basic among these problems is the two- or perhaps three-faced meaning we must attach to the term *rhetoric*. If we accept as a working definition of rhetoric something like "the art of effective discourse"—to which the seminar kept returning, as a starting place, at least—we risk the same sorts of confusion through multiple meanings or applications that have confused grammar. That is, *rhetoric* refers to the theory of what happens in communication; in this sense it is a descriptive study attempting to determine what occurs and why. *Rhetoric,* however, also refers to whatever body of precepts or accumulation of advice we can offer to writers or speakers. Other distinctions in meaning might also be drawn, but these are sufficient to account for a good deal of difficulty. The two aspects of the subject must be related, but they must also be distinguished. As we slip indifferently from one meaning to another, we develop frustrating confusions. Rhetoric is very like a weasel.

This confusion, it seems to me, can explain the way in which the history of rhetoric appears as an almost cyclical pattern of enthusiasm and decadence. Theory develops, is taken seriously, is confused with precept, is translated into dogma, and develops into absurdity. The Renaissance enthusiasm for classifying tropes produced distinctions that became meaningless when multiplied into dozens of precepts. Or, more significantly, eighteenth-century rhetoricians like Lord Kames or Hugh Blair modified Aristotle's observations on metaphor into precepts and then took their precepts seriously. Blair, for example, by specifying that a metaphor must be based on a resemblance that is "clear and perspicuous, not far-fetched, nor difficult to discover"[9] rejects a great deal of metaphysical poetry. By proscribing the mixed metaphor, making "two different Metaphors meet on one object," he manages to object to much of Shakespeare and even some of

[5] *Roots for a New Rhetoric,* New York, 1959.

[6] For example, see Richard M. Ohmann, "Prolegomena to the Analysis of Prose Style," *Style in Prose Fiction,* ed. Harold C. Martin (English Institute Essays), "A Generative Rhetoric of the Sentence," *CCC,* XIV (1963), 155-61.

[7] See Noam Chomsky, "Current Issues in Linguistic Theory," in Jerry A. Fodor and Jerrold J. Katz, *The Structure of Language,* Englewood Cliffs, N. J., 1964, pp. 50-118.

[8] See E. R. Fagan, *Field: A Process for Teaching Literature,* State College, Pennsylvania, 1964; Kenneth L. Pike, "Language as Particle, Wave, and Field," "*Texas Quarterly,* VIII (1961), no. 6; Hubert English, "Linguistic Theory as an Aid to Invention," *CCC,* XV (1964), 136-41.

[9] *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres,* London, 1801, I, 351-52.

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the writing of "more correct writers than Shakespeare" like Addison.[10] Similarly, many of the elocutionists of the eighteenth century systematized delivery to the point of specifying gestures or postures or movements for every sort of thought or idea. Much of the current abuse of the teaching of usage results from the same sort of development, in which observation becomes dogma and the teaching of English becomes proscription against initial *and's* or final prepositions. The nature of the relationship between theory and practice tends to produce this kind of cycle. The problem is to develop both theory and pedagogy, relating them without confusing them.

As a theoretical study of discourse, rhetoric must include within its domain subjects like logic, semantics, linguistics, psychology. Just as George Campbell or Joseph Priestly turned to study of the human understanding as an approach to rhetorical invention, rhetoricians today need to learn from psychologists or logicians or anyone else who knows anything about the relations between thought and language. There has been no extensive analysis of the patterns of modern prose, analysis that might aid considerably in the development of theories of disposition—of what a paragraph is, if it is anything more than an indentation for the sake of visual appeal; of the effects and uses of different sorts of sentence patterns. Further analysis is needed to determine how patterns of speech and writing differ; one participant in the seminar, for instance, questioned whether the appositive construction has any significant use in speech—or the absolute construction, which seems rather frequent in written prose, although it receives only sketchy treatment in the textbooks. A rhetorical theory needs to incorporate what has been happening in semantics and in grammar. It needs to be a comprehensive theory, and it needs to be based on fresh understanding of what modern prose is like.

Rhetoric as the basis for teaching writing or speaking, however, has different problems. For example, it would seem that today any comprehensive theory of rhetoric would have to incorporate the findings of generative grammars; it does not follow that generative grammar should be part of every course in writing. A theory of rhetoric attempts to describe accurately and consistently and fully what happens; practical rhetoric is concerned with choices. The teacher of writing is concerned with the effects of different grammatical alternatives, so that he can offer advice about which choices to make for different circumstances.

In other words, rhetoric considered as practical advice about writing and speaking grows from comprehensive rhetorical theory, but it is not just a statement of the theory. The problem is that when the theory gets put into practical terms, when it becomes norms or precepts, it risks being useless, being only partly applicable, and being dogmatic. For example, the effort spent to separate the forms of discourse as expository, argumentative, narrative, and perhaps descriptive may reflect theoretical understanding of the ends of discourse, but it seems to have little value for the teaching of composition. Or, the traditional advice with models about the six or eight or eleven ways of developing a paragraph tends to be unconvincing because so frequently the methods do not describe what actually happens; that it, when the theory becomes concrete its weaknesses show. Or, again, attempts to specify what is meant by theoretical statements about perspicuity or unity often produce such rules as "never include more than one thought in a sentence" or "always place a pronoun as near its antecedent as possible."

[10] *Ibid.*, 357-58.

I know of no way to escape these dangers completely, but I think that a teaching rhetoric must be neither a direct exposition of theory nor a collection of rules or warnings. It must rather attempt to describe the choices available to the writer, to explain the results or effects of different choices, and thereby give the writer a basis for choosing. It may, of course, involve analysis of paragraphs, but its aim must be to try to describe some ways—not *the* ways—of putting a paragraph together, to try to show what results such an effort can be expected to produce. It does not tell the writer always to begin a sentence with the subject or to avoid the use of the expletive or never to use the verb *be*. It rather attempts to enumerate the situations in which the expletive sentence is useful, to indicate something of the effects of the pattern, and to give the writer some basis on which to decide when or whether to use it. It does not simply say "He done good on his test" is wrong, or avoid "He done good on his test" because good writers avoid it. It establishes the customary context for the expression, speculates about its effects, and helps the writer choose.

A teaching rhetoric, in other words, may classify the materials of rhetoric differently, because it attempts to guide the writing process and because it can never deal in total isolation with one part of it—the writer, unlike the theorist, is using a variety of devices as he studies one. Although for theory an organization like that of classical rhetoric may be fairly consistent, practical requirements have produced a variety of often overlapping systems of classification. We classify by compositional units—the sentence, the paragraph, the longer composition; or by alleged virtues of composition — unity, coherence, emphasis, economy, perspicuity; or by devices or techniques — transition, continuity, elaboration, analysis; or in other ways. The cross-ranking in most textbooks tends to produce awkward theory, but it may work.

For example, it seems to me useful to make one approach to the sentence or paragraph—or any segment of discourse—as a sequence of commitments and responses. That is, when a writer selects a subject for his sentence or chooses a sentence opener, he commits himself to a limited number of patterns and a limited set of meanings that can follow. If what he wants to say about the subject, the predication which is probably his motive for making the statement, does not respond logically to the commitment he has made, he probably needs to start over. Or more broadly, a topic sentence or statement of a main idea can profitably be examined for more than its validity as a generalization, for the expectations it creates. Both the meaning and the structure of the statement make commitments, more or less restricting, which need to be honored. The topic sentence of a paragraph is likely to regulate the type of support that can follow, to determine something of the degrees of specificity which the development will attain, to help determine the organizational scheme of the paragraph. The following sentence rather obviously indicates what should follow it:

> The results of the efforts of these few grammarians may be illustrated by referring to a couple of pronouns and a few verbs.

The sentence limits the choices of the writer clearly; it is obviously framed to fit a preconceived plan for the paragraph. The responses must be examples using "a couple of pronouns and a few verbs." Another topic sentence is less limiting:

> Perhaps the most noticeable change that has occurred since 1500 is not in grammar but in vocabulary.

The writer has various choices for his next sentence, but he is also limited. He cannot start listing grammatical changes; he cannot turn to a generalization about the state of the language in 1500. He might mention a specific vocabulary change, he might make a general comment about vocabulary in 1500. Perhaps the most likely response is the one that does follow, a specification of the opening sentence:

> Through borrowings from dead Latin, dead Greek, and most of the important living languages of the world English has multiplied its store of words manyfold.[11]

Such an approach to writing as a sequence of commitments and responses may have usefulness for rhetorical theory, may indicate something about how writing is generated; but it is more obviously a basis for practical exercises in paragraph construction, and it involves at the same time all stages in the composing process, from invention to the finished product.

A teaching rhetoric, then, is likely to emphasize devices organized unsuitably for rhetorical theory; but it must, nevertheless, be comprehensive enough to take account of all aspects of composition. And it is a lack of comprehensiveness which seems to me to weaken the rhetoric of many typical Freshman English courses. The course based on literature or on a book of readings has advantages in stimulating thought, providing subject matter, and sometimes motivation. But its attention is almost exclusively on invention, only the first stage in the process of composing. The course based on what is called grammar, but is usually usage, turns only to a small part of the final stage.

The interest in a new rhetoric, or in new rhetorics, therefore, seems to me doubly important, because rhetoric is not only valuable in itself but is the logical subject matter for the Freshman English course. I am not suggesting that Freshman English trace the history of rhetoric or expound rhetorical theory. Neither am I suggesting that all freshman courses should be the same or that students learn to write simply from studying methods or precepts or models. There is more than one way to skin a freshman, and many different approaches work for different teachers and different students. I am suggesting that there is still need for a course on the college level which concentrates on developing the art of discourse and that rhetoric is logically the central subject matter of this course. Furthermore, as new rhetoric develops or is revived, organizing and unifying a number of fundamental subjects, it should resume something nearer its classical importance in elementary and secondary training.

It seems obvious, therefore, that rhetoric deserves more emphasis in the training of teachers, that elementary and secondary teachers should have some training in the subject that occupies much of their teaching day, that graduate students should have work in rhetorical theory as well as practice in writing.

Like any discipline exposed to sudden and unusual prosperity, rhetoric has inspired its share of nonsense in the course of the current enthusiasm. But it seems to me that the progress outdistances the backsliding. I think that a new rhetoric is developing. Rhetoric is huge and often difficult to manage; it has its share of blubber, but it is also solid. Perhaps it is very like a whale.

University of Nevada

[11] The sentences are from paragraphs in J. N. Hook and E. G. Mathews, *Modern American Grammar and Usage*, New York, 1956, pp. 25-26.