

Dorothy Ann Amsler

The following conversation with Professor Edward P. J. Corbett took place at the Penn State Conference on Rhetoric and Composition, July 7, 1982. Professor Corbett, of the Ohio State University, is the author of Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student, The Little English Handbook, The Little Rhetoric, The Little Rhetoric and Handbook, and Rhetorical Analyses of Literary Works. He is editor of The Essay: Subjects and Stances and, with Gary Tate, of The Writing Teacher's Sourcebook. Professor Corbett has also published many influential articles on rhetoric and on eighteenth-century literature.

A. Professor Corbett, in your talk on Monday, you said that 1963 marked the resurgence of rhetoric as the informing principle for composition courses. What happened in that year to cause the renewed interest in rhetoric?

C. Well, I remarked the date when I noticed a resurgence of interest in rhetoric. Until you asked me, I never asked myself what the cause of that was. I think I could mention a number of attendant circumstances, but I don't know whether I could establish a cause and effect relationship between them.

The 4 C's convention that year was held in Los Angeles. One of the significant features of that program was that the word "rhetoric" appeared in the title of more workshops and panels than I had ever remembered at any previous 4 C's meeting. It was also the year in which Francis Christensen and Wayne Booth gave what they both acknowledged to be their most often reprinted articles.

Wayne Booth had come to the convention fresh from his triumphant

Rhetoric of Fiction and was one of the stars of that convention. He gave a talk there called "The Rhetorical Stance," an oft reprinted essay. Francis Christensen was also on one of the panels called "rhetoric," and he gave his very influential talk, much reprinted later, "A Generative Rhetoric of the Sentence."

But those were just two of the most prominent of the talks. In fact, there were a number of significant talks given at that convention, so that the then editor of the 3 C's journal, Ken Macrorie, gathered together six or eight of them and printed them in a special pamphlet in the following year. In 1965 Ken Macrorie put together another collection of essays, but that just confirmed that the ferment that started in the 1963 convention was continuing and getting a firm hold.

There was one other thing I noted. I reviewed Keith Erickson's bibliography of Aristotle's Rhetoric which lists both primary and secondary sources. The primary sources are listed alphabetically, but the secondary bibliography is ordered chronologically, and I noted in my review that in 1963, more articles and books had appeared on Aristotle's Rhetoric than in all the years before. There was a sudden renewal of interest in Aristotle's Rhetoric, not only, of course, by English teachers but also by those people in speech and philosophy and so forth.

Those are some of the circumstances, but as I said, I don't know that I could argue a cause and effect relationship between those circumstances and the sudden resurgence of interest in rhetoric. It just may be that by that time, teachers were becoming dissatisfied with their teaching of composition and were latching onto some more substantive help. A lot of things may have just come together at that particular time, but there was a steady climb from then on. I think the interest peaked about 1965--all the hoopla about rhetoric--but when it got out of the limelight, people really dug in and started to do some very significant work. Very seldom do you get much significant work when the particular discipline is in the spotlight.

A. That work still seems to be continuing today. Would you agree with that?

C. Yes. I think there's no question, and one of the most promising things for me about the future of rhetoric is that it has attracted the interest of so many bright, committed young people. Not only are they majoring in rhetoric--taking their degrees in rhetoric and composition--but they are making very significant contributions to our conventions, our journals, and even to the production of our textbooks. That prognosticates a bright future for rhetoric.

A. Speaking of textbooks, you said that one of the signs of the improvement in the status of composition courses was the appearance of many innovative textbooks in the spring of 1981. Could you comment on some of these books and show how they should change the way composition is being taught?

C. Well, first of all, I want to make clear what I meant by that. I said it was the appearance of more first-rate, innovative rhetoric texts than at any other time that I had been in the profession. There had been other springs, of course, when more books on writing had appeared, but I am using the qualifiers: first, innovative; and second, really first-rate rhetorics.

I might just mention two or three of them--there were at least half a dozen. For the first time in my experience, there were two books which bore in their titles an indication that they had been written specifically for the advanced composition market: Maxine Hairston's book called Successful Writing which



bore the subtitle, A Rhetoric for Advanced Composition, and Richard Coe's Form and Substance: An Advanced Rhetoric. Previously, if people were using any rhetorics in advanced composition courses, they were just using some of the better freshman level texts. But this would be one of the advances, I would think, that not only had the advanced composition course grown, but now it was looked upon as a significant enough market that people were producing texts which were tailored for advanced composition courses.

I'd like to mention two others. These books are notable for the fact that they bear the names of multiple authors. There had been in the past rhetoric texts and handbooks authored by two people, but there were at least two 1981 texts by four or five authors. While that is very common in the sciences, it has never been common in English.

One of the texts is called the Four Worlds of Writing. The authors are Janice Lauer, Gene Montague, Andrea Lunsford, and Janet Emig, and the text is published by Harper and Row. One of the significant things about this book is that each of these people has established a name for him or herself in rhetoric. Each has a specialty in rhetoric, and it was perhaps the first time when a particular author would concentrate on a particular part of the writing process, but that's exactly what this book has done. Gary Tate was the general editor and the proposer of the text.

Another book of this kind is the one called Writing in the Arts and Sciences, produced by Winthrop and now being published by Little, Brown. This is by Elaine Maimon, Department of English at Beaver College, and four of her colleagues: Gerald L. Belcher, History; Gail W. Hearn, Biology; Barbara F. Nodine, Psychology; and Finbarr W. O'Connor, Philosophy. In addition to the multiple authors, this was maybe the first of the textbooks designed for the teaching of writing across the curriculum, that is, in which teachers of subjects other than English would be involved in the teaching of writing. Each of the contributors to the volume again wrote those sections which have to do with the kinds of writing that are done in their disciplines; for instance, Gail Hearn wrote on biology. Now this text, while it could well be used at a university where the actual teachers of those disciplines would be involved in the teaching, will if it's going to be taught, be taught by teachers of English as in the present. But I think what's significant about it is that it will make English teachers aware of the conventions, the rationales, the formats of the writing that is done in the various disciplines. We are not going to be concentrating on the kinds of discourse that English teachers typically have taught in the past.

I think that's one of the most promising things that has developed in the recent past, this whole writing across the curriculum or interdisciplinary writing. This book by Elaine Maimon and her colleagues grew out of a three-year NEH grant that Beaver College of Pennsylvania received to train members of various departments to get involved in the teaching of writing. That movement is beginning to spread now. I don't know whether and how much it is going to catch on, but it could be one of the healthiest things to happen to our profession if it does.

A. Did any of the 1981 texts make overt use of recently published rhetorical theory?

C. One textbook published in the spring was John Ruskiewicz's Well-Bound Words by Scott, Foresman. What's significant about this book is that it is the first book which avowedly incorporates the principles and rhetorical perspective of James Kinneavy. Ruskiewicz announces in the title that this book is based on



James Kinneavy's A Theory of Discourse. Kinneavy's book was an innovative work which made a great contribution to the development of interest in rhetoric in the '60's, but now this book is beginning to pay off in terms of the textbooks that are going to be used in the classroom. Some of the other books I mentioned also acknowledged that they were incorporating new developments in rhetoric.

I might mention, along this line, that Don Stewart, in my second to last year as editor of the 3 C's journal, published an article in which he reviewed about twenty of the best-selling rhetoric texts of the time. One of the things that he was appalled at in his article was how few of those best-selling rhetorics, which, of course, were very influential in how writing was taught in our schools, made use of some of the innovations and findings that had been coming through from the theoretical books. Now, some of them were. But I think we will soon begin to see the textbooks and the teaching practice in the schools reflecting those things that we have been talking about in our journals and at our conventions.

A. How long do you think it will take for the change to occur?

C. It's hard to assess that. I'm sure that it is catching on. For one thing, the 4 C's in at least the last three years has had the largest attendance in its history. Many, many people who had never before attended a meeting of this organization whose interest is primarily the teaching of writing at the college level are being exposed to these innovations and new developments. So, I think that they can't stay in the profession and not at least hear about the new developments. Now, how much they dig into it themselves, once their interest is peaked, that's hard to say, but I think the rate of impact is going to be accelerated in the next few years. But there are still people out there, of course, who are teaching composition as they were in the 40's.

A. That's what Maxine Hairston says, that the majority of people who are teaching composition now haven't heard about any of these new developments.

C. Yes, that's undoubtedly true. One of the things that I've been noting: I've been three years now out of the editorship of the 3 C's journal and every week I receive at least one manuscript from someone who is sending it to me as editor. What it indicates to me is that they haven't been reading the journal. Even when I was editor, the thing that I was rather amazed at was that I would get articles either dealing with things that were current five or ten years earlier or reiterating what I had published in the past year. Here were people who thought they were making some innovative contribution to the profession, but it was obvious that they were not keeping up with the literature of the times. I think this is inevitable. It will always happen in any discipline, I guess, that there are people who are just out of the mainstream.

A. I think the problem with composition courses is that so many people have to teach them these days, and it's not easy to keep up with the composition journals as well as with those in one's own speciality.

C. Yes, that's one of the significant developments. Most of those people who in the last ten or fifteen years have not taught composition because they were needed to teach the heavily populated literature courses, now, because of the decline in enrollments, are having to come back to it. They've had their



apprenticeship in their early years of teaching, but now they are coming back to composition when so much has changed. One of the healthy signs, it seems to me, is that these teachers are asking for special workshops to bring them au courant with what's been going on. The conscientious ones say that they'll sit in on the workshops that many freshman writing directors conduct for their new teachers because they realize that they have been out of the mainstream and they want to bring themselves abreast. So that's a very healthy sign, it seems to me, that they realize that this is an important enterprise. Maybe they've never felt this before but now they are convinced of it and they want to do a better job than they did in the past because they've just taught the course, really, by the seat of their pants.

A. Many people would say that you are one of the people most responsible for the resurgence of interest in rhetoric. You've been telling people about the importance of rhetoric since your book, Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student, first appeared in 1965. What is your reaction now that people are finally catching on?

C. Well, I wouldn't, myself, make any claim that I've introduced the profession to rhetoric. I think that if I've made a contribution, it was maybe just to point out to my colleagues that people like Aristotle, Cicero, Quintilian, Hugh Blair, Richard Whateley, and George Campbell might have something to say that would be relevant and useful in our composition courses. Once I reminded my colleagues that there might be something here that might be useful, many of them went to the original sources and discovered what I had discovered too. If I can make any claim to having an influence, I gave them a push in the right direction, but they were smart enough to go and look themselves and to make their own adaptations of what they had discovered in those rich rhetorical texts.

Ross Winterowd once made a very interesting remark. He said that among the people in English departments who are known as rhetoricians, if you really stop to consider, none of them has made any original contribution to rhetoric. That is, there have been no advances that any person in English who claims to be a rhetorician has made. All of the innovations and all of the advances in rhetoric have come from people outside our discipline, people in psychology, anthropology, philosophy, communications theory. But what you can claim, at least, for rhetoricians in English departments is that they were smart enough to recognize that there was something from some of these other disciplines that they could incorporate into rhetoric and that it would be fruitful in teaching.

So now we are beginning to hear the names of people like Michael Polanyi, A.R. Luria, and Lev Vygotsky in addition to people like Jean Piaget and Jerome Bruner. Those are names you see any time you pick up one of our journals or go to one of our conventions that even ten years ago were not familiar to English teachers. As I listen to the convention talks at this meeting, there are new names coming up. One of them yesterday was William Perry, a psychologist from Harvard. Constantly people are discovering things in a discipline which is seemingly far removed from us but which, if you come at it from the right perspective, you recognize it has something to say about the process of writing.

A. One of the big concerns in writing courses today is concentrating on writing as a process, rather than as a product. Could you comment on this?

C. I think that there's no question that this has been a very salutary development in our teaching of composition. It's rather ironic because teaching writing as a process is getting back to its roots. If you look at Aristotle's Rhetoric,



it is dealing with the process of writing. For Aristotle, rhetoric was one of the practical arts, an art of doing, and if you read his Rhetoric, you'll see that it's process oriented. So, if we have drifted away from that and are now returning to it, we are returning to what rhetoric was at its very beginning. I would hope that this is one of the things teachers of writing will latch onto. I think teaching writing as a process is a very healthy thing. It will certainly improve writing and will help students, too, if they approach writing from the point of view of how it's done.

One of the ironies, of course, is that this process results in a product, and as a communicative instrument, it's the product that does the job; it's the product that goes to the public, either in the form of a piece of writing or a piece of discourse in the sound medium. That's what goes to the public and that's what the public sees. They do not see the process, the machinery behind the product. So we'll still have to be concerned about the product because certainly one of the things we want when that product finally goes to the public is that surface elements like punctuation and spelling be up to the mark too. I don't think we'll ever get away from a concern with the product because it is the source or medium for communication. But I will say in general that the shift in emphasis to the process is one of the healthiest things that has taken place in composition in the last ten or fifteen years.

A. It seems to be producing better products, all in all.

C. Yes. I think one of the things that has contributed to the improvement of the textbooks is this concentration on the process of writing. A significant change that has taken place is that, whereas in the past, textbooks seemed to lay out a way, one way, in which to go about the teaching of writing--it was largely a linear process--now, if you look at some of the new textbooks, one of the things they are doing is introducing students to a variety of ways in which professional writers go about writing. They're inviting students with, say: "Here's another way. Why don't you try this way and see if it works better for you than some of the others." So, it's the great variety of ways of going about the writing process that I think will be very helpful because temperamentally, things that work well for one person just won't work as well--or at all--for another person. That's one of the changes that has come about because of the concentration on or the interest in the process; what we're discovering is that there isn't a single process for writing.

A. I find that giving students that leeway and not trying to plug them into a certain system makes a big difference in their writing. They're surprised that they can write at the end of the semester and they do make incredible improvement.

C. When a teacher attempts to have everybody jump through the same hoop, some people can't make that jump, or don't do it very well, but if you give them another hoop, they would do very well.

A. Some of the suggestions for ways of teaching today seem to be threatening to people who have been standing in front of the classroom for ten or twenty years and saying, "This is how you do it." For instance, one of the trends now is to have students work in groups and talk about each other's writing. Some instructors don't know what to do with themselves if everyone's in a group.

C. One of the things we find is that when you use that so-called collaborative learning or peer critiquing, especially the older teachers--and certainly I think it's true of myself--have a hard time shutting up. That's one of the things that as teachers of writing we need to be able to do to get students talking about somebody's writing and making suggestions about it. If the teacher can stay out of it and doesn't start sounding forth to kill the fruitful dialogue that sometimes goes on, I think that the workshop atmosphere in the classroom is going to contribute greatly. But for teachers who were trained and whose experience has been to stand up in front of a class for fifty minutes to hold forth, that's a very difficult thing to do, something you have to learn, really.

A. I guess some people feel that they're not doing their job or they're not teaching if they're not in the front of the room talking.

C. When I throw out a question, for instance, and I get no answer, I'm so uncomfortable with silence that I have to jump in and answer my own question. You can see that students, if they find out that teachers answer the questions they ask, will just sit back and let the teacher answer.

A. Is there any final comment you'd like to make?

C. Well, I think that these are bright and promising times for the teacher of composition. Composition teachers are now getting the recognition, and in many cases, the rewards that they have always deserved but didn't always get because they were doing the service work of the department, the kind of work that wasn't rewarded often times with tenure, with promotion, where prestige was not in proportion to the valuable service these teachers were giving the department. But I think now we are seeing the value of the work that these very faithful, committed, and skillful teachers have been doing all these years. Now the job market is reflecting that in demanding people who have not only had the experience of teaching but also some formal graduate training in rhetoric and composition. There are jobs for those people, although the supply of composition specialists is relatively short. But there is a great market. I think we're seeing it in the greater sophistication of our teachers, of our journals, and of our conventions.

It's not that we want the composition segment of the English teacher to take over and become dominant. It would be healthy if the three provinces of English--literature, language, and composition--would have equal billing since they are all complementary and ancillary, one to the other. There really shouldn't be any rivalries between, say, the literature and the composition realms of your department. They should be working together, and nothing is going to come from hostilities between those two branches, but lots of good things will come if they cooperate and help one another, because we're all in the same enterprise, really.