

At the Lectern

MY WORK IN RHETORIC

Edward P. J. Corbett

I feel like a con man whenever I catch myself talking about "my work in rhetoric." All "my work" is really somebody else's work. I have stolen all of it from wiser heads than mine will ever be. In the argot of the con man, I am a "fence," a purveyor of stolen goods.

What I have appropriated from others is indeed "goods." In fact, it is good goods. This much at least can be said for me: I was shrewd enough to recognize valuable property when I saw it. Others of my contemporaries had gone to the fountainheads before me. Apparently, many of them did not realize the value of what they found there. Even before I had sluiced the streams, I detected the golden grains suspended there in solution.

I came to Aristotle and eventually to Cicero and Quintilian via the eighteenth-century Scottish rhetorician, Hugh Blair. I discovered Hugh Blair, quite by accident, one day in a college library while I was searching for something else. My eye was attracted by a calf-skin-covered book on the shelves. It was one of the more than 150 editions of Blair's Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres that were published in England and America after the book was first issued in 1783. I took the book down from the shelf, broke it open, and began reading. An hour later, I left the library, with the book tucked under my arm. Little did I know it then, but that was the beginning of "my work in rhetoric."

I was then in my first teaching job. My graduate work for the M.A. degree had given me a marvelous preparation to teach literature. But in that first job, I was assigned to teach only one literature course (a sophomore survey of English literature) and four sections of freshman composition. In those composition courses, I just thrashed around futilely, because my graduate work had not trained me to be a teacher of writing. My poor students were the victims of my trials and errors. But Hugh Blair's book gave

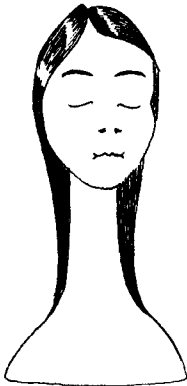
me hope--and something of a method. When I read Blair's book carefully at home, I saw that he was dealing with written discourse, not only the aesthetic kind that I was analyzing with my students in my literature course but also the utilitarian kind that I was struggling with in my composition classes. And I also saw that Blair was operating in a tradition, the tradition of rhetoric, which had its roots in ancient Greece.

I should have known about Aristotle's Rhetoric. For my master's degree, I had gone to the University of Chicago, which, under the aegis of Robert M. Hutchins and Mortimer Adler, had become a hotbed of Aristotelianism. Largely because of the influence of Ronald S. Crane, the bible for one of the factions in Chicago's English department was Aristotle's Poetics. Hardly any graduate student in the English department there in those years escaped without some exposure to the so-called "Chicago school of criticism." I recall having read Aristotle's Rhetoric, but that text did not particularly impress me at the time, maybe because it was overshadowed in that atmosphere by the Poetics.

But Blair made me aware that if I wanted some help as a teacher of writing, I had to go back to Aristotle's Rhetoric and the dozens of other rhetoric texts that were spawned by that seminal work. Eventually, I got steeped in the rhetorical tradition. Having chosen to do my doctoral dissertation on Blair, I had to spend a couple of years acquainting myself with the history of rhetoric and reading the influential primary texts in rhetoric from the classical, medieval, Renaissance, and eighteenth-century periods.

One of the things that this review of the tradition did for me was make me aware that many of the approaches and techniques that I had used quite instinctively in my composition classes were sound. I also learned, of course, that many of the things I had been doing in my writing classes were idiotic and unproductive. I should have been sued by my students for malpractice.

What Aristotle, Cicero, Quintilian, and dozens of other derivative rhetoricians made me aware of is that there are certain rock-bottom fundamentals about the writing situation and the writing process that do not change from age to age or from culture to culture. Writing was, and still is, a transaction involving a writer, a reader, and a message--someone saying something to somebody else for a purpose. You can't get any more rock-bottom than that.



ARISTOTLE'S OWN
ENTHYMEME

Rhetoric: The Practical Art

Rhetoric gave a "local habitation and a name" to many of the strategies that I had deliberately or instinctively used myself when I was trying to communicate with others through either the spoken or the written medium. It was reassuring to learn that there was, after all, a method to my muddlings. And if there was a method, there had to be an art that codified all the means to an end. Rhetoric was that art. Aristotle classified rhetoric as one of the practical arts, an art of "doing," a behavior, a skill. The ancients maintained that we acquired a skill by some combination of ars (a set of precepts), imitatio (observation of the practice of others), and exercitatio (repeated practice of the skill). That triad sets up the whole rationale of the pedagogy of composition. If one studies the history of the teaching of writing in the schools or contemplates just the various philosophies of composition that prevail in the schools today, one sees that the various approaches to the teaching of writing are shaped by the particular element in that triad which receives the greatest emphasis.

Because the principles of classical rhetoric were so elementary and universal, I found that they were readily adaptable to the modern classroom. In fact, much of what is touted in modern writing texts as being "new" often turns out to be something old in a new guise with a new name. Some teachers claim that the system of classical rhetoric is too limited for the modern classroom because it deals primarily, if not exclusively, with persuasive discourse. One response to that charge is that all discourse is, in some ultimate sense, persuasive; even if our objective is to inform or enlighten or entertain our readers, we ultimately have to win acceptance of our presentation from our readers. If there is a persuasive thrust in all discourse, classical rhetoric is still the best system of persuasive strategies. It touches all the bases: the three kinds of appeal--logical, emotional, and ethical; the two basic strands of logical appeal--the deductive (the enthymeme) and the inductive (the example); the three kinds of persuasive discourse--the judicial (arguing about things that have already occurred), the deliberative (arguing about things that will or should take place), the ceremonial (arguing about things that are occurring in the present).

Another answer to the charge that classical rhetoric is too limited to be of use in the modern classroom is that even though classical rhetoric was concerned mainly with persuasive discourse, many of the strategies laid out by the classical rhetoricians are applicable also to expository, descriptive, and narrative discourses. Much of the heuristic system (especially the topics), much of the doctrine about the effective arrangement of the parts of a discourse, almost all of the immensely rich collection of instructions about style and rhythm and figures of speech are just as applicable to the expository, descriptive, and narrative modes of discourse as to the persuasive mode.

It should be interesting for readers to discover from subsequent issues of fforum

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neighbors'." If you say, "This film is good," you transform the personal report into an evaluation, an intellectual proposition to be illustrated as valid before the whole universe. This is growing up, this shift from believing that ideas are good because you hold them to realizing that they are good because they are good, and can be so demonstrated. Writing confirms this realization as you persuade others that what you believe true is indeed true. Writing reveals that you can trust what you think, not because it is yours--that kindergartener's "I"--but because it has demonstrable validity. So writing is one of our essential means of realizing our maturity. Writing teaches us that our ideas are valid, not merely personal and adolescent whimsies, and it teaches us to think as we attempt to prove those ideas so.

Writing formulates our thoughts. It is our supreme teacher. All of us know that having to write about something is our most effective means of learning about it, grasping it for ourselves as we try to explain it to others. Our schools have sadly neglected this elemental means of learning. Do you want to understand how an internal combustion engine works? Get the basics in mind, and then write out your understanding for someone else, adding details and connections you hadn't even thought were there. You will understand it as never before. Writing is our supreme means of understanding, of discovering our thoughts, of learning, of grasping things in the mind. Reading a book is following a stream of understanding. Writing one is a whole Mississippi. The simplest single page of freshman composition writing demonstrates this process. Writing is discovery of thought. Writing is learning. Writing is maturity. We should use it in all our classrooms for all it is worth.

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Amy J. Devitt, John Grove

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John Warriner's Warriner's English Grammar and Composition Complete Course, used extensively in high school classrooms, is divided into six parts: grammar, usage, sentence structure, composition, mechanics, aids to good English, college entrance and other examinations. The grammar and usage sections cover the familiar topics found in the earlier Warriner's texts such as parts of speech, parts of a sentence, subject-verb agreement, correct form and use of verbs, correct use of pronouns. Devotees of sentence diagramming will find everything from adjective clauses through subordinate clauses in the chapter on parts of speech. The glossary of usage at the end of part two is provided as a reference tool for correcting usage errors.

The greatest portion of the text is devoted to composition, including instruction on paragraphs, precis, factual reports, research papers, and business letters.

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Edward P. J. Corbett (cont. from p. 28) just how much other systems of rhetoric and composition represent variations, extensions, refinements, or modifications of the classical system. I can promise quite confidently that readers will not find much that is wholly new in these other systems. The classical rhetoricians did not say it all once and for all, but what they said they said very well.

Edward Corbett has published extensively in the field of rhetoric and composition. He is presently teaching at Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio.