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## Reading the Past Into the Future: Changing Disciplinary Identities in Rhetorical Studies

A Response to Edward P. J. Corbett's  
"Rhetoric in Search of a Past, Present,  
and Future"

*Steven Mailloux*

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In Edward P. J. Corbett's paper "Rhetoric in Search of a Past, Present, and Future," he comments on the five position papers prepared for delivery at Wingspread.<sup>1</sup> He begins his commentary by remarking on the number of disciplines participating at the conference and argues for even more "cross-fertilization" among those disciplines concerning their shared focus on rhetoric. A self-identified teacher of English, Corbett contributes to the interdisciplinary dialogue with historical contextualization, pedagogical questioning, and literary comparisons, contributions directly relevant to our present concerns about the future prospects for rhetorical studies.

A well-known classical rhetorician within his discipline,<sup>2</sup> Corbett initially employs Aristotle's time scheme for distinguishing persuasive discourses in order to summarize the preoccupations of the five position papers: "with their pursuit of historical developments, Wallace, McKeon, and Rosenfeld might be said to be primarily interested in the *past* as it bears upon rhetorical developments in the present and future; Becker focuses primarily on the *present*; and Johnstone is primarily concerned with the *future*." Corbett immediately follows with a comment that characterizes his own approach, noting that rhetorical study needs to avoid two complementary dangers: "in the concern for the future of rhetoric we might neglect to explore its rich tradition" and "a reverence for traditions might indispose us to break the molds and cast new models."<sup>3</sup>

Having struck the balance between the old and new, Corbett goes on to express disappointment that the papers failed to "make the point that not all the doctrines and techniques of a discipline as hoary as rhetoric have lost their pertinence and vitality." For he "detected in all of them at least the implicit notion that the ancient tradition of rhetoric is mortified and that if we are to get on with the development of a new rhetoric we will have to wipe the slate clean and start all over again." Corbett readily

admits that Aristotle “did not formulate the perfect theory of rhetoric” and that “our knowledge about speaker, the message, and the audience in the rhetorical triad has been immeasurably enhanced not only by later rhetoricians but by scholars in such other fields as psychology, sociology, and communication theory.” But still, he wonders, how much is really new in “the so-called ‘new rhetoric’”? Corbett declares himself “simply amazed at how much that is proposed as new is just Aristotle in new trappings or new terminology.”<sup>4</sup>

Corbett’s observations are doubly applicable to the state of rhetorical theory today. Much avant-garde theory, rhetorical or otherwise, owes a special debt to borrowings or revisions of classical Greco-Roman thought. Twenty-first-century theory derives from modern and post-modern thinking of the past hundred and fifty years, which has again and again been shown to have significant roots in ancient thought: from Nietzsche through Derrida, Heidegger through Badiou, Arendt through Butler. Corbett’s specific complaint most immediately brings to my mind recent scholarship exploring Aristotle’s influence on the early Heidegger, including publication and interpretations of Heidegger’s 1924 lecture course on Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*.<sup>5</sup> I will return in my conclusion to other recent attempts to use Aristotle for contemporary purposes within rhetorical study.

But there is a second and different kind of point to derive from Corbett’s insistence on Aristotle as significant precursor to the “new rhetoric.” Composing specific genealogies of the “new trappings” and the “new terminology” is just as important as acknowledging general claims about precedence or indebtedness in regard to the ancient roots of contemporary thought. Following Corbett’s lead, we should continue to ask: How much does today’s newness owe to classical rhetorical traditions? How does the translation of those traditions work? What has been lost and what gained? How does rhetoric itself mediate these translations of the old into the new? What are the historical, social, economic, institutional, geographic, technological, and other conditions of this translation process? What does this rhetorical translation process tell us about the contingencies of the past, the needs of the present, and the prospects for the future?

For at least these two reasons—convincing claims about ancient precursors for contemporary rhetoric and the value of doing genealogies of our current thinking—I still find compelling the priority Corbett gave to his suggestion:

If I had only one recommendation to make as my part in this Conference, I would suggest that in our quest for a relevant rhetoric for the modern age we take a firsthand look at the classical rhetoricians, see which of their doctrines still have something pertinent and valu-

able to say about the arts of discourse, and discover which of those doctrines are the underpinnings of modern rhetorical theory.<sup>6</sup>

But I would like to add a third reason for not ignoring our ancient rhetorical traditions: As we expand our disciplinary topics, as we rhetoricize new objects of study, as we make claims for the contingent universality of rhetoric, it is crucial that we attend to those traditions constituting important aspects of our shared interdisciplinary identities. Such identifications are implicit in Corbett's essay, but I suggest making them explicit if we want to maintain a shared project of inquiry as a scholarly community. Our rhetorical traditions can help unite us in our intellectual diversity as we continue to follow Corbett's additional recommendation "that one of the ways in which rhetoric will be revitalized is by expanding its purview to include all those modes of discourse which dispense information, influence attitudes, and prompt or prevent action."<sup>7</sup>

What are the disciplinary and interdisciplinary consequences of this expansion today? Rhetoricians occasionally worry about a universalizing of rhetorical study, a disciplinary imperialism, what some call Big Rhetoric. If rhetoric is everything, they ask, then what distinguishes rhetoric as a specific discipline or interdiscipline?<sup>8</sup> The (not so) simple answer to this question: we are distinguished by the theories, practices, and *traditions* we share even as we critique and revise them. These shared elements continue to unite us in our connected interdisciplinary identities even as we maintain our disciplinary diversity.<sup>9</sup>

As interdisciplinary practitioners of rhetoric, we find ourselves academically placed both inside and outside departmentalized disciplines. This double-placement is actualized in various ways within our institutions and professional organizations. For example, scholars practicing rhetoric within such disciplines as English and communication now often actively seek cross-disciplinary dialogue and shared projects. Opportunities for such activities can be found in interdisciplinary centers or programs at their home institutions and in multidisciplinary professional conferences such as those of the Rhetoric Society of America and the International Society for the History of Rhetoric.

Corbett's essay strongly advocates this "cross-fertilization" across disciplinary boundaries. As a teacher of English, Corbett names the "literary" as a particularly opportune site for such activity. "I was surprised," he writes, "that no one mentioned the relations of rhetoric to the literary modes of discourse—poetry, drama, short stories, novels."<sup>10</sup> Acknowledging the presence of the literary-rhetorical critic Wayne Booth at the conference and noting some recent interest among speech communication scholars in literary criticism and poetics, Corbett advocates that much more rhetorical attention be given to literature in the

future. As a fellow rhetorician from an English department, I find myself strongly agreeing with Corbett's recommendation decades after its first appearance.

Even though I would word them differently, the literary-critical points Corbett makes remain pertinent to the present moment of disciplinary dialogue: "Although it is possible to regard a literary artifact solely as an object for aesthetic contemplation, it is also possible to view it as a vehicle of communication, as a means of teaching or influencing an audience." Moreover, "one can also analyze the rhetorical transactions going on *within* the literary work."<sup>11</sup> Indeed, we might say more generally that rhetorical study is especially useful to the literary critic today because rhetoric is both inside and outside the text being interpreted. It is constitutive of the tropes, arguments, and narratives within the text, and it pervades the historical context, the cultural conversations, through which the text is produced and received. For literary studies, this ubiquity of rhetoric inside and outside the literary work provides a way to mediate between the two competing literary-critical perspectives that dominate the field: crudely put, aesthetic-formalist close textual reading and socio-political cultural studies. What we might call *cultural rhetoric study* offers a way to combine (what used to be called) intrinsic and extrinsic criticism under one internally-complementary approach to the literary artifact.<sup>12</sup>

To his emphasis on the literary-rhetorical, Corbett adds a focus on nonverbal media as objects of study, remarking on the eloquent power of music and the pervasive influence of audiovisual electronic communication. Of course, the revolutionary newness of the latter does not keep the classical rhetorician from remarking on ancient analogs to the television medium: "One of McLuhan's messages has been that we have returned to the audio-visual world in which rhetoric had its beginning. Technology, of course, has made it a *different* audio-visual world from what the Greeks knew, but it is still fundamentally the time-world of sound and icon that the Greeks knew rather than the space-world of graphic symbols that we have been accustomed to ever since Gutenberg invented the printing press."<sup>13</sup> Today the general intent, if not the specific content, of Corbett's observation on technology and media still applies. The digital media of the information age offer additional opportunities for rhetorical investigation and new challenges for original cross-disciplinary collaborations, not only among rhetoricians of literature, composition, and communication, but also between these scholars and those in new media studies, computer science, and informatics.

Whether talking about new rhetorics or new technologies, Corbett reminds his readers of the ongoing importance of reconnecting with our classical traditions of rhetorical thinking. Since his imperative is still extremely relevant today, I'd like to conclude by noting two exemplary

respondents to his call. In his *Principia Rhetorica* Michel Meyer applies Aristotle's rhetoric in describing recent critical thought in order to contextualize his own general theory of argumentation and problematology. For example, he uses *ethos-logos-pathos* to characterize distinctions not only among Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero but also more provocatively among twentieth-century theorists of language, associating Kenneth Burke, John Searle, and Jürgen Habermas with *ethos*; Oswald Ducrot, Chaim Perelman, and Stephen Toulmin with *logos*; and I. A. Richards, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Hans-Robert Jauss with *pathos*.<sup>14</sup>

Less comprehensively but perhaps even more usefully for some American audiences, Robert Danisch also thinks with ancient rhetorical traditions as he attempts to relate classical Greco-Roman thought to pragmatist and neopragmatist theory. In *Pragmatism, Democracy, and the Necessity of Rhetoric*, Danisch combines old ideas with new in typically pragmatist fashion as he achieves consequential results in rhetorically helping us address our current intellectual and political needs in a democratic public sphere. He says, "pragmatism can be read in the light of the rhetorical tradition" so that it "opens the possibility for a search for contemporary, American rhetorics, with roots in classical rhetorical theory but with the determination to respond to contemporary irresolutions."<sup>15</sup> Danisch ingeniously accomplishes this reading in various ways throughout his book. I will limit myself to describing three of his interpretive strategies, each very much in the spirit of Corbett's call for finding present resources in classical rhetorical traditions. We might call these strategies *theoretical*, *instrumental*, and *transactive*.

*Theoretically*, first treating each way of thinking separately, Danish demonstrates how classical rhetoric and the pragmatist tradition share similar orientations to the world or, perhaps more exactly, overlapping perspectives on being-in-the-world. He summarizes pragmatism's five central "commitments to uncertainty, epistemological anthropocentrism, pluralism, community, and the search for practical arts."<sup>16</sup> He juxtaposes these to the "five central themes" he finds in the Sophists, Isocrates, and Aristotle: "In the classical tradition, rhetoric is deeply associated with uncertainty and ambiguity, democratic decision making, the persuasive use of language, a system of rules for speech making, and a force in the dynamic construction of the social world." He then argues persuasively that "American pragmatism and classical rhetoric are related by a shared outlook on the human predicament and the search for practical methods to cope with that predicament."<sup>17</sup>

*Instrumentally*, Danisch shows how pragmatism and rhetoric (classically understood) can function as tools for each other's further elaboration. He complains that modern pragmatism has never fully developed its rhetorical potential as it strove to find practical arts for elaborating a successful democratic politics. Classical rhetoric helps provide these

instruments. Conversely, pragmatism can help deliberative rhetoric develop its own central preoccupation with the consequences of action in public decision making. Danisch historically demonstrates how particular pragmatists have (or should have) used classical rhetoric to develop their specific arguments and, in turn, how some rhetoricians used pragmatist thinking to argue their cases.<sup>18</sup>

*Transactively*, Danisch challenges rhetorical pragmatists to exploit the full potential of pragmatism and rhetoric to transform their respective traditions. Pragmatism “offers a unique and important perspective on debates about a philosophy of rhetoric and the foundation for rhetorical scholarship.” Not only does neopragmatist thinking develop postmodern sophisticated rhetorical traditions, opening “the possibility for a decentered rhetorical theory”; but it also makes clearer ancient rhetorical traditions’ significant contributions to contemporary debates over practical reason and phronetic, antiessentialist, antifoundationalist theory.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, and ultimately more importantly for Danisch, a return to classical rhetoric with a difference transforms the contemporary pragmatist tradition by bringing out its central dimension of symbolic action and helping it develop specific rhetorics effective within today’s American democratic politics.

Early in his Wingspread paper Corbett declares, “Rhetoric is the common interest that has drawn us together.”<sup>20</sup> Today this same common interest remains central to our evolving (inter)disciplinary identities. We would do well to follow Corbett’s lead and think together to develop our common interest by turning once again to our shared ancient, modern, and postmodern traditions of rhetorical thinking. In this way, we will heed Corbett’s still present challenge to read the past productively into our collective futures.

## Notes

1. Edward P. J. Corbett, “Rhetoric in Search of a Past, Present, and Future,” in *The Prospect of Rhetoric: Report of the National Development Project*, ed. Lloyd F. Bitzer and Edwin Black (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1971), 166–78.
2. See, Robert J. Connors, Lisa S. Ede, and Andrea A. Lunsford, eds., *Essays on Classical Rhetoric and Modern Discourse* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984); and Robert J. Connors, ed., *Selected Essays of Edward P. J. Corbett* (Dallas, TX: Southern Methodist University Press, 1989).
3. Corbett, “Rhetoric,” 168.
4. *Ibid.*, 169.
5. Martin Heidegger, *Grundbegriffe der aristotelischen Philosophie* [Basic Concepts of Aristotelian Philosophy] (Frankfurt: Vittorio Klostermann, 2002); Daniel M. Gross and Ansgar Kemmann, eds., *Heidegger and Rhetoric* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2005); Walter A. Brogan, *Heidegger and Aris-*

- totle: The Twofoldness of Being* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2005); and Martin Heidegger, *Basic Concepts of Aristotelian Philosophy*, trans. Robert D. Metcalf and Mark B. Tanzer (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009).
6. Corbett, "Rhetoric," 170.
  7. *Ibid.*, 171.
  8. For discussion and references, see my "One Size Doesn't Fit All: The Contingent Universality of Rhetoric," in *Sizing Up Rhetoric*, ed. David Zarefsky and Elizabeth Benacka (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 2008), 7–19.
  9. For more detailed discussion of the notions of identity and disciplinarity assumed here, see my *Disciplinary Identities: Rhetorical Paths of English, Speech, and Composition* (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 2006).
  10. Corbett, "Rhetoric," 172.
  11. *Ibid.*, 172–73. Examples of recent rhetorical approaches to literature include histories of literary reception: see James L. Machor and Philip Goldstein, eds., *Reception Study: From Literary Theory to Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 2001) and Rosa A. Eberly, *Citizen Critics: Literary Public Spheres* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000); for narrative analyses in the tradition of Wayne Booth see James Phelan, *Experiencing Fiction: Judgments, Progressions, and the Rhetorical Theory of Narrative* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2007); Peter J. Rabinowitz, "Lolita: Solipsized or Sodomized?; or, Against Abstraction—in General," in *A Companion to Rhetoric and Rhetorical Criticism*, ed. Walter Jost and Wendy Olmsted (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 325–39.
  12. On cultural rhetoric study, see my *Reception Histories: Rhetoric, Pragmatism, and American Cultural Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998); and on the complementarity of the two interdisciplinary perspectives more generally, see Thomas Rosteck, ed., *At the Intersection: Cultural Studies and Rhetorical Studies* (New York: Guilford Press, 1999).
  13. Corbett, "Rhetoric," 174–75.
  14. Michel Meyer, *Principia Rhetorica: Une théorie générale de l'argumentation* (Paris: Fayard, 2008), 20, 54.
  15. Robert Danisch, *Pragmatism, Democracy, and the Necessity of Rhetoric* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2007), 2.
  16. *Ibid.*, 7.
  17. *Ibid.*, 12–13.
  18. See, for example, Danisch's discussions of the pragmatists F. C. S. Schiller and William James in relation to the Older Greek Sophists (24–29) and of the rhetorician Lloyd Bitzer on the rhetorical situation (52–53).
  19. Danisch, *Pragmatism*, 17.
  20. Corbett, "Rhetoric," 167.