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Literary Criticism and Composition Theory

STEVEN MAILLOUX

ARE rhetoric and poetics separate and discrete fields of study? Although rhetorical theorists from Aristotle to Burke have pointed out the overlap between these two areas, detailed discussion has centered on showing their distinctiveness. The common ground of rhetoric and poetics has been a "no man's land, the limbo of the faithless, for no self-respecting esthetician will vulgarize his subject by glancing, even momentarily, at rhetoric, and the rhetorician, though generally much more comprehensive in his viewpoint than the esthetician, is so busied 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, especially at a time when English departments are becoming more aware of their dual responsibility to teach composition and promote literary study. A sharp distinction between rhetoric and poetics has encouraged us to view these duties as two 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. What I would like to do in this essay is to outline these areas of shared theory and practice.

Observation and interpretation always

proceed within accepted paradigms, whether in medical research, composition study, or literary criticism.² From the late thirties to the early sixties, the dominant paradigm in American criticism was New Critical formalism. As we are all well-aware, this "objective" criticism (in its purest form, at least) viewed a literary work as an artifact, cut off from authorial intention and reader response. It rejected "external" criticism and restricted its analysis to the work in and of itself. Many New Critics spatialized the text, viewing its parts in relation to the whole, a tightly organized network of structures. This American New Criticism provided little of interest to rhetoricians. It not only ignored the audience (a central concern of rhetoric) but also actively discouraged talk about readers through its condemnation of the "affective fallacy."

In recent years, a reaction against New Criticism has set in. The model of art as aesthetic product is being challenged by a model of art as communicative process. Both the intentional fallacy and the affective fallacy are being practiced with impunity. This new paradigm of criticism has much more to offer the composition teacher, and it is here that we can begin to see the overlap of rhetoric and poetics most clearly. Two recent critical approaches that work within the model of literature as communication are textual-biographical and reader-response criticisms.

Recent textual-biographical critics

¹W. Ross Winterowd, "Beyond Style," *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, 5 (Spring 1972), 110. My enormous debt to Professor Winterowd's insights in composition theory will be evident from my many citations of his work.

²See Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1962; 2nd ed. 1970), esp. pp. 10, 187-91.

view art as process not as product. This view may at first seem contradictory to our usual notion that textual editors are only interested in establishing a product, the intended text for a critical edition. But this portrayal is incomplete. As G. Thomas Tanselle points out, the editor establishes the text based on the "author's final intention," and this criterion must be viewed in terms of the textualist's knowledge of the author's whole composing process.³ That is, the literary work must be seen as a process, a series of acts by the author. When critics study a work from this textual-biographical perspective, when they practice what has been called the "New Scholarship," they revel in the intentional fallacy, bringing to bear their total knowledge of the author's composing process (including extant forms of the text) and the relevant biographical events that affect that process.⁴

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 there primarily for the reader's sake."⁵ Abrams cites the work of Wayne Booth in his *Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961) as an example of this type of criticism. In the

late sixties and early seventies, this rhetorical approach was extended (and transformed) by reader-response critics such as Wolfgang Iser in phenomenology, Jonathan Culler through his theory of reading conventions, Richard Ohmann with speech-act theory, and the early Stanley Fish in his affective stylistics.⁶ 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." The reader's response includes "the making and revising of assumptions, the rendering and regretting of judgments, the coming to and abandoning of conclusions, the giving and withdrawing of approval, the specifying of causes, the asking of questions, the supplying of answers, the solving of puzzles."⁷ Iser describes a similar process of "anticipation and retrospection" in reading: "We look forward, we look back, we decide, we change our decisions, we form expectations, we are shocked by their nonfulfillment, we question, we muse, we accept, we reject; this is the dynamic process of recreation."⁸ Discarding the affective fallacy, these reader-response critics 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 which views literature as a temporal act of communication provides much encouragement for a rapprochement between literary criticism and composition

³G. Thomas Tanselle, "The Editorial Problem of Final Authorial Intention," *Studies in Bibliography*, 29 (1976), 183, 193, 195.

⁴See Brian Higgins and Hershel Parker, "The Chaotic Legacy of the New Criticism and the Fair Augury of the New Scholarship," in a forthcoming *Festschrift* for Darrell Abel, ed. G. R. Thompson and Vergil Lokke.

⁵M. H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1957; 3rd ed. 1971), p. 148.

⁶See Steven Mailloux, "Reader-Response Criticism?" *Genre*, 10 (Fall 1977), 413-31.

⁷Stanley E. Fish, "Literature in the Reader: Affective Stylistics," *New Literary History*, 2 (Autumn 1970), 126-27; "Interpreting the *Variorum*," *Critical Inquiry*, 2 (Spring 1976), 474.

⁸Wolfgang Iser, "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach," *New Literary History*, 3 (Winter 1972), 287, 293.

theory. Like textual-biographical critics, composition theorists stress the importance of viewing the composing process as a series of acts by the writer.⁹ And like reader-response critics, these rhetoricians suggest paying considerable attention to the reader while writing and analyzing discourse.¹⁰

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 in which to examine 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 (see Winterowd, *Contemporary Writer*, p. 82). Literary critics often use *heuristics* in their analysis of literary texts. 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*?" ("Literature in the Reader," p. 126). This question can be used by the student writer to generate

comments about any piece of discourse (including his own essays). An even more powerful heuristic can be seen 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 (see Winterowd, *Contemporary Writer*, pp. 82-90 and Imscher, pp. 30-40). 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 sequence."¹¹ In its emphasis on the reader and on temporal sequence, Fish's "structure of the reader's experience" is similar to Burke's theory of form. In describing the structure of response, Fish specifies what the reader "is *doing*, what assumptions he is making, what conclusions he is reaching, what expectations he is forming, what attitudes he is entertaining, in short, what acts he is being moved to perform."¹² At the level of *arrangement*, then, the work of Fish and Burke encourages the composition teacher to place a strong emphasis on the structure of the reader's response.

⁹See Janet Emig, *The Composing Process of Twelfth Graders* (Urbana: NCTE, 1971).

¹⁰See, for example, W. Ross Winterowd, *The Contemporary Writer* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975), p. 30 and William F. Imscher, *The Holt Guide to English*, 2nd ed. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1976), pp. 172 ff.

¹¹Kenneth Burke, *Counter-Statement* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1931; 2nd ed. 1953), pp. 31, 124. See W. Ross Winterowd, *Contemporary Rhetoric: A Conceptual Background with Readings* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975), p. 183.

¹²Stanley E. Fish, "What Is Stylistics and Why Are They Saying Such Terrible Things About It?" in *Approaches to Poetics*, ed. Seymour Chatman (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1973), p. 144.

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? Pedagogical and aesthetic stylistics provide a focus for my discussion here. "*Pedagogical stylistics*, as the term implies, deals with teaching students to develop style" (Winterowd, *Contemporary Rhetoric*, p. 253); *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.¹³ No such strong claims are made for aesthetic stylistics. However, some aspects of aesthetic stylistics do have contributions to make to composition.

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:

71 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 71 is either immature or awkward or both. One alternative to it is the following:

72 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 72 sounds more mature, perhaps even more intelligent, than 71, and yet the idea content of both of them is essentially the same. (Winterowd, *Contemporary Writer*, pp. 308-09)

Professor Winterowd's purpose here is to illustrate the usefulness of pedagogical stylistics (in this case, embedding propositions within propositions). As he argues further, "The reason that most readers would prefer 72 over 71 is simply that in 72 the grammatical possibilities of the language have been used to put closely related ideas together in the neat syntactic package of a sentence."

However, by focusing on the syntactic choices, Professor Winterowd ignores larger rhetorical strategies. If we examine 71 and 72 from the perspective of affective stylistics, we see that the structure of the reader's experience is radically different in each case. Though 71 may sound syntactically "immature," it is certainly more rhetorically "sophisticated" than 72. In 71, the freshman writer (consciously or not) has withheld the specific name of his "greatest love." After the first sentence, the reader naturally jumps to the conclusion that "possessions" 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 impression at this point during my first reading: not only does this student lack syntactic fluency, but more importantly his values are

¹³See Frank O'Hare, *Sentence Combining: Improving Student Writing without Formal Grammar Instruction* (Urbana: NCTE, 1973).

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 also forces the reader to repudiate the previous condescending attitude toward the writer's value system. Such a reversal makes a rather commonplace statement into a rhetorically forceful corrective. In Professor Winterowd's "more mature" rewrite of 71, none of these rhetorical strategies is manifested: 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.

I've used this example to show how aesthetic stylistics can give composition teachers an added perspective in using pedagogical stylistics. Once again recent literary theory sheds light on composition theory.

In terms of their controlling paradigms and in light of shared models for

invention, arrangement and style, rhetoric and poetics 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 essay: literary 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 composition. But I would like to stress a further point: not just any English professor can teach writing, even if he *has* accepted the model of literature as communicative act. It is clear that composition teachers are becoming specialists within the English Department (not just second-class citizens). There is now a growing empirical and rhetorical body of knowledge that all 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.

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