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The Self Enlarged: The Case for Good Literature in the Composition Class

USING LITERATURE to teach composition is a method that has lapsed into disfavor in recent years. One of the reasons for this has been the widespread impression that some English teachers have been teaching literature instead of teaching composition in the composition class; that some instructors haven't known very much about composition or rhetoric and haven't cared very much about it either, and as a result they have glossed over addressing composition directly and taught their first love, literature, instead. Unfortunately, this impression has had some foundation in fact. However, it would seem to me equally unfortunate if departments and administrators reacted in an inquisitorial manner to this problem, and outlawed anything but token use of literature in the teaching of composition. For not only has literature been used extensively to teach composition and rhetoric in the past—in the great age of Roman oratory this was the case, for example—but the theory of rhetoric itself, and especially the philosophy and theory of classical rhetoric, provides compelling arguments for such an approach. This paper will attempt to present one of those arguments.

Nor does it seem imprudent to consider the whole topic of literature and composition again, for it has now become pretty firmly established in the profession that without a good background in composition theory a teacher does not really belong in the composition classroom, an opinion with which I concur. Moreover, insofar as such an eminent authority as Professor E. D. Hirsch, Jr., has recently suggested that the split between the literature teachers and the composition specialists is one of the major problems facing the English profession in the 1980's,¹ it seems to me to be an appropriate time to reconsider

whether that split is necessary and final, and in particular, to consider one of the grounds upon which some rapprochement might be done.

* * * * *

Since Aristotle, teachers of rhetoric and composition have realized that one does not convince others only by intellectual argument; Aristotle claimed that there were three basic means of persuasion, and even organized most of his *Rhetoric* about them.² One of these, of course, was *logos*, or the argument itself, and in some measure this has always been the aspect of rhetoric most instructors have focused upon, for it perhaps lends itself to systematic instruction more readily than do the others. However, the two other means of persuasion were considered to be equally important, and these were *ethos*, or persuasion by means of the speaker or writer's own character, and *pathos*, or speaking to and stirring the emotions of the listeners or readers.

Naturally, Aristotle was by no means the only authority to speak to these things; Cicero echoed him in speaking of "the three things which alone have the power to persuade: that the minds of the hearers be won over, instructed and moved (conciliare, docere, movere)."³ Clearly, here "conciliare" or "winning over" corresponds to *ethos*, which is getting one's hearer's good opinion or respect; "docere" or "instructing" has to do with the argument put forth, or *logos*; while "movere" or moving the audience is appealing to emotions or *pathos*. In our own times we have other names for these things, perhaps the most common being "voice" for *ethos*; "audience" for *pathos*; and of course "content" or "message" for *logos*. Nevertheless, the principle remains the same, and it is admitted by almost all major composition authorities. Basically, all agree that it is not the argument or message alone, but also the witness of the writer's own character

and personality, and her ability to speak to the convictions and emotion of the readers, all three of these things, which have power to convince or persuade.

But now if this is true, that is, if all of these three things are necessary to achieve our rhetorical objectives, then it is of crucial importance for us as teachers of writing to try to develop in our students the ability to make use of these means. Nor is it only the surfaces with which we have to do. That is, in the case of *logos* or message, while organization and style are both good things, and important for us as teachers of writing to deal with, it is of primary importance that the students have something to say in the first place—that they actually know something, have convictions about something, and thus have a real motive to get those convictions or that knowledge across.

Normally, we consider finding or having something to say to be the province of rhetorical invention, but in rhetorical instruction and theory, invention is customarily reduced to "discovery of arguments" or a means of inciting the memory to apply whatever it knows or surmises to the particular matter at hand. There are of course good historical reasons for this, one of them being that the original rhetoricians sometimes spoke of invention in these terms. But for Aristotle and Cicero, at least, invention certainly had a much wider reference than this.⁴ And if we consider it properly, it seems pretty obvious that invention does have a much wider sense, which is, the discovery or rediscovery of some real information or knowledge. That is, true invention involves the knowing or learning of some subject matter, some facts or truth about the world as a whole. As John Milton pointed out, "it behooves an aspirant to true . . . eloquence, to be instructed and perfected in an all-around foundation in all the arts and in every science"; otherwise what results will be "specious."⁵ That is, if we do

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not make clear to our students that logos must be based on something concrete, they are likely to deduce that truly good argument is a matter of manipulation, of wit, and not of real knowledge or perception at all. It was probably for this reason that Milton considered that the "right season" of forming writers and composers should be put off until they had mastered almost everything else; in other words until "they shall be thus fraught with an universal insight into things."⁶ We are not at liberty to wait this long, but we can, by insisting on the relation of invention to subject matter, endeavor to make clear to our students the necessary relation of logos and fact.

Likewise in the case of ethos, or persuading others by one's own character, it is not enough only to know how to make appropriate reference to one's own character in discourse, or how to paint oneself in the very best light; clearly if one is to be both successful and constructive in the long run one must personally possess some real character or believability. Moreover, to conciliate you have to be able to play the right role with your audience—if the situation requires counseling, you have to be a counselor; if it requires leadership, you must be a leader, etc. But then, if you are not a leader in fact, or if at the very least you don't know the kind of things a leader must do, it's going to be very hard to play that role. And the same thing holds for simple probity; you should certainly know what an honest person does or how he or she acts if you are going to try to put that character across—and ideally of course you will actually be a good, trustworthy person in your own right. Quintilian even defined the ideal rhetorician as "a good man skilled in speaking."⁷ While others did not go this far, all the major classical authorities were agreed that simply for the basic purposes of rhetoric, good character was an extremely important thing.

Similar things also hold true for pathos: in the business of making effective appeals to the emotions of one's audience or readers, one must as a minimum know something of the workings of human emotions, and ideally be a truly sensitive human being. Of course, it can help immensely to know the nature of each of the various emotions, and Aristotle distinguished a number of points that should be intellectually grasped. "Take, for instance, the emotion of anger. With respect to this we

must note (1) what the mental state of angry persons is, (2) with whom they are wont to be angry, and (3) what are the things that commonly make them so. . . ."⁸ The same with every other emotion. And certainly such knowledge is important. However, such intellectual perceptions can also of themselves be pretty lifeless and dull, and hard to put into practice. Eventually, such knowledge must become indwelling and vital. As Horace put it, "If you want me to feel an emotion, you must first feel that emotion yourself";⁹ in order to win hearts of one's hearers, ideally one must first have a heart. Naturally, learning about the emotions can be a first step towards developing them in oneself; knowledge often will breed sensitivity of its own

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virtue, and the two can go hand in hand. But sensitivity and humanity are the chief things, and if one becomes adept at arousing an emotion without feeling it, one literally is prostituting oneself.

To sum up, then, we cannot be content to deal with the subject of rhetoric superficially, as if good writing were a matter merely of glibness about a subject, an easy rapport with a group, or an ability to temporarily put on a role. No, we cannot treat composition instruction as if it were anything less than a fully human and vital subject, one that requires knowing something, being someone, and being able to establish genuine and fruitful relationships with others. Thus, a fully humane and sane approach to the teaching of composition would aid and encourage our students to develop their whole personalities—their understanding, character, and emotion—at the same time they exercise and perfect their technical skills, for only if they are learning to speak out of fully developed personalities will they ever become truly good writers. And I am convinced that the most natural way for us to do this, to encourage personal growth in all of its various aspects, is to consider centrally in

the composition class works of good literature.

That literature can aid in these goals is easily understood. That is, if the question comes up as to how we as English teachers can best help beginning writers know human nature so as to know how to appeal to the emotion and personalities of their readers, the answer clearly is by having them read and write about good books which illustrate human beings in actions, books which touch again and again on human emotions, drives, and loves. Or, if one asks about the most natural way for a teacher to help her students to convince others by means of themselves, again, a natural response would be to have them consider literature which deals meaningfully with the human situation, and in which the reader can recognize himself. And how do we aid young men and women in finding something they can really say for themselves, in learning to speak with conviction, coherence, and authority? Once again, by having them read, write about, and thereby possibly get themselves vitally engaged in some kind of interesting and generally significant subject matter—in other words, in all of these areas, the most immediate and natural answer is to have them read and write about works of good literature.

Of course, there is no question of focusing exclusively on literature in the composition class. Some significant portion of every composition course must certainly deal with technical matters of organization, grammar, syntax, the precepts of invention, and so on. But much of this kind of teaching can be integrated with the discussion of literature, and the more the better, for the urgency and vitality of literature can bring many otherwise dull things alive. Moreover, the proportion of instruction in technical matters which is requisite and useful in beginning writing courses is by no means so large as a cursory glance at most composition textbooks would suggest. For if we are really to practice the rhetorical precepts we teach, and to require such practice of our students, we will not be able to make our composition courses overwhelmingly dry and technical, as it is to be feared many composition classes are now, especially those which focus the entire semester exclusively on the subject of writing. Of course, neither will we be able to make our composition classes courses in esoteric

literary criticism—but the point is that our use and discussion of literature, as informed by our strong professional knowledge of its principles and purpose, can not only enliven our teaching, which is surely of immense importance to the rhetorical situation of the classroom, but it can also aid us greatly in getting across the very nature of the subject of rhetoric to begin with.

For the touchstones of character, emotions, and argument are not only central to rhetoric—or rather they are central to rhetoric because in the first place they are central to human life, and to some degree at least, all literature imitates life. Of course, it is immediately clear how the notion of character is related to literature, for characterization is one of the pivotal bases of every drama or story; indeed, good characterization is usually one of a novelist's principal reasons for writing. But "argument" in a sense is even more important to literature than characterization. For from the "argument" or "action" or "plot" of a story arises its various themes, and as Wayne Booth has made clear, no fiction is lacking in this; every good work of fiction has some "rhetoric" underlying it, in that work's imitation of action. Finally, wherever there is human action, there is also reaction or passion; in a typical work of fiction one kind of emotion serves as the motivation for a character's choices, and then more and sometimes much more emotion arises in that character and in other characters as a result of the working out of the plot. Thus, the emotion which we must try to move in our readers, the character that will inevitably influence them, and even the message which we try to convey, all of these things are centrally involved not only in writing but in almost any literary text.¹⁰

It is evident what follows from this: if we deal with the central character and action of any good fictional work in our class, and illuminate these things for our students, we can at the same time be aiding them in understanding the basic rhetorical means of persuasion. To use a simple example, reading the description of the retreat in *A Farewell to Arms* can illumine the psychology of armies in retreat, certainly, but beyond that, it can shed light on the general emotional states of disillusion and defeat. As a result, discussion of this episode can lead to the discovery of the kinds of things important to people in this state of mind and emotion, and to tentative stra-

tegies to deal rhetorically with analogous situations. On the other hand, a study of Stephen Crane's "The Open Boat" can not only yield insight into the emotions of men in distress, but can also deal with the extraordinary loyalty and obedience the men in the boat show to the captain, and can focus on the degree to which the captain's character and personality brought that unity and order about. Obviously, where the first example would be a consideration of pathos, the latter would be a study of ethos.

Nor are we limited to discussing these things verbally, leaving all application to chance, but we can and must use the composition assignments to drive home the rhetorical principles. One can have

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one's student's devise arguments for Frederick Henry to use in order to convince his soldiers not to desert, for instance, requiring that the arguments speak to those particular soldiers and their particular emotional needs. Or, in the case of Crane's story, a teacher might ask the student to compose a commemorative speech or a tributary newspaper article on the oiler, an address or article meant to be given by the correspondent, and required to embody a rhetorical stance especially appropriate to him. These are just two of a multitude of possible assignments that could be used in order to create understanding of ethos and pathos.

As for logos, most of us are adept already in discussing the meaning and/or themes of a story or novel, and we can easily broaden our discussion to include asking why the characters believe as they do, what causes them to act, how one could use the events in the story as examples to get those characters to change their minds and act differently, what arguments on modern issues or current affairs arise from the nature of the story's events, and to have our students write composition assignments related to any or all of the

above. The possibilities for using the "argument" embedded in a typical story as the object of composition assignments and for the better understanding of logos, generally, are indeed numerous, although even here it helps greatly for instructors to make use of their wits, or to become good rhetoricians themselves.

Such, then, is an approach to composition instruction which, it seems to me, both from my acquaintance with rhetorical theory and from several years of reflection and teaching, deals with central things centrally, while lesser things assume a naturally subordinate role. I know that a common objection to such an approach, one I have heard several times, is that using subject matter this prominently in the composition class will inevitably make the class a course in content, or that courses which use literature naturally become courses in literature. But this objection carries within it the seeds of its own refutation. For it is precisely because subject matter is generative—that it can get students to ask questions, to pose problems, to thirst for knowledge, to be intrigued by the subject matter, to want to learn more—that it can be valuable in a composition course. Students will naturally tend to get stimulated by the literature, and want to learn more about the books that they read. But this is the very virtue of the thing, that is, that they might actually want to use their heads, for a change.

On the other hand, if the course *doesn't* have such a tendency; if students aren't bursting with ideas and opinions, if they aren't challenged enough to try to discover something, to pose problems, to thirst for knowledge, to be intrigued by the matter at hand—or at least if these things are not our aim—then that course really isn't worth teaching. Naturally, when they are so thirsting, so struggling, and so demanding—again, not that you or I can always so stimulate them, but works of good literature can—we will then channel those energies and the drive into their writing, so that it is informed by examples, by analogies, by illustrations, by stimulating arguments and facts, and so in this way it will come to be informed by content generally. But this is just what we want. For an encounter or an engagement with content or knowledge is not only the fruit of the reading of good literature, but it is also the trunk, the root, the very foundation of all noble composition and rhetoric; moreover,

it is the delight and joy of a writer and the very reason for being of the whole process. Finally, it is this very connection which is so often missing today.

Rhetorical theory, whether ancient or modern, can be good, useful, and true. We have too long been ignorant of its riches, and have done our students disservice thereby. Moreover, most of us who have really given serious attention to rhetorical theory have found ourselves delighted by discovering the objective reasons for things which we already implicitly knew, and by the effectiveness which knowing such things has lent to our teaching. But we must now be on the watch lest the resurgence of an intense investigation into composition theory and a resulting practice of "pure composition" in the classroom further fragment modern education; lest, say, to use the extreme case, composition split off from the English profession in the way that speech and drama once did.

Just as there is a need for us to be disciplined, and to channel our enthusiasm for literature so that our teaching is productive towards all the skills and abilities which our students so desperately need, so too there is a great need to channel the enormous energy currently being employed in rhetorical research and composition instruction so that it is integrative and constructive for the discipline as a whole, and for the humanities in general. In my mind, one thing that is greatly useful to such integration, that, in helping thwart whatever movement to the merely technical and away from the fully humane is currently in action within our discipline, is the re-integration of literature with composition, an approach which is not only congenial for us teachers, and exciting and rewarding for students, but, as I have attempted to show above, is manifested in the theory and history of rhetoric to be true to the very nature of writing itself.

ENDNOTES

¹Hirsch suggested this in his speech, "Frontiers in the Teaching of Literature," Opening Address, The 1979 Wyoming Conference on Freshman and Sophomore English, Univ. of Wyoming, Laramie, 8 July 1979.

²Aristotle first discussed these three means of persuasion in Chapter 2, Book I of the *Rhetoric*. Most of the rest of Book I discusses logical argument. Then, in Book II, he turns to emotions and character before returning to the essentials of argument. See Lane Cooper, trans., *The Rhetoric of Aristotle* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1960), pp. 8, 9-79, and 90-181, respectively.

³*De oratore*, II.xxviii.121, as quoted by Donald Lemen Clark, *Rhetoric in Greco-Roman Education*

(New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1957), p. 75.

"This is indicated by their attitude toward subject matter. On the one hand, as C.S. Baldwin points out, Aristotle spends "some two-thirds of his treatise on the function of rhetoric as a whole course of study. This he finds philosophically necessary. Otherwise rhetoric cannot be justified; otherwise, he clearly implies, it is narrowed and degraded. For him rhetoric is so inextricably moral that it should never be divorced from subject matter of real significance" (*Medieval Rhetoric and Poetic* [New York: Macmillan, 1928], pp. 4-5). On the other hand, Cicero considers that "no man can be an orator complete in all points of merit, who has not attained a knowledge of all important subjects and arts. For it is from knowledge that oratory must derive its beauty and fullness, and unless there is such knowledge, well-grasped and comprehended by the speaker, there must be something empty and almost childish in the utterance" (*De oratore*, I. vi.20, as translated in E. W. Sutton and H. Rackham, trans., *Cicero: De Oratore* [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1948], p. 17). Clearly, for both of these men, invention must reach deeply into specific subjects and knowledge.

⁵⁴"Prólusion VII: Learning Makes Men Happier Than Does Ignorance," John Milton: *Complete Poems and Major Prose*, ed. Merritt Hughes (New York: The Odyssey Press, 1957), p. 622.

⁵⁵"Of Education," *John Milton*, p. 637.

⁵⁶Cited in Edward Corbett, *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1971), p. 35.

⁵⁷*Rhetoric*, Book II, Chapter 1; Cooper's translation, p. 92.

⁵⁸Cited in Corbett, p. 101.

⁵⁹What is said above will hold true for all literary works involving character and plot—in other words, for short stories, novels, drama, biography, etc. It will also be generally true for poetry, except that many poems embody only one of these things, e.g. emotion.

The Power of Positive Comment (Continued from p. 8)

dialogue, and although this positive approach may take more time than the mechanical perusal of papers, students may learn something about writing in the process. Writing comments provides teachers an opportunity not only to correct papers, but to nurture writers; and positive comments may be a means to this happy end.

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