Rhetoric and Hermeneutics: Composition, Invention, and Literature

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Rhetoric and hermeneutics are clearly if variously related disciplines. They are historically related because they developed simultaneously in ancient Greece (Eden 60). They are professionally related in that many journals publish essays relevant to both disciplines (PMLA, College English, Quarterly Journal of Speech, Rhetoric Review, Critical Inquiry, Rhetorica, and the Journal of Advanced Composition, for example). They are pedagogically related because the burden for teaching both falls largely on English departments. And they are theoretically related because they are, or at least they are assumed to be, reverse sides of the same communication coin (Schleiermacher 74): one provides reading instruction while the other provides writing instruction. Despite (and because of) this clear relation between rhetoric and hermeneutics, composition and literature are generally disassociated. In the last fifteen years or so, a great many people have suggested various ways of integrating these two disciplines (for overviews and related arguments, see for example: Booth, Clifford and Schilb, Comprone, Hartman, Horner, Kaufer and Waller, Lanham, J. Hillis Miller, Susan Miller, Salvatori), and yet, as Patricia Sullivan observes, even at the graduate level “literature and composition are still represented as separate intellectual activities” (296). This disassociation is primarily caused by matters of “attitude and history” (Horner 8), and one of the longest standing, most divisive attitudes is the theory/practice dichotomy (Jarratt 94) which assumes that theory and practice operate in separate realms: the one of abstract, intellectual knowledge; the other of concrete human activity. While each may inform the other, they are distinct and essentially different. The distinction between theory and practice adumbrates the subjects of rhetoric and hermeneutics, reinforcing beliefs and attitudes about the relative function and value of literature and composition. After all, for a majority of traditional English department faculty, literature is studied while composition is taught. They are categorically different enterprises, best dealt with by different kinds of people, but they are related activities and so best housed in the same department. One coin, two sides.

Schleiermacher’s assertion that “hermeneutics and rhetoric are intimately related in that every act of understanding is the reverse side of an act
of speaking” (74) carries with it an obvious, almost intuitive plausibility. As with all plausible appearances, however, this one relies on several significant assumptions. If one assumes, as Schleiermacher's text suggests, that rhetoric is the art of transforming thoughts into signs while hermeneutics is the art of transforming signs into thoughts, and if one assumes, as Schleiermacher asserts, that “hermeneutics deals only with the art of understanding, not with the presentation of what has been understood” (73), then obviously rhetoric and hermeneutics are reverse sides of the same coin. These assumptions about the nature and function of rhetoric and hermeneutics, however, have a disciplinary effect on English departments. By associating hermeneutics with the search for abstract thoughts and rhetoric with the presentation of concrete signs that momentarily stand in for abstract thoughts, one associates hermeneutics with abstract thinking and rhetoric with the physical, at most managerial, act of writing. Because the academy generally considers the production of knowledge (thinking) superior to the dissemination of knowledge (writing), the reverse-sides metaphor ultimately subordinates rhetoric to hermeneutics and composition to literary studies, polarizing members of the English department into those who love either literature or composition and tolerate the other as either an indulgence or an unfortunate necessity. The subordination of rhetoric to hermeneutics has also had the more seriously harmful effect of creating an underclass of composition instructors, a situation that nearly everyone deplores, but which is also difficult to correct. Although I do not for a minute imagine that a new understanding of the relation between rhetoric and hermeneutics is going to solve a largely financial problem, I do think that reevaluating the relation between the two disciplines may improve the relative attitudes of those who find themselves (schizophrenically) on opposite sides of the same coin.

Instead of accepting Schleiermacher's metaphor of reverse practices, which assumes that the discovery of ideas precedes rhetorical activity on the interpreter's part, the practical understanding of interpretation that I am describing and promoting on these pages presents hermeneutics as a specialized application of topical invention. The topics have traditionally been understood as the places where subjects for discourse can be located (loci is the Latin translation of topoi; both the Greek and the Latin words are usually translated into English as places, but they must not be confused with common places, which most people associate with hackneyed ready-mades, the compositional equivalent to prefabricated houses). As the location of arguments or subjects for discourse, they form the core of invention, and to the extent that invention is central to rhetoric, the topics are a critical practice. Aristotle differentiates between special and general topics in his Rhetoric (1358a 20-35). General topics are patterns that may be applied in any field. “Superfluities are better than bare necessities,” for example, “and sometimes also preferable. For living a good life is better than merely living” (Topica, 118a 6-8). Special topics, on the other hand, are primarily discipline-specific sites
of argumentation. Every field has its own set of acceptable topics. Literary interpretation is no exception. These patterns are not merely containers for words, but interpretive conventions, ways of understanding, and ways of locating relevant subjects for discourse. By understanding the production of literary studies as an application of topical invention, a general rhetorical technique that can be taught in composition courses but that can be specified in any field where writing is relevant, we can associate composition and literary studies as the general to the specific. Although my insistence on the centrality of invention for interpretation may seem arbitrary to some, placing invention at the center of interpretive activity is critical to a practical hermeneutics because the current division of labor in English departments is the result of a hermeneutics that considers understanding non-rhetorical and rhetoric non-inventional. It is, however, the canon of invention that gives rhetoric its substance; without it, rhetoric merely arranges, clothes, and dispatches the arguments and observations other disciplines have discovered. Without invention, rhetoric is not an epistemic activity, and as such it can never hold anything but a secondary place in the English department (to say nothing of the academy at large). If, on the other hand, invention is part of the way interpretations are performed, then literary studies are epistemologically connected to rhetorical theory. The value of this practical hermeneutics is that it eschews the hierarchy that subordinates composition to literature because it describes interpretation as a creative effort to compose an understanding. It may appear as though I am simply trying to subsume literature under the heading of composition. My intention, however, is to level the hierarchy, not invert it. I am simply trying to specify by means of a practical hermeneutics one inventional aspect of the composition of literary interpretations.

To make this argument I will review, schematically, the historical origins of the arrangement between hermeneutics and rhetoric that makes Schleiermacher's misleading metaphor plausible. I will then indicate how the reverse-sides metaphor and the theory/practice split it reinforces dissociate composition and literary interpretation. Penultimately, I will recount the changes in hermeneutical thinking, which I call the rhetoricization of hermeneutics, that mark one current move in the humanities away from an apparently passive appreciation of literature toward a performance-centered hermeneutics. It is from this recent hermeneutical center that the possibility of an inventional approach to interpretation becomes plausible. In recounting these changes in interpretive thinking I am not so much arguing in the sense of attempting to demonstrate the validity of a theoretical position as I am narrating a segment of a tradition to suggest that a new turn in the narrative is appropriate given the prevailing intellectual climate. This is a kairotic rather than a demonstrative proof. Finally, I will provide a partial list of literary topics which will illustrate how patterns of reading can configure interpretation.
A History of the Subordination of Rhetoric to Hermeneutics

It is possible to trace the lineage of our current configuration of rhetoric and hermeneutics—one that understands hermeneutics as theoretical, rhetoric as practical, and the former as superior to the latter—back to Plato's configuration of rhetoric and dialectic in the *Phaedrus*. In that dialogue, the art of incrementally distinguishing knowledge from appearance or opinion (*episteme* from *doxa*) is called dialectic, whereas the art of tailoring opinions to a specific audience in order to improve that audience's soul is called rhetoric. This dialogue actually concludes with a wholesale rejection of all written compositions as not worth "serous attention," thus setting a precedent for the denigration of writing generally (278a). We might explain Plato's preference for dialectic over rhetoric in the following way: ideas are the unmediated apprehension of a portion of divine reality (knowledge). Thought is the internal representation of ideas; thought produces opinions. Any representation of an idea is instrumentally inferior to the idea itself, just as any representation of a thing is instrumentally inferior to the thing itself: a picture of a glass of water only increases thirst. Any representation of an idea is also ontologically inferior to the idea itself because even a fragmentary portion of divine knowledge is superior to any human opinion. Thoughts are therefore ontologically and instrumentally inferior to ideas. Opinion is inferior to knowledge. Speech is a representation of thought. Therefore speech is inferior to thought and even more inferior to ideas. Moreover, because speech is externalized thought, it is debased even further by defect of its being in the world of unstable perceptions, in the cave of human existence where sounds and images are distorted by imperfect conditions. Speech removes thought even further from the realm of ideas.

Rhetoric, when understood in the Platonic sense as the techniques of effective speaking, translates divine ideas into human opinions because humanity in general is incapable of understanding divine Truth. Dialectic, when understood in the Platonic sense as the techniques of effective thinking, provides human knowledge that approximates ideas because even philosophers cannot completely grasp divinity. What is instrumental in a superior realm is superior to what is instrumental in an inferior realm. Therefore, dialectic is superior to rhetoric. This hierarchy is responsible for rhetoric's divorce from theory. Because ideas are *a priori* and divine, they are superior to any human invention. Ideas are glimpsed by introspection (*theoria*, a looking at, beholding, viewing, knowing). They are seen for what they are in themselves, not constructed or construed by human activity. Such introspection is purely theoretical; that is, it no more manipulates the objects of its apprehension than the eye distorts the images it perceives clearly. Because dialectic translates these ideas into thoughts, dialectic is a practical activity, but it is more theoretical than rhetoric because it creates knowledge while rhetoric merely organizes opinions for dissemination. Rhetoric is as far
removed from theory as it is removed from knowledge. It is therefore extremely practical.

The Platonic "rhetorical" tradition was translated from a primarily oral culture to a primarily literate one by St. Augustine, who attributed invention to hermeneutics, while presenting rhetoric as merely a collection of strategies for effective preaching. He begins the first book of On Christian Doctrine with the following assertion: "There are two things necessary to the treatment of the Scriptures: a way of discovering those things which are to be understood, and a way of teaching what we have learned" (7). Of the four books, the first three are dedicated to the techniques of discovering textual truth in the Scriptures—dedicated, that is, to hermeneutics; only the last discusses homiletics, or the art of preaching. Because he divides his subject in this way, he suggests that discovery (invention) belongs to hermeneutics, and thus all that remains of rhetoric is merely a collection of rules or strategies for preaching the Truths that hermeneutics has discovered. This division between learning and teaching, with its consequent reduction in the scope of rhetoric, subordinates writing to reading: "Those with acute and eager minds more readily learn eloquence by reading and hearing the eloquent than by following rules of eloquence... And he will learn eloquence especially if he gains practice by writing, dictating, or speaking what he has learned according to the rule of piety and faith" (119). Thus, in the pursuit of eloquence, reading precedes writing just as for Plato knowledge must precede rhetoric. This organization of hermeneutics and rhetoric suggests that not only is writing nonepistemic, it is actually ancillary to any epistemic activity. The substance of discourse and the means of discourse are separate entities that must be learned at separate moments, and because rhetoric is insubstantial, it is a secondary academic concern from an intellectual standpoint. According to this division of hermeneutics and rhetoric, when writing finally does come into play, it is predicated not on rhetorical knowledge or practice, but on piety and faith. One must pray, or (a secular alternative) seek one's muse for divine inspiration. Thus, writing instruction is theoretically impossible, not just irrelevant to this kind of hermeneutics. The rhetorician may offer a few general rules and some techniques regarding the presentation of knowledge, but that is all rhetoric has to offer a writer.

Thus, Augustine believed, just as Plato did before him and Schleiermacher did after him, that rhetoric was epistemologically insignificant. Hermeneutics discovers what to say while rhetoric merely suggests how to say it. The two disciplines are mutually dependent because thought without expression is useless, and expression without thought is vacuous. It is from this perspective that rhetoric and hermeneutics can be construed as opposite sides of the same coin. One must think before one speaks, and one must know before one thinks. The corollary of this is that one must understand a book before writing about it. Thus reading and writing are mutually dependent but entirely different activities—two sides of the same coin. If one accepts this
argument, then one is committed to reading and writing instruction as they are currently provided in the traditional sort of English department where the honors and perks go to those who teach literature while those who teach writing teach nothing intellectually significant and are rewarded accordingly.

The survey of contemporary exclusivist positions that follows is offered as an indication of how the theory/practice dichotomy configures the relation between reading and writing, and also as an indication of how the hierarchy of disciplines that the split between theory and practice creates remains active even among arguments favoring the interrelation of reading and writing.

Disassociations
For those writing specialists who consider literary studies inappropriate for composition, literature is too specialized a form of discourse to warrant its inclusion in courses where the emphasis is largely on developing basic rhetorical skills. Literary discourse is considered an unapproachable model for students, one that creates impractical expectations about the purpose and nature of the kind of prose that almost all of them will be called upon to write both in their academic careers and in life after graduation. Earl Britton, for example, has argued that first-year composition courses predicated on literary study develop skills antithetical to professional writing. More recently, Edward Corbett has argued that literary texts distract students “from the objectives of a writing course” (183). Even more recently, Erika Lindemann has offered five more reasons why “using literature in freshman English is inappropriate” (313). If the goal of all nonfiction writers is to convey information linearly, in simple declarative sentences, with adequate forecasting so that the reader can understand effortlessly, then reading William Faulkner or Virginia Wolf would seem to be counterproductive. If one argues in this fashion, that literary texts are opaque while nonliterary texts are transparent, then literary interpretation is an impractical activity that should remain separate from composition. Although it is no doubt true that some students may be intimidated by literary texts as composition models and others misled into assuming that a good technical manual should be constructed like a gothic novel, completely separating composition from literary interpretation suggests that understanding a literary text must be fundamentally different from composing a more mundane text. Moreover, it suggests that the composition of literary interpretations is a non-rhetorical activity. Thus, this position contributes to the valorization of literary studies even as it champions the autonomy of composition precisely because it associates composition with practicality and literary studies with something impractical.

Conversely, some literature specialists believe that the practical concerns of composition instruction confound literary interpretation. Hephzibah Roskelly records a telling example of this kind of literary exclusion of
rhetoric. She observes Geoffrey Hartman's complaint in *The Fate of Reading* that reading considered as a precondition for writing, "where interpreters read only to find topics for their own discourse," destroys the "dream of Communication" that was once the foundation of writing and reading (Roskelly 138). Hartman seems to believe, at this moment at least (he is more conciliatory at others: "Understanding Criticism"), that introducing rhetoric into literary studies, encouraging the integration of composition and literature, could subvert effective interpretation because it would encourage people to appropriate what the author said. In other words, integrating composition and literature would stage an interpretive coup by supplanting the authority of the author with the voice of the critic or interpreter. Writing about a text before one completely understands it seems to disrupt communication the ways speaking before thinking makes communication dangerous. This position suggests that the production of a literary interpretation is dissimilar to the comprehension of a literary work because understanding is non- or pre-linguistic. Thus, literary interpretation would seem to be divorced from rhetorical practice and, therefore, better left separate from composition. The difficulty with this position is that it relies on a hermeneutics of piety similar to Augustine's and Plato's. If the process of understanding is a form of supernatural magic, then there is nothing to teach in a literature class, and literature has nothing to offer apart from the spontaneous appreciation of powerful works. The literature specialist becomes a museum curator and the English department a museum piece. This splendid isolation excites some kinds of non-activist literary scholars but leaves the more issue-oriented literary scholars "doing theory." It also invalidates rhetorical study, offering "rhetoric" as nothing more than a service to the academy at large in return for financial support.

This division between theory and practice is resilient even to positions that address it directly. Robert Scholes, for example, argues that "reading and writing are complementary acts that remain unfinished until completed by their reciprocals" (20). Writing, or expression as he calls it, is critical to the development of understanding. Thus reading and writing are inseparable. This position goes a long way toward redressing the theory/practice split. Interpretation offers the opportunity for a social construction of textual reality, where interpretation is a process that produces its own market in the process of its production. Thus we would teach interpretation in order that our students would learn how to insert their own texts in the spaces they have created in other people's texts. But Scholes also argues that literary interpretation and discourse production are reciprocal practices (16), a mathematical equivalent to Schleiermacher's numismatic metaphor. This configuration threatens to reassert the theory/practice dichotomy, which makes the division between composition and literature inevitable. I may seem to be quibbling here. What difference does it make if a theory has a dichotomous tendency? The answer is that the theory/practice dichotomy is not a theoret-
ical infelicity. It is rather an event, an attitude that has serious consequences for the distribution of labor and respect in English departments.

The problematic nature of Scholes' configuration of rhetoric and hermeneutics is most apparent when he explains that reading is a process of decoding "the codes that were operative in the composition of any given text and the historical situation in which it was composed" (21). He composes this position by explaining how he teaches a Hemingway piece to a group of historically ignorant students. Basically his practice is to inform his students of the sedimented meanings of the terms around which pivot the kind of interpretation that would be performed by a person of Hemingway's generation, culture, and gender—a traditional hermeneutic recuperation of the text. Hence his concern to "rehabilitate reference itself" (85). Such a position continues to privilege the past, suggesting that meaning is buried in language that has become opaque because of the passage of time. The interpreter thus becomes a cataloguer of semiotic references that can be applied to a text the way solvents are applied to dusty windows. The purpose of interpretation is to make language a transparent window on the thoughts of (dead) authors. A person who writes interpretations, therefore, uses interpretation only to efface the changes that language undergoes in time, employing rhetoric simply to present the discoveries made by interpretation. If the interpretation is properly constructed according to the rules of "rhetoric," then it is itself not in need of interpretation. Interpretations are thus instrumentally different from literary texts, and rhetoric is understood as a set of techniques for presenting information unmediated by authorial assumptions. Because each literary text contains a historically accurate interpretation (the meaning of the text) and the role of hermeneutics is to recover that meaning, meaning precedes any rhetorical activity on the interpreter's part. Composition is used to communicate what interpretation discovered. Interpretation produces knowledge and composition expresses that knowledge. The theory/practice dichotomy is momentarily removed, but the hierarchy it created remains. Writing is merely the expression of thought. And so the wall between literary theory and rhetorical practice remains even when the desire to talk about reading as writing and vice versa motivates the discussion.

Perhaps the most successful approach to removing the theory/practice dichotomy has been presented under the sign of deconstruction (see the essays collected by Atkins and Johnson for a sample of different perspectives). J. Hillis Miller has argued, for example, that "reading is a kind of writing" (41) and that rhetoric is a form of de-composition or analysis (42). By associating rhetoric with the creation of new understandings, he elevates rhetoric beyond mere expression. But Miller also argues that writing is a "trope" for reading (41). Like Scholes', this intersection of rhetoric and hermeneutics indicates just how resilient the theory/practice dichotomy can be, even for rapprochement theories of reading and writing. If writing is a
trope for reading, then writing is still a secondary practice, a translation or an alteration of the literal. Writing can thus be returned to the level of that which presents but does not invent meaning.

In each of the arguments I have just recounted, either the preponderance of a theoretical or practical orientation in one discipline distinguishes it from the other to such an extent that the two must be held separate, or the hierarchy that subordinates composition to literary studies remains intact even when reading and writing (theory and practice) are considered inseparable. Theoretical activities are and have been associated with knowledge production, while practical activities have been associated with the dissemination of knowledge. Thus the theory/practice line divides literary interpretation from composition and creates the potential for the hierarchy which privileges literary interpretation. The separation of these two disciplines, then, is the result not only of the theory/practice dichotomy but also of the relation of inequality that the dichotomy sets up between rhetoric and hermeneutics.

The persistent segregation of composition and literature might end, therefore, if the hierarchy that holds composition inferior to literary interpretation could be leveled. In order to do this, hermeneutics and rhetoric have to be understood as something other than reversely or even reciprocally related disciplines, as two sides of the same coin, so that it is impossible to associate one with theory and the other with practice exclusively. If we recognize the rhetorical nature of interpretive processes as a topical form of invention, then literary interpretation is simply a special instance of a general practice of invention. This argument connects literature to composition at the site of invention rather than expression, unites theory and practice (reading and writing), and eliminates the hierarchy of texts. I am not arguing that *King Lear* and a college junior’s interpretation of it are equally valuable to the world, only that the production of any text, even the production of a text about a text, requires the application of special topics and, therefore, that composition and literary studies are positively related subjects.

This topical approach to literary interpretation is historically grounded in a Renaissance hermeneutic, which, according to Victoria Kahn, considered interpretation and rhetoric indistinguishable (Kahn 39). The Renaissance humanists understood interpretation as a re-presentation of a verbal artform that offered the manuscript writer the opportunity to embellish, to amplify, to read, and even to write between the lines of a previously composed text (Bruns 101-02). Meaning, from this perspective, is created by interpretive activity. It does not reside in a text the way an artifact lies buried in the dust. A text is not a repository of meaning, but rather a potential opportunity for discourse. Meaning is continually reinvented, not originally given to be recovered. Interpretive validity is no longer determined by an isomorphic relationship between an idea and its linguistic representation, by a metaphysical goodness-of-fit test. There is no absolute standard of evaluation for
interpretive propositions because interpretation happens within informal, open systems. Unlike mathematics and formal logic, where propositions can be evaluated by absolute standards because the words that construct these systems are entirely formal, interpretation involves words and systems of thought that cannot be codified and formalized. Thus, interpretive propositions cannot be evaluated according to an absolute standard. From this perspective, rhetoric is significantly involved in interpretation at two different levels. Rhetoric not only advises people how to arrange arguments and choose words, it provides the framework of informal argumentation that is necessary for evaluating interpretive propositions. This Renaissance rhetorical hermeneutic has recently been reinvented by Continental and American hermeneuts, as well as by scholars who "do theory." Despite its success in these fields, its implications seem to be ignored by English departments at large because the opinion that one must re-write a text in order to read it is inconsistent with the disassociation of reading and writing. Thus, a fast overview of the rhetoricization of hermeneutics is warranted.

Rhetoricization of Hermeneutics

Before 1970, hermeneutics was primarily dedicated to the discovery of features in a specific text that indicated an essential meaning and to developing universal principles that could guide the discovery of essential meanings in any text. The concepts of authorial intention and literal meaning, for example, were thought to anchor interpretation outside language (in the psyche or the world) and so necessarily demonstrate the accuracy of an interpretation, or at least to provide the hope that interpretive certainty could approximate scientific certainty (Hirsch; Hoy 32). A literary author could use rhetoric if he or she wished, but an interpreter could not permit rhetoric to interfere with interpretive method because he or she sought knowledge of the text in question. Rhetoric would be additionally irrelevant when it came time to present that meaning because knowledge must be demonstrated rather than proven. In other words, rhetoric was unacceptable as a method of inquiry and even as a method of composition. Although the attitude that rhetoric is an underhanded technique employed when authorial ambition outstrips the available evidence is slowly being eradicated, you will know that some strain of it is alive and well wherever you hear someone say something like, "I liked that lecture (or article); it wasn't full of rhetoric."

The prevalence of this attitude toward rhetoric began to diminish when Richard Palmer introduced the hermeneutic thought of Heidegger and Gadamer to America. Palmer argues that the separation of time and place that holds readers and writers apart is the natural and inevitable effect of the fact that written discourse outlasts the context of its composition. He concludes, therefore, that the hermeneutic purpose is to overcome this separation, to revivify the text (14), to breathe life back into the empty words, as it were, so that they may say what they were composed to say. This
hermeneutic task of returning a text to immediate (aural) experience is, according to Gadamer, what makes “the rhetorical and hermeneutical aspects of human linguisticality completely interpenetrate each other” (“Scope” 25). Interpretation “resembles more the art of the orator than the process of listening” (24), he says. The interpreter must amplify a text in order to “hear” it as it once was spoken. This perspective leads Palmer to argue that understanding a text is more like interpreting a piece of music than deciphering a code (15) in that one’s abilities improve with practice rather than with the application of universal laws. Hermeneutics, in other words, is closer to *phronesis* than it is to *theoria*. It is more practical than theoretical. Demonstrative validity is therefore an inappropriate criterion for hermeneutic evaluation.

Although this perspective helps integrate composition and literature by arguing that rhetoric and hermeneutics are both practical activities, it privileges the spoken word in a way that reinforces the idea that rhetoric is essentially an oral practice, which would seem to render it ancillary in a textual age such as our own (an assertion which Gadamer himself makes: “Hermeneutics” 55). More importantly however, Gadamer’s logocentricty privileges the Platonic epistemology that relegates rhetoric to the art of dissemination and so removes invention from the rhetorical canon. The rhetoric of interpretation is thus limited to the art of amplification, of increasing or improving the reception of what is already there. Thus rhetoric is disassociated from the production of knowledge and relegated to the practical sphere of broadcasting. Nevertheless, by making interpretation a performative rather than a purely analytical activity, this perspective does suggest that rhetoric and hermeneutics are both practical activities.

Palmer also inaugurated the transition from an object-oriented hermeneutics to a process-oriented one by arguing that literature was an experience rather than an object and a conscious practice rather than an effect. Incidentally, he argued hermeneutics is an iterative process, just as writing is. Palmer laments the trend in American criticism to treat interpretation as though texts were objects indifferent to the intentions of their writers and the attentions of their readers (5-7). Thus he offers his phenomenological hermeneutics as a move toward an interactive understanding of interpretation that follows the examples of Gadamer and Heidegger. The concepts of effective history and fore-having suggest that the interpreter and the object of interpretation are not independent of each other as subject from object can be in controllable experimentation. Because hermeneutic understanding is understood as a circular and holistic process involving a shuttling back and forth between part in relation to whole and whole in relation to part, the context of consumption has to be considered in addition to the context of production. Adequate understanding, therefore, does not consist solely of placing a text in its historical context, but also of placing the interpretive process in its historical context and considering the interrelation of the two
processes. This reflection on the process of interpretation is meant to ensure that the truth of the subject that inspired the text is no more obscured by present conditions than historical changes necessitate. Although this hermeneutic insists that some interpretive influence is unavoidable, and so does not construe a text as an object about which absolute knowledge is available, it retains a metaphysical goal, and so reasserts the divine/human dichotomy which generates the theory/practice dichotomy, from which descends the literature over composition hierarchy.

So while the rhetoricization of hermeneutics has not entirely endorsed the idea that rhetoric in an epistemic activity and so has not yet provided members of the traditional English department with a way of recognizing the intellectual integrity of rhetoric, it has re-presented hermeneutics as a performance-centered form of argumentation, the validity of whose propositions cannot be necessarily proven by demonstrative reasoning, and thus it has understood interpretation as a broadly based, socially significant form of informal argumentation. It has, in other words, concluded that rhetoric has a lot more to do than just dispense the knowledge that hermeneutics produces on its own. But if contemporary hermeneutics informs literary studies as to the significance of rhetoric as a paradigm of argumentation, it also informs compositionists that hermeneutics is not an abstruse derivative of esoteric philology, but rather an unavoidable activity of life in general.

Hermeneutics is sometimes mistakenly understood to occur only when obscurity, ambiguity, alienation, or misunderstanding render immediate recognition impossible. Metaphorically speaking, it is, from this limited perspective, the set of tools used to restore the Sistine Chapel. Thus, it would seem to be an irrelevant practice when clarity, uniformity, immediacy, or previous understanding make recognition instantaneous and unnoticeable. In other words, it would seem to be irrelevant to technical writing and exposition in general. Since the publication of Gadamer's *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, however, the processes of interpretation have been generalized to cover all situations, immediate and foreign. One interprets even when doing so is effortless because one must filter sensations or be overwhelmed by them, just as one who wears an unsophisticated hearing aid may not hear a conversation for the sound of the refrigerator, the computer monitor, and the rumble of cars outside until he or she learns to consciously "tune out" the extraneous noise. All of these sounds attend the conversation but cannot be attended to without a loss of understanding. Interpretation is an unavoidable activity: just as one cannot not communicate, one cannot not interpret; the world is always already constructed by selection and arrangement of material. Interpretation is therefore just as relevant when writing a process description for an extrusion plant as for illuminating a Chaucerian Tale. If one accepts the tenets of contemporary hermeneutics, then interpretation is an unavoidable part of practical wisdom (*phronesis*), a purposive activity rather than a spontaneous psychological mechanism or objective technique that produces
absolute knowledge (*episteme*). From this perspective, then, interpretation is a form of rhetorical argumentation. If we add to this an inventional component, then we will have a rhetorical hermeneutics that does not distinguish between learning and writing.

**Topical Hermeneutics**
The virtue of understanding interpretive practices as an application of special topics is that it affords the practitioner a level of conscious control over how he or she will construe a text, and thus some measure of control over how he or she will both construe and be construed by others. Because meaning is not given in a flash of insight but created, invented out of existing but differently composed materials, writing and reading are inseparably linked. They both require invention. An additional virtue is that there is no effort to describe the process of interpretation in such a way that one topic is always privileged over all others, as it is, for example, when meaning is understood as authorial intention or a single stable meaning is assumed available to a particular methodology (or a multiple, ethereal collection of disparate readings, for that matter). This makes interpretation more versatile, more able to suit various situations and needs. This makes some of what is learned in a literature classroom relevant to other endeavors without rendering literature subservient to other practices. One can still enjoy the power of a great piece or consider the ethical implications of a great work. One simply has a broader range of ways to write about these topics.

From the perspective of topical invention, the purpose of writing is not to represent thought in words or to convey abstract meanings to others by means of words, but rather to exert power over experience—to re-form what had been formed before. Interpretation is understood not as a psychological event or metaphysical quest or a methodical reconstruction of a historical consciousness, but rather as a conscious effort to apply formalizing principles to previously formed matter. Just as an interpretation of a piece of music creates another piece of music, one that bears a family resemblance to its parental score, so the interpretation of a text produces another text. When reading and writing, as in all other aspects of life, one considers what one can do with what one has found. From this perspective, then, rhetoric is significant to interpretation because it advises interpreters how to arrange and clothe arguments, it provides the argumentative framework for evaluating the relative plausibility of various interpretations, and, most importantly, it provides a practical method for discovering how to provide interpretations—for inventing meanings, in other words.

**Literary Topics**
The special topics of literary interpretation have in the past been chosen more or less by practice, habit, and inheritance, or because a particular topic was thought to lead to an undeniably true interpretation differentiated from
other interpretations by the denomination meaning, but the topics of interpretation may also be chosen self-consciously. Just as one versed in rhetorical invention can deal effectively and immediately with new situations by at first dividing the new experience into familiar categories and then branching out, so can an interpreter create a useful encounter out of a new text by starting with traditional special topics and then considering topics from elsewhere. Some traditional literary topics are intention (or anti-intention), structure, context, influence, origin, significance, implication, sublimation, signs of ideological issues and conflicts, form and substance, ambiguity, indeterminacy, etymology, figurality. Any particular instance of interpretation might require any number and hierarchical configuration of these.

Literary topics, like all special topics, are contextual in two ways. They are associated with a particular endeavor. Although they may be transported from one endeavor to another, they will carry with them residue of the first context. Intention, for example, comes from law (as do many traditional hermeneutic practices) and carries with it the aura of vindication (or vilification) and contractual agreement. Special topics are also contextual in that each one (or each collection) is more fitting and appropriate in certain circumstances (determined by audience, desire, ethos, institutional context) than in others. It is important to underscore the contextuality of interpretation because doing so makes interpretation a real-world event rather than a metaphysical quest which exceeds all temporality, or, at the other extreme, a schoolbook exercise performed for the sake of a grade. One is not searching for either the Meaning or the Being of a text, but rather for what can be said about it and for reasons to write in the first place.

Intention, for example, is used when the obvious meaning is inefficacious for an interpretive purpose. The rap singer Ice-T’s defense of himself when his song “Cop Killer” created a public outcry was that he was merely personifying an attitude. In other words, he defended himself from the accusation of inciting violence toward authority by distancing or disassociating himself from the words he sang. He was requesting (perhaps belatedly) that his rap not be interpreted literally, but obliquely, as the dancing of an attitude, as Burke might say. A similar, although more subtle, defense may be given for the author of “A Modest Proposal.” The fact that the intentional defense is only rarely required of Swift (in cases where the audience has no idea who Swift was, or when the audience does not understand the idea of double reading, or misses what are normally considered cues) does not make the topic different for Swift than for T, even though most of the people who readily understand Swift as ironic would blanch at T’s rap simply because they miss the cues or refuse the ones offered. What is alien is frightening and so must be normalized by some means. One of the purposes of interpretation is to naturalize the alien, and intention is a topic that can be used to vindicate an author just as it can be used to defend someone accused of a crime. One may also interpret for the opposite reason, however. Defamiliarization
makes immediate and apparently effortless interpretations unpersuasive and alien, while rendering obscure interpretations plausible. Because, as Roland Barthes once said, for every inclusion there is an exclusion, it is always possible to redirect compositional attention, to locate a group of people who have been unfairly represented or an ill-conceived attitude behind a well-meaning explanation. Description reveals the writer, not the world. This topic is useful when an audience seems complacent about the validity of a particular interpretation, or when a work is locked into a single mode of interpretation—when, for example, an audience refuses to "see" any ideological component to what it calls a fairy tale, but which you can perceive as a vehicle for promoting unquestioned opinions: a young woman must obey her father; wolves are terrestrial sharks. The topics that support defamiliarization in general are ambiguity, indeterminacy, etymology, and figurality. These may be chosen and arranged in different ways to accomplish different interpretations. Ideological critique, for example, the topic of locating a social injustice beneath a fair semblance, is a politically specified form of defamiliarization. By promoting indeterminacy and then "discovering" ambiguity, one can create an interpretive space between immediate understanding and a preferred understanding. Thus, one can use defamiliarization whenever something different needs to be said but there does not appear to be any place to say it.

A related literary topic is that of ethics. The "great works" tradition of literary scholarship argues that people who are exposed to canonical literature develop an improved ethical sensibility. The opposite is also true, according to this hermeneutic: people are ethically corrupted by inferior works, pulp fiction and pornography. From within this hermeneutic, all texts are read and evaluated in relation to an abstract standard of conduct that is supposed to be universally valid. All authors are preachers. To apply this topic, one has to assume that the text is presenting what the author believes is a correct mode of being in the world. Does the text provide an accurate description of human behavior while maintaining a proper attitude toward that behavior? This topic was employed, for example, by the people who condemned Madame Bovary on the grounds that it depicted immoral behavior. They were assuming that the central figure of a text was necessarily the heroine and was offered as a model to be emulated. The same topic was used against Ice-T and, perversely, against Reverend Swift. Although many people interpret all works of art as sermonic, a more versatile understanding recognizes that some texts may be more valuable if understood from some other topic, whereas books already considered artistically valuable can be revalued if read according to a sermonic hermeneutic. A topical approach to interpretation does not remove the ethics of interpretation. It suggests that ethics is a topic worth pursuing in some circumstances for some works, but it also points out that the topic implies (as all topics do imply) certain assumptions—that human behavior is generalizable, that ethics are not
purely situational, that authors are priests. With these assumptions in mind, one may be better able to choose the topic wisely. One would also be much less likely to apply the topic blindly, as when one thinks that Swift had to have been a barbarian.

Another special topic is to use a narrative about the historical context of a textual production as a method of analysis and argumentation. This topic is employed almost exclusively by those who would recuperate the true meaning of a text. Even if one is inclined to reject the hermeneutics that posits reading as a metaphysical quest, one might still consider historical context of production in order to generate a discourse that relates the past and the present, using a particular text as a locus or point of intersection. The interpreter’s goal of establishing the meaning of a text as a psychological event in the author’s head is abandoned and replaced by the effort to locate a text’s participation in social configurations as a result of how it was construed at the time it was published. This is the approach that Stephen Mailloux has used for *Huckleberry Finn*. The goal in this particular case is to explain the social function of a text and thus to explain how various meanings could be attributed to it at a particular time. Whereas underscoring the importance of context is a universal tenet of the new historicism, a topical hermeneutics considers context a text in itself. It is a narrative frame or a lens that may be used to recompose interpretations of a given text. In other words, context is thus a compositional option rather than an Archimedean point for accurate interpretation. If it were an absolute criterion, then it would not be susceptible to infinite regress—each context being supplemented by another context that fails to completely explain the previous one, until it too has been explained by a context, *ad nauseam*.

Influence as a literacy topic is a specification of the general topic of cause and effect. Influence studies are (like causal studies) out of fashion these days because continuity has been replaced with discontinuity as a special topic of historiography. The heterodox composition of contemporary society renders emphasis on difference (equal but different) more plausible than similarity. Thus, a study that posits direct lineage between ages or cultures is more likely to be objectionable now than when people believed that there was essentially one culture and that it descended in a straight line. Influence studies might return, however, if lineage became important again. If one were trying to collect a disparate group of works under a single term or idea, then tracing a connection to a previous term or idea might be an effective technique. The topic of influence is also just one example of how topics act as subliminal ideological arguments, as rhetorics in the sense of persuasive events. By demanding that a work or a practice have an identifiable origin, and, as it were, a pedigree, we demand that all narratives conform to a humanist paradigm. By arguing, for example, that the origin of rhetoric can be attributed to Corax and Tisias responding to political changes, that they influenced Gorgias, and that he influenced Plato (negatively), we place
human action at the center of change. Thus, the topic of influence is also an ideological argument, albeit a very indirect one. All topics have allegiances and rely on assumptions that they simultaneously promote when they are “successfully” interpreted, that is, when they are interpreted as true or right.

Gender bias is another special literary topic of considerable ideological importance these days. One begins with an intense set of expectations about how individuals should or should not behave as a consequence of their gender and then critiques a text based on its fit with or remodification of those expectations. One assumes that the piece describes the world, prescribes others’ perceptions of the world, or signifies a past understanding of the world. If texts were closed systems, their prejudices would be quaint or irrelevantly obscene, but not dangerous and in need of critique. Thus, it would be highly difficult to nest a gender topic within a formalist topic unless the formalism was itself gendered. If one were arguing that prose style or argumentative style is a function of gender, for example, then one could nest formalism and gender. But again, the writer’s purpose and her or his circumstances would influence the application of these topics.

This list of special topics is by no means complete and the actual group and configuration of topics will be changing constantly as local exigencies change. I have provided this brief sketch simply to show how literary topics can be implemented. Each one provides a way of reorganizing a text, of finding new things to say about it, of inventing knowledge in the sense of producing a text that elaborates textual understanding.

The interaction of these topics will provide compositional possibilities. They may be hierarchically arranged, as when, for example, Hirsch distinguishes between significance and intention and then privileges the latter. In the face of that pattern’s popularity, one might need to revise the hierarchy if one felt compelled to provide a modern interpretation of an ancient text (if the audience one were addressing were aligned with contemporary hermeneutics). This is what Richard M. Weaver does when he concludes his interpretation of the Phaedrus by replacing the topic of intention with the topic of structure:

No one would think of suggesting that Plato had in mind every application which has here been made, but that need not arise as an issue. The structure of the dialogue, the way in which the judgments about speech concentrate, and especially the close association of the true, the beautiful, and the good, constitute a unity of implication.

(Johannesen et al. 82-83)

He is able to make this move because his understanding of textual interpretation is subtle and dynamic, attuned to local interpretive needs (in this case the contemporary application of one brand of ancient rhetoric) and not confined to a single method of interpretation. The critical point for a topical hermeneutics is that any interpretive hierarchy that would valorize one topic and subordinate another, like intention over significance, is usefully under-
stood as a momentary effect of argumentation rather than an accurate description of a permanent truth.

Conclusion
It seems to me that a topical approach to interpretation enables us to refute many of the arguments used to separate composition and literature. Once a writer progresses beyond grammatical instruction, the discovery and application of special topics is a basic rhetorical skill and so not alien to the composition at any level, undergraduate, graduate, or professorial. Because literature offers a reasonably interesting source of topics and because most English teachers practice written interpretation anyway, literary interpretation may be a useful composition practice. Literature need not be the only place in which to develop the practice of discovering and using topics, but, because the interpretation of literature requires the application of a general theory of invention, it is a legitimate area of composition. Although it may be a special form of discourse, it is not interpreted in an entirely unique way. For the same reason, the gap between first-year composition and technical writing will be less broad if the idea and practice of topical invention is regarded as integral to all writing activities.

The fear that rhetoric's practical orientation spoils communication is more difficult to allay. But if communication is considered a congeries of several topics, intention and context primarily, and as an argument rather than an event, then perhaps the fear may abate somewhat. A topological hermeneutic emphasizes the work involved in producing interpretations and so seems to de-emphasize the experience of direct communication, but it does not eliminate communication, only exchanges the conduit metaphor of direct transmission for an argumentative paradigm: communication is ascribed rather than prescribed; it is a rhetorical construct, not an experiential or cognitive phenomenon. One cannot deny another's communication by appropriating a text because the textual possibilities that a text enables do not belong to the individual who signed that text; each text is simply a figurative space that one may attempt to lay partial claim to, a space from which to work with other figurative spaces. From the perspective of a topical hermeneutics, the truth of one's interpretation is simply equivalent to the cogency of one's argument as determined by anyone who interprets the piece. To argue that there is a True Meaning of a text is to employ specific topics in order to limit the method of interpretation employed by one's readers. It is, in other words, a rhetorical effort to control a textual situation. From within a topological hermeneutic, Meaning is simply a primary topic in the hermeneutics of recuperation. It is an option, not a necessity.

Plausible objections to topological theory of interpretation are no doubt numerous. From within the framework of a paralogical hermeneutics such as Thomas Kent offers, a list of special literary topics might seem an excessively codified approach to interpretation. Indeed, unless one takes a
pragmatic attitude towards topics, an attitude such as Quintilian offers (V 10.119-20), for example, then the practice of interpretation would become uselessly rigid. And, although a certain amount of rigidity argues against interpretation as a metaphysical activity, against a quest for epiphanic meaning, and so highlights the hard work of writing that interpretation requires, too much rigidity could reduce interpretation to a plodding application of rules that would produce formulaic and uninteresting interpretations.

Another related objection is that topical interpretation seems to remove natural purpose from interpretive activity. If all topics are equally possible, as they appear when presented schematically as they are in this essay, then "why pound the keyboard?" There are two responses to this objection. First of all, the topics are not purely interchangeable. They are hierarchically arranged by social conventions so that some topics will be convincing under certain social circumstances while others will not. Second, by rejecting the metaphysical concept of a single, stable, and universally available (if partially obscured) meaning, one foregrounds the labor of composition and so makes conscious the effort to manipulate and control, to participate, in other words, in the conversation. While we lose the innocent commitment to discovering the truth behind a given collection of words, we gain an active ability to consciously influence the collection. We interpret, not to tell the truth or to amplify a faint sound, but to gain (or relinquish) control over the world and our place(s) in it.

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Works Cited


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**Kinneavy Award Winners Announced**

The James L. Kinneavy Award for the most outstanding essay in volume 13 of *JAC* was awarded to Michael Murphy for “After Progressivism: Modern Composition, Institutional Service, and Cultural Studies.”

John Trimbur received an honorable mention for “Articulation Theory and the Problem of Determination: A Reading of *Lives on the Boundary*.”

The award is generously endowed by Professor Kinneavy, Blumberg Centennial Professor at the University of Texas, and was presented by him at the meeting of the Association of Teachers of Advanced Composition at the CCCC Convention in Nashville.