Humanities Seminar in 1979 with Richard Young (and with such fellow participants as Jim Berlin, Victor Vitanza, Sam Watson, and Charles Kneupper) enabled me to plug a few of the holes in the enormous dike of ignorance that constituted (and still constitutes) my knowledge of rhetoric.

Rather than calling attention to all that I didn’t know, Ed Corbett embraced me with an open and generous intellectual and professional spirit, a spirit that encouraged me to feel that I could make a place for myself in the field. Although Ed was welcoming to all who indicated an interest in rhetoric and in the teaching of writing, over the years I observed that he went out of his way to be supportive of the efforts of women, just as he went out of the way to downplay the significance of his own scholarly and professional work. There was nothing feigned or politically correct in Ed’s behavior. Ed loved to call attention to the prominent role that women played in the field—but he also claimed not to understand the role that feminist theory and praxis might play in rhetoric and composition. As my friend and coauthor Andrea Lunsford observes in her reflections about Ed, like all of us, he was a “bundle of contradictions.” And he was, again like all of us, marked by the particularities of his time and of his experiences.

Nearly a month has passed since I wrote the preceding. Ed died on June 24, 1998 at the age of 78. I wrote the first draft of this remembrance on July 1st, and I’ve been trying to write a concluding paragraph ever since. My comments need to go to JAC, and I still can’t find the words I want to say. So like many who knew Ed personally—and other who knew him primarily through his work—I will simply say that I will miss Edward P. J. Corbett. Miss him and also and always be grateful for his life and for his work.

Oregon State University
Corvallis, Oregon

Feminism, Composition/Rhetoric, and Power: The Oeuvre and Political Action of Edward P. J. Corbett

KATHLEEN E. WELCH

Cynicism Kills Idealism
It is more than obvious that we live in an age of irony, not a new thing under the sun, as, say, Aspasia would attest in her own fifth century BCE Athenian context that preceded and helped to establish what is called Platonic irony. In a historical moment closer to our own, the fin-de-siecle that precedes our own current fin-de-siecle trembled with irony, as any reading of Oscar Wilde or spectatorship of
In Memory of Edward P.J. Corbett

his plays immediately indicates. To move forward with a line of male writers, certainly irony in our own time derives strongly from the Beat Culture best typified by Allen Ginsberg and his unending commitment to the betterment of this world, and worst typified by Jack Kerouac, whose misogynistic freewritings and actions—how he wrote and how he lived—obliterate for many discourse communities any positivity they might offer. Postmodern irony now emanates from all our communication machines/electronic symbol distributors and drives irony from a distanced point of view (for example, on the stage or on the printed page) on which to survey the scene of cynicism that leaves irony behind in its wake and washes over its nemesis, idealism, not, of course, the philosophical kind but the utopian version.¹

Edward P.J. Corbett displayed the idealism of utopia that typifies many youths and perhaps not as many nonyouths.² In his long career, he maintained utopian idealism and appeared never to resort to the protective mask of cynicism. I never saw evidence, in print, in person, or on screen, that he was cynical. In other words, he understood very well the irony of our current age and, in his actions, he forged ahead with idealism to make a world a better place. His actions—linguistic and otherwise—never descended to the level of cynicism.

Instead, he worked in his research, teaching, and local/national public education to build a different kind of language study, one that consistently was based on idealism and utterly resisted cynicism.³ Our age of attitude, detachment, hipness, and knowing poses was acutely observed and understood by him, but he was never taken in by it. Cynicism readily leads to the closure of learning, in my view, of the ability to take in and synthesize the new. Edward Corbett’s mind never closed; he would not let it. For example, when he attended dozens of papers at the Conference on College Composition and Communication—a powerful, growing, and crucial organization that he collaborated in constructing and to which he displayed utter commitment through his actions—he readily commented to many people that the level of work at CCCC was better every year, that he was so far behind, that he was struggling to catch up, and so on. He lauded the dramatic change of few women in CCCC to the presence of many powerful women. No cynicism there. No mind closing there. And no arrogance (frequently the twin of cynicism) there. And never once did I see him threatened by feminism, whether enacted by women or men, academic or otherwise. In fact, he promoted feminism in composition and rhetoric studies.

By turning away from the lure of cynicism and its frequent companion arrogance, not directly battling it so much as following his own vision, Edward P.J. Corbett maintained a powerful idealism that contributed strongly to his open mind. Part of that openness displayed itself in his ceaseless support women/ rhetors/ writers/ professors/ adjuncts/etc. One of my primary definitions of a feminist is a female or male who spends academic political capital in order to right a wrong, to make a process work fairly for all, and to use up power through actions and not merely through the wizened rhetoric of private complaining. Edward Corbett, who of course enjoyed tremendous academic power across
all the disciplines and subdisciplines of the humanities, never hesitated to deploy his massive, ethical power to follow his vision of universal literacy via composition and rhetoric studies. Neither did he squander that power, also, of course, a crucial issue in the use of political capital.

To illustrate this issue, I turn to the parable of the three gold coins—or talents—narrated in the Christian Bible in the Book of Matthew. This amazing small story illustrates Corbett’s deployment of political power. In this parable, one of the most persuasive by “Matthew,” a second, embedded narrator, a rich man, is said to have given bags of gold (talents, the coins) to three servants. The first two invest their gold and receive a return of 100%. The third person buries his talents, partly so that they will always be there. When the master returns, he rewards the first two by doubling their money and reprimands the third with the lesson of the parable: to bury one’s talents is to make them useless. Academic political power resembles the actions of the parable and illustrates one of the ways that Edward Corbett was able—from his youthful professorial work running the freshman writing program at Creighton University, through his years of tenacious and brilliant work at The Ohio State University, and until the very day before he suddenly died—to lead us by showing us in what many regard as a literacy crusade that is democratic, aware of power differentials, and aware of how those differentials work to hurt Others and of how to counter the conservative forces that regard the teaching of writing as low-level, menial labor, best left to exploited adjuncts.

So Edward P.J. Corbett did not accept the lure of protection that cynicism can offer. Nor did he preach about it, as far as I can determine. Instead, he exemplified for at least three generations of scholar/teachers (that is, the whole history of the current movement of rhetoric/composition studies) the ways that composition/rhetoric/literacy studies can change some of the worst aspects of the humanities, even as, of course, he knew the traditions of the humanities in the construction of the West as well as anyone. In his lifelong work, he acted consistently as a feminist, by which I partly mean a person who not only holds power (in this case, academic power) but who realizes it and then chooses to use it wisely. The widespread recognition among women feminists was observed in November 1997 when, at the Colloquium on Women in the History of Rhetoric, sponsored by The Ohio State University Department of English, the Coalition of Women Scholars in the History of Rhetoric and Composition presented Edward Corbett with the inaugural Award for Support of Women Rhetor/Writers.

Deploying Power

So many academics, in my experience, are like the third person when it comes to their political academic, pedagogical power: they bury it. Edward Corbett understood power relationships (the study of rhetoric and writing is the study of the distribution of power relationships and used his power/influence/rhetoric/ethics to empower ethically the many people who have built compo-
In Memory of Edward P.J. Corbett

sition/rhetoric graduate programs and highly effective undergraduate writing programs throughout the U.S. How did Edward Corbett deploy his power or invest his many talents? In addition to acting as an exemplary teacher/scholar/public educator, he contributed an enormous quantity of time to mentor younger rhetoric/composition scholars, to read their work and thereby lead others to read unknown names, to write hundreds of tenure and promotion letters in the 1980s atmosphere of the routine firing of rhetoric/composition scholar/teachers, to write thousands of letters of recommendation, etc. When he identified a young scholar whom he thought worked hard at rhetoric/composition, he deployed the power of his name and reputation to help get many in our community through the thickets of writing-hostile English departments. In so doing, he contributed mightily to the changes in English department cultures that now take place: a replacement of the masculinist, Gerald Graffian “Let’s Have Conflict; It’s so Way Cool, Especially for Those of Us with Power” school of anti-thought. Composition/rhetoric studies have, in our most recent thirty-three year construction, worked so assiduously to make freshman writing and all writing a location of power, so that those sites can improve not just the academy but the general population (whatever that construction might signify) as well.

The Eloquence of a Good Person Using Language Well

I would like to name Edward P.J. Corbett vir bonus dicendi peritus, Quintilian’s famous formulation that he, in turn, received from various of his own discourse communities. But Corbett and others have known well, a “vir” always and only signifies a sexed and gendered male. (“Homo,” a human being, “man,” has a different history). Quintilian had big gender and class problems, ones that cannot simply be tropped over by saying something like “he was a product of his time.” That hideout of the many Heritage School people in classical rhetoric studies—as well as of so many of the humanities—is no longer a hideout. The fresh air of new theories of gender constructions has swept out much of the dead air of that space. No one welcomed that fresh air more than Edward Corbett, particularly in his designation as an Aristotelian first, last, and always, a designation that simply ignores an enormous amount of his work.

So we cannot call Corbett vir bonus dicendi peritus. His political, overt, covert actions, as well as his extraordinary understanding of academic political power and how to deploy it for the betterment of the large culture, means that Corbett simply cannot be placed in Quintilian’s wizened little category.

Remember one thing: It was Edward Corbett who put in print that of all the histories of the West, the history of rhetoric was very well the most misogynistic. As we remember this fact, it is also important to remember his writing strategy: publish your rhetoric composition scholarship. As composition/rhetoric teacher/scholars are now asked (and usually willingly take on) the additional, huge burden of incorporating technology into English departments, it is useful to remember Corbett’s publishing strategies. If we all follow it, even as our various institutions exhaust us with more and more labor (misnamed
“service” and regarded as menial) and still-inadequate support, we can transmit the new knowledge of composition/rhetoric studies via the printed page and the digital screen, no matter what.

It will take many dissertations, theses, and other interpretive acts to integrate the range of Corbett’s work. It takes no time to salute him in these pages as an exemplary compositionist, rhetorician, and reader of the emerging polis that his actions and political courage made so much better for women and other Others.

University of Oklahoma
    Norman, Oklahoma

Notes


2 The idealism among faculty members could very well be related to our exposure to the idealism of our students, whose infectious commitments to various causes for peace, literacy, and social justice continues to provide one of the most important power sources in the U.S.

3 I reject the term “service” as an academic description. I have replaced it with public education (for the polis of a university or college, the polis of a subdiscipline of scholar/teachers who range across many geographies, and the polis of a nation). The word “service” no longer works because it has been so thoroughly devalued in the waning days of the research-privileged modern university; in addition, the word calls to mind, say, a gas station more than the crucial work that is accomplished under its rubric. We are not workers in educating our students through research that is transmitted rapidly to our students and in interacting with whichever polis is in need of our work.

4 See Jean-Pierre Vernant, Myth and Society in Ancient Greece. New York: Zone Books, 1990, for a revision of Karl Marx’s analysis of ancient economies. Also see M.I. Finley, The Ancient Economy. See also The New English Bible with the Apocrypha, pp. 35-37, Matthew 25.


6 See http://rossby.ou.edu/~ , the website for the experimental graduate composition/rhetoric course histories of Feminist Rhetorics and Writing Practices, for more information on the scholarly/pedagogical/political work of the Coalition.

7 I have written and spoken elsewhere about the “teach the conflicts” hypermasculinist, agonistic approach to department cultures, an approach, of course, not limited to men but seen also among women. See also Patricia Bizzell, “In Praise of Folly.” Feminine Principles and American Rhetoric and Composition Studies. Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 1995. Graff’s teach-the-conflicts mantra partakes of cynicism when one studies his work to see any visible analysis of the rhetoric/composition revolutions in many English departments. See Professing Literature, a book that could not have been written without rhetoric/composition research but that erases it with a thoroughness that is remarkable. On other issues of invisibility, see Michele Wallace’s collection Invisibility Blues: From Pop to Theory. London: Verso, 1990, and Paul Gilroy’s The Black Atlantic. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1995.