book with me in order to study it between sessions. When a colleague saw it, she told me that a reviewer had suggested that she use it to historicize her own study of the personal writing assignments that are used today. *The Young Composers*, which Schultz herself labels as "our profession's first history of school-based writing instruction," is a groundbreaking text that reveals the true creativity of writing teachers, the innovations in the lower schools, and the complex origins of many teaching methods. In *Archive Fever*, Jacques Derrida notes the difficulty of reclaiming the past: "classical and extraordinary works move away from us at great speed, in a continually accelerated fashion. They burrow into the past at a distance more and more comparable to that which separates us from archaeological digs." Through her careful research, Schultz has helped to slow down that process as it pertains to writing instruction and has introduced a more nuanced vision of our past, one that should enrich our teaching practices.


Reviewed by Reed Way Dasenbrock, New Mexico State University

*After Rhetoric* is an unusual book. While the field (or fields) of rhetoric and composition have not quite settled into the postmodernist torpor that has characterized literary studies in the last decade, the field is certainly more stable and, in Kuhnian terms, less pre-paradigmatic than it was even a few years ago. This is not altogether a good thing: the health of any field depends in great measure on the supply of potential heretics, those willing to challenge the assumptions that others take for granted, even when (or especially when) those assumptions have the weight of institutions and traditions behind them.

While *After Rhetoric* doesn't exactly constitute theses nailed on a church door, it nonetheless is a courageous attempt to challenge directly a number of central beliefs in the field today. Yarbrough's central aim is to criticize what he calls "culturalism"—or the belief that we are divided into groups that share a culture and a language. Virtually everyone working in rhetoric and composition takes this view for granted and would not question it. In Yarbrough's view, not only is it incorrect to
assume that we must share a culture or language to communicate, we
cannot even be said to share such things when we do communicate. This
unquestioned belief—one that unites "culturalists" and "multiculturalists"
alike—is, in Yarbrough's view, the root of many of our problems.

This assumption would seem to be enough to take on, but Yarbrough
broadens his attack, as he links his view of culturalism to the disciplines
of rhetoric and philosophy and argues that each has worked from the start
with a fallacious conception of language. Not content just to criticize,
though, Yarbrough has an alternative conception of language that he puts
forward. In one of the few moves in this book I would do very differently,
he calls this conception "discourse studies," which doesn't, to my way of
thinking, have the specificity he intends it to have. The three heroes of his
discourse studies are Donald Davidson, Mikhail Bakhtin, and Michel
Meyer. No one has put these three theorists in conversation before, let
alone presented them as founders of a new field, and the profoundly
revisionary nature of the claims that Yarbrough makes for discourse
studies mark him as a bold thinker.

Of course, some heretics found new churches and others get annihi­
lated by the orthodoxy they confront. I hesitate to predict the fate of
Yarbrough's assault on composition orthodoxy, but I can declare that I
find its spirit refreshing and many (though by no means all) of its
arguments persuasive. I should declare myself an interested party here,
since I am, with Thomas Kent, one of the very few people to have
anticipated Yarbrough in advocating a role for Donald Davidson in
contemporary rhetoric, and my new book, which is being published
contemporaneously with this review, is also sharply critical of the
conventionalist position in literary theory that parallels the position that
Yarbrough attacks. The constellation of thinkers that Yarbrough aligns
with Davidson is quite different from the analytic tradition, and Yarbrough's
discourse studies is uniquely his own.

Having said that, I must ask one question: what is culturalism and why
does Yarbrough say so many terrible things about it? Culturalism is the
belief that "meaning and identity derive from the relationship of individu­
als (whether persons, things, concepts, or signs) to groups (whether
categories, classes, memberships, or systems)." In other words, by
culturalism Yarbrough means to include concepts generally associated
with structuralism (for example, that the meaning of a word exists because
of the place it holds in a diachronic system) and the more American set of
ideas associated with concepts such as interpretive or discourse commu­
nities—or, the notion that I speak the way I do because of the community
I belong to and the related notion that only fellow members of my community can completely understand me. In Yarbrough's view, culturalism is a mistake both in its monochrome and polychrome variants. He writes, "I think that if culturalism is foolish, multiculturalism is simply multi-foolish. The problem is not that (multi)culturalism recognizes a multiplicity of legitimate aims and values. Rather, the problem is that it considers languages and cultures to be internally coherent, therefore self-referential and incommensurable." One common mode of interpretation in contemporary culture is to explain (and usually criticize) a position expressed by an individual by referring to the group to which the individual belongs, the assumption being that the posited group membership explains what the individual says or thinks. For example, I have lost count of the times I have been told in the last two years that I think the way I do because I have now become an administrator—that is, a member of a particularly bizarre interpretive community. But to become an administrator is not at the same time to lose or shed the identity one has before becoming an administrator, since otherwise I would not be writing this review. Moreover, even the tiniest bit of experience of university administration shows that not all administrators think alike, otherwise no one in that particular community would ever disagree. We simply don't say or mean the things we say or mean because of the communities we might be descriptively said to belong to, since the discourse of a given community never has either the monistic nor the obligatory force this model presupposes.

If one accepts this critique of communitarian theories of meaning—or culturalism, in Yarbrough's terminology—then what follows is a vision of human discourse in which we are not tightly bound into sealed groups but instead we freely interact with members of other communities. It is this interaction that produces discourse. If we center our attention in this way on how we interact rather than on a description of the groups into which we can be said to be divided, then our interactions are more likely to be productive if only because we believe that they can be productive in a way foreclosed by the culturalist model. Yarbrough builds from this point to a critique of both the theory of rhetoric as conceived across the millennia and of composition as presently practiced and theorized in this country.

The problem with rhetoric, in Yarbrough's view, is that in accepting the assumption of culturalism (that is, that the discursive field is already defined), there is little the rhetor can do aside from seek to gain power over the audience. Yarbrough differentiates this power, which he calls "rhe-
torical force,” from what he calls “discursive power.” Understood as an ability to avoid using force, discursive power is the superior aim. The goal of discursive power is not to constitute a new community of those who are persuaded to join the rhetor in his or her beliefs; it is “to keep the conversation going, not to silence it, to proliferate differences, not erase them, to respond to challenges, not submit to them or vanquish them.” I like Yarbrough’s ideal as he describes it here, but I suspect that I am not the only one to find that he draws too sharp a dividing line between the rhetoric he criticizes as essentially a mode of stasis and the more productive, dynamic orientation towards discourse he advocates. I think he has pointed out something important and unfortunate about much rhetorical theory: its “willingness to accept previously defined discursive grounds” in a way that leads to a definition of the task of the rhetor as “mere audience accommodation.” It seems to me, however, that there has always been an important strain within rhetoric that is less easily captured by rhetorical theory, composed of smart—if not always systematic—insights into precisely the terrain Yarbrough wants his discourse studies to occupy. Rhetorical practice seems less vulnerable to Yarbrough’s critique than much rhetorical theory. For instance, I certainly would consider Machiavelli a practitioner of discourse studies as Yarbrough defines it, and I suspect others might wish to claim Cicero as well.

Yarbrough spends a final chapter taking on contemporary practice in composition. The implications of his discourse studies is clearly that discourse does not work in “any one, universal way, which is why neither [he] nor anyone else can formulate a general theory of discourse.” I accept this, but I have substantial reservations about the next step he takes, which is to claim that writing cannot be taught and that composition as we now teach it should be dropped from the curriculum. Thomas Kent came to a similar conclusion in his *Paralogic Rhetoric*, and in my review of his book I suggested that this was not a book we wanted to bring to the attention of any state legislators! This is to say that there are strong pragmatic concerns militating against adopting any such idea, and I think I can predict, as Etienne Gilson said about philosophy, that first-year composition will bury its own undertakers. However, self-interest is not the same as reasoned argumentation, and certainly one merit of Yarbrough’s modest proposal to do away with first-year composition is that it will force any reader to articulate reasons (beyond those of self-interest) why we shouldn’t follow his recommendation. My own position here is that although I share Yarbrough’s Davidsonian position that there can’t be a science of discourse, that doesn’t mean that there isn’t an art. Teaching the
The art of writing is possible even if there isn’t a science of discourse to teach. Although there may be no general rules for effective writing, there are certainly skills, habits, maxims, and rules of thumb that can be successfully imparted to students. We are dealing here with matters of craft, not science. Yarbrough helps to show why the teaching of composition is so difficult, but he doesn’t convince me that we shouldn’t try. I admire the courage of his argument, the power with which he criticizes entrenched theories and practices, and the learning he brings to the task. *After Rhetoric* is a book the field of rhetoric and composition should take very seriously, and Yarbrough’s unwillingness to accept previously defined discursive grounds certainly should keep the conversation going and make it more productive. Read this important book, but don’t cancel all your first-year composition sections just yet.

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