REVIEW:

THE RHETORICAL TRADITION AND MODERN WRITING

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When the Modern Language Association admits to an interest in teaching composition, one of two assumptions must be true. Either composition has become academically respectable, or it has become professionally profitable. Maybe both are true, now that the MLA has placed its lustrous imprimatur upon our once-lowly endeavor. Predictably, what the MLA has to offer in this collection of essays is strong in historical, philosophical overviews and weak in practical, hands-on advice. But is it healthy for us toilers in the field to step back briefly and survey our domain. And we can take wry solace in the thesis that underlines The Rhetorical Tradition and Modern Writing: rhetoric and literature need to be reunited, and it is literature that is offering its service to rhetoric.

The opening group of essays presses this need for reunion between the literature and composition camps of most English departments. Nineteenth-century Harvard and, especially, Professor Francis James Childs emerge as the villains in the split, while Quintilian is the hero. Quintilian perfected a curriculum with rhetoric at its heart and head, a rhetoric encompassing all linguistic arts, both practical and poetic. His syllabus looked back to the Greeks and forward to the Boylston Chair at Harvard—and there, in the mid-1800's, it stopped. Childs, appointed to teach both rhetoric and literature, neglected the first, elevated the second, and influenced most American colleges to follow suit. James Murphy, E. D. Hirsch, Jr., and Susan Miller all trace the roots of this divorce. Miller's essay most fully explains the classical curriculum in grammar, logic, and rhetoric, but all three
equally deplore the debilitating effect of the Harvard model upon modern literacy. And all agree that without an understanding of our professional history, we may not be able to draw together literature and rhetoric and once again recover "our authentic double vocation," as Hirsch puts it, with the two parts "validating and supporting each other" (p. 15).

James Kinneavy takes a more rigorous classicist stance. Literature, he points out, is not part of rhetoric, so there can be no true unity in our profession, except as a union of equals. For him, rhetoric is "the kind of discourse that is exemplified by political speeches, legal persuasion in court, religious sermons, [and] commercial advertising;" it excludes "most scientific writing, fictitious or poetic writing, or even informative news stories" (p. 20). Rhetoric, then, is the practical humanities study that deals with those human activities where certainty is impossible and persuasion is paramount. And until we once more teach both the production and the analysis of rhetorical prose, Kinneavy fears that American literacy will continue to decline.

Another divergent classicist's voice is heard in Virginia Steinhoff's paper. While most authors in this collection cite Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian as the founding fathers of rhetorical study, Steinhoff plumps for Plato. She regrets that the neatly organized analytical rhetoric of Aristotle has overshadowed the dialectical, ethical, implicit rhetoric that Plato offers in the *Phaedrus*. She admits that Plato's rhetoric is "frequently charged with obscurantism and impracticality"—and indeed, as she writes about "obliqueness of attack," "transcendent frame of reference," and "the ungivenness of the given" (p. 32), she graphically illustrates obscurantism. But bear with her. When she lists some lessons that teachers can learn from Socrates—"Profess less knowledge and sophistication than your students. Go barefoot whenever possible and try to get them to make fun of you. Enjoy all this" (p. 40)—she brings the only touch of humor to this sober-sided book. And she concludes with the plea that we pay some attention to Platonic indirectness and irony, "both as correctives to Aristotellean analysis when it appears to mount scientific claims that shift the responsibility of writing from the writer to a methodology without 'soul' and as a respite from the labor of teaching writing in a time when playfulness and artfulness are not perceived as serious pedagogical
duties” (p. 42).

As the history of rhetorical instruction is tracked through the post-Roman centuries, Michael Halloran and Merrill Whitburn reflect on the Plain Style—what it was under Cicero and still should be, what it has unfortunately been transformed into under Bishop Sprat and the Royal Academy. Edward Corbett explores the value to modern rhetoric instructors of John Locke’s philosophy and psychology. Gerald Mulderig shows how Alexander Bain’s psychological theories shaped his rhetoric, which in turn has shaped our composition pedagogy. Winifred Horner describes writing courses in 19th-century Scottish universities—courses that, to our minds, sound surprisingly modern. In a similar vein, Nan Johnson discusses the teaching practices of three 19th-century American professors who tried to introduce a humane alternative to the prevalent skills-management rhetoric of Campbell, Blair, and Whately. And Donald Stewart once again deplores the baleful sway of Harvard’s Child’s, overpowering the beneficial insights of Michigan’s Fred Newton Scott. Childs turned English departments into citadels of literary scholarship. Scott, himself a literary scholar, recognized the vital role of rhetoric in English education. Childs, of course, won; and we are only now returning to Scott to study his philosophic and linguistic bases of composition.

The nineteenth-century rhetoricians who receive praise in these essays are the ones who viewed composition as a humanistic, organic process in which discovery leads to growth. It is to these older rhetoricians that Richard Young tries to connect modern theories of rhetoric in the book’s concluding essay. This instantly-anthologized piece (it has now appeared in at least three books or journals since 1980) is the book’s main concession to present-day rhetorical ideas. Young stresses invention, heuristics, and process in what he terms the “new rhetoric,” a school that ideally would reconcile the neo-romantics, those who see composition as mysterious and uncontrollable, creative and intuitive, and the neo-classicists, those who try to induce and channel, by “conscious, directed action,” the kind of discovery that leads to good writing.

Throughout the book, the historical exemplars of good and bad rhetoric are selected and colored by this modern predilection
for process. A second motif runs through the twelve essays: the necessity of historical knowledge. If we don’t know where we come from, we can’t know where we are, nor where we ought to go. And as Young says, “we have no way of knowing what is genuinely new, what is redundant, what is promising, what has been tried before and found wanting” (p. v). Yet the two motifs can seem at times somehow contradictory. In Scottish universities a century ago, a democratic admissions policy opened the doors to ill-prepared youths who lacked the classical training of their English public-school counterparts. To teach these students acceptable writing skills, the rhetoric professors devised frequent writing assignments, laboratory-style “process” classes, peer critiques, individual conferences—all the pedagogical methods that we have only recently “discovered” as we tackle the same problem students. And what do we learn from history? It didn’t work. Scottish universities returned to stiff entrance exams and elitism, abandoning the attempt at “democratic and humanistic general education” (p. 94). Should we assume, then, that modern rhetoric “has been tried and found wanting?” The lessons of history can be double-edged.

Because the book provokes questions of this nature, questions we would never consider were we ignorant of our rhetorical traditions, it is worth reading. It offers few answers and no methodologies. But it is, in its whole, an instructive model of practical rhetoric—persuasion where certainty cannot exist.

The book is carefully indexed. Although I would prefer proper footnotes, on the bottoms of pages, the notes are at least gathered after each essay and not lumped inconveniently at the end of the volume. The one missing apparatus is a listing of contributors with their provenances. True, many of the names are familiar to students of rhetoric, but it would be helpful to be given some information on the authors’ backgrounds and affiliations.

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NOTE

¹ Edited by James J. Murphy (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1982, vii + 149 pp.).