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## Romance and Rhythm in the Teaching of Writing

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Some years ago, in an essay entitled "Paradigms and Problems: Needed Research in Rhetorical Invention," Richard Young argued that the discipline—composition studies—had reached a stage of crisis. While the discipline "shared a remarkably stable system of beliefs, a system that Daniel Fogarty has called 'current traditional rhetoric,'" the paradigm had been repeatedly attacked for its failure to provide effective instruction in the art of invention.<sup>1</sup> Elbert Harrington, for example, notes in "A Modern Approach to Invention" that "Most teachers know that rhetoric has always lost life and respect to the degree that invention has not had a significant and meaningful role."<sup>2</sup> From another perspective, Wayne Booth pointed out at the Dartmouth Conference the "prevailing tendency to minimize the need for systematic knowledge, the value of techniques of analysis . . . or in general the importance of thinking."<sup>3</sup>

As Young has argued, the overt features of current traditional rhetoric are familiar enough: emphasis "on the composed product, instead of on the composing process," an emphasis that grew out of the assumption that "There is essentially one process of writing that serves all writers"<sup>4</sup> in all situations, despite differences that may inhere in their aims, intents, audiences, genre, voice, and the like. Leveling the complexity of language and denying the dialectical process between writer, audience, reality, and language that produces meaning, current traditionalists perceive composing as essentially linear. Planning precedes composing. What is more, Young notes the emphasis upon an analysis of "discourse into words, sentences, and paragraphs; the classification of discourse into description, narration, exposition, and argument; the strong concern with usage (syntax, spelling, punctuation) and with style (economy, clarity, emphasis) . . ."<sup>5</sup>

With its stress on the natural powers of the mind, the current traditionalists adopted the vitalist principles of the Romantics, thus suggesting the uniqueness of the creative act and, in a sense, repudiating the possibility of teaching writing. "What is involved in being A Writer is 'talent' or 'genius,'" Roger Sale tells us in his book *On Writing*. Perhaps, he continues, it's "just having 'a way' with words . . . it cannot be taught as a skill by

English teachers."<sup>6</sup> Adopting instead the formalist principles of the new critics, teachers operating in the current traditional paradigm reduce the teaching of writing to a critical study of the composed product. Finally, though recognizing the importance of invention, adherents to current traditional rhetoric argue that the subject of rhetoric is the presentation of ideas, hence the emphasis upon arrangement and style, and that "original inquiry, the development of new knowledge," belongs to the domain of other disciplines.<sup>7</sup>

The discipline's response to crisis—in the form of both research and teaching—has been to strengthen the connection between thinking and writing, to provide systematic procedures for discovering new knowledge and making analyses. We have learned that there is no "monolithic process of writing,"<sup>8</sup> that audience, purpose, genre all shape the way we approach a particular writing task. While there may be shared features in the ways that we write, the issue of difference is crucial in our understanding of process. Composing style is like any other rhetorical choice we make, constrained by the variables of a rhetorical situation. We have learned that the "rhythms of writing are uneven," as Janet Emig puts it, that we not only "plan, draft, and revise, but also revise, plan, and then write."<sup>9</sup> We have come to see that knowledge results from a "transaction between people, in language, restricted to and limited by" what John Gage describes as the "assent of the participants and the conventions of language."<sup>10</sup> The process of writing, then, can be "enhanced by working in, and with, a group of writers . . . who give vital response."<sup>11</sup> The movement toward collaborative learning, where reciprocity is an integral part of a group setting, and furnishes a driving force to learn, re-defines the way we teach writing, if only to enable us to show how writing works in context, as opposed to talking about writing out of context.

The "dynamics of conceptualizing" and "creative discovery" is for many a distinctive feature of what we term the new rhetoric.<sup>12</sup> Together, the movement toward collaborative learning with the understanding that writing is a process of discovery forces teachers to take a step back and allow students to take responsibility for their own writing. In turn, teachers become partners in the composing process, sharing their own attempts to produce a piece of writing, offering ways to invent, plan, draft, or revise, or simply listening to another writer work through a problem in writing. We can aid writers by helping them to imagine an audience, form intentions, and realize those intentions. By offering choices, instead of "demanding writing formulated according to the [teacher's] authority," we can enable writers to take an active role in learning, empowering them to teach themselves to write.<sup>13</sup> In this way, students develop what Jerome Bruner describes as a competence, an ability to make learning one's own, to see that the "value of information is not simply in getting it,"<sup>14</sup> but in being able to use that information to effect change. To make learning the student's own enables that student to go beyond the given, to generate ideas that can be measured against experience and used to develop "reasonable hypotheses"<sup>15</sup> independent of instruction. The result is a rhetoric of action, of performance, not merely a mechanistic skill concerned with the presentation of ideas.

Yet, our search no longer appears to concentrate on determining how to respond to an older rhetoric—though we must still unravel the mystery of whether writing can be taught and how—but upon finding some coherent images of the writing classroom. Knoblauch and Brannon, for example, implore teachers of writing to develop a theory of teaching in a philosophical context. It's important, they tell us, that we become "conscious of

the philosophical dimension" of our "work because nothing short of that consciousness will make instruction sensible and deliberate, the result of knowledge, not folklore, and of design, not just custom or accident."<sup>16</sup> Methods derive from differing perspectives and, importantly, they note that the epistemological assumptions that circumscribe a particular method may often be opposed rather than complementary. Consequently, it cannot be assumed that any one "teaching practice can be joined with any other without affecting the coherence or quality of instruction."<sup>17</sup> In his review of *Rhetorical Traditions and the Teaching of Writing*, John Gage asserts that a coherent image of the classroom can be wrought if teaching techniques assume an inherent connection "between the act of knowing and the act of writing," at the same time suggesting that this may not be the case in current teaching practice.<sup>18</sup> Our response to crisis has not been entirely homogenous. James Berlin puts the problem another way, though, he too, believes that a coherent theory of instruction is informed by epistemological concerns. "To teach writing is to argue for a version of reality, and the best way of knowing and communicating it."<sup>19</sup> Rhetorical theories differ in the way writer, audience, language, and reality are conceived but, more importantly, they differ in the way we conceive of their relationship.

Whereas our theoretical knowledge about current traditional rhetoric had been tacit, thus in part explaining its dominance and stability, Berlin, Knoblauch and Brannon, and Gage question the assumptions that we have adopted in teaching a process rhetoric. Recognizing that our attempts at teaching process may be as ritualistic as any of the principles that inhere in an older rhetoric, they force us to examine the aims of teaching writing and how to best achieve those aims. We need to look at the suppositions that give rise to our methods, suppositions that cause us to prefer doing things one way and not another. Indeed, epistemological concerns circumscribe a theory of rhetoric, but this is only part of the picture which also includes political, social, and aesthetic considerations. Equally important, we can create a coherent image in the classroom by establishing a rhythm that grows out of what Alfred North Whitehead calls "romance" in *The Aims of Education* and that follows the patterns of our students' learning.<sup>20</sup> Rhythmic progress embodies intellectual ferment — a process of discovery, a process of shaping questions, of noticing. Ferment that grows in this stage of romance leads to understanding in a more precise stage of analysis and finally to what I termed earlier, a competence in learning that enables a writer to move beyond the known, to seek alternatives, to effect change.

In the remainder of this article, I want to examine two responses to current traditional rhetoric — the new romantics and the new classicists — "two apparently irreconcilable positions." In fact, Richard Young has remarked that "the difference between them is as important theoretically and pedagogically as the difference between the new and the older rhetoric."<sup>21</sup> In part, such an examination will help to make more specific the way our discipline has reacted to crisis. And, in part, I want to argue that these two positions may not be as irreconcilable as Young asserts, not if in our attempts to create a coherent image we establish a rhythm that follows the patterns of our students' learning, a movement from romance to competence.

Indeed, they may be complementary; in the new romantics, we see the romance of discovery, while in the new classicists we see the introduction of a formal art of invention that aids discovery through systematic heuristic procedures. Each feeds the other in the search for fresh possibilities of meaning in writing.

Together, these two rhetorical traditions can provide a base for a rhythm of instruction, balancing the freedom and discipline that can help make writing prevail, this despite seemingly conflicting epistemologies and responses to the question of whether or not writing can be taught. This is an issue raised by our suspicion that an earlier presentational rhetoric could not cultivate the skills that would lead to effective composing.

This older rhetoric embodies a set of norms about the conventions of language, excluding the process of origination, in part because the discovery of new knowledge belongs within the realm of disciplines outside of rhetoric and, in part, because the work of origination should be left to the individual. All that can be taught is a skill, the performance of which "involves a series of set, repeatable steps."<sup>22</sup> Part of writing is skill, craft, mechanical learning, but writing also consists of art, which for the new romantics exists in the realm of mystery. Indeed, it is a process, "something which shows continuous change in time like growth in organic nature."<sup>23</sup>

Reaffirming the vitalist position of the old romanticism, the new romantics maintain that the "composing process is, or should be, relatively free of deliberate control, that intellect is no better guide to understanding reality than nonlogical processes are, and that the act of composing is a kind of mysterious growth fed by what Henry James called 'the deep well of unconscious cerebration.'"<sup>24</sup> Above all, this response to current traditional rhetoric insists on the primacy of discovery, self-actualization that enables the individual to mediate his or her world, and upon the imagination. Exploration of ideas displaces the formalist principles that once lay at the heart of composition instruction.

Yet, if composing is predicated upon the workings of the imagination — a process that does not involve a series of set, repeatable steps — what do we teach? William Coles asserts in *The Plural I* that ". . . the teaching of writing as writing is the teaching of writing as art. When writing is not taught as art, as more than a craft or a skill, it is not writing that is being taught, but something else . . . On the other hand, art because it is art, cannot be taught."<sup>25</sup> In *On Writing*, Roger Sale shifts the emphasis of the problem away from what can be taught to the relationship between student and teacher. "When [the] relationship is one of real question, real answer, and real possibility, writing cannot be taught at all. But it can be learned."<sup>26</sup> We can set up enabling situations, allowing students to take an active role in learning, at times playing the principal role in the process of discovery.

Coles, for example, establishes a community of writers in which both students and teacher write, each swept into a competence required by the setting of the group. Though Coles poses questions and problems, at times taking the role of master amidst his apprentices, the questions are genuine — there are no good simple answers, but good complex ones. They are questions that force students to look more closely at a subject, to find a suitable voice for their writing, to know who they are as they confront a subject for writing: "Where and how with this problem do you locate yourself? To what extent and in what ways is that self definable in language? What is this self to judge from the language shaping it? What has this self to do with you?"<sup>27</sup> In this community of writers, students develop a critical consciousness by entertaining conflicting views about seemingly obvious subjects like nonsense and advice, confronting contradictions head-on, and then taking responsibility for their own work. Both teacher and student enter into collaborative inquiry, at times exchanging roles, each growing. What is more, students begin to see that language serves many functions, pursues many

aims, and employs many voices. By writing in a social context, where they do not have to imagine an audience or create fictional contexts or aims, they become aware of the fact that what one has written requires that one hear it, listen to it, that writing is a part of a transaction with another who will respond in some way. Meaning grows out of this relationship, that is out of a dialectical process in which writer and reader interact in a world mediated by language. As a result, the act of writing creates a new awareness about the nature and powers of language, that language has the power to shape a reader's perceptions, to create change in both the writer and her world. In the end, students internalize the narrative of inquiry that occurs so that the students can, as Jerome Bruner puts it, "run off the narrative"<sup>28</sup> on their own.

We might think of this community as a sort of "play-community,"<sup>29</sup> an exceptional situation where writers share something that is important — their work — and, in a sense mutually withdraw from a traditional learning situation, rejecting the usual norms. Here we can "distill the more playful elements" of composing and set up a situation that allows writers to engage in "frivolous creative interchange" and work toward giving shape to "half-formed impressions."<sup>30</sup> This is the stage of romance, a process of discovery, of shaping questions, of ferment that is triggered by an intrinsic need to come to grips with curiosity or puzzlement that grows out of a particular subject matter.

As teachers who "are no longer to be purveyors of information about the craft of writing . . . [but] designers of occasions that stimulate the creative process,"<sup>31</sup> we can allow students to see for themselves, to explore connections and possibilities embedded in a text or in experience and allow this stage of romance to run its course. It is this stage of intellectual ferment, where students begin to make learning their own, that makes comprehension and understanding possible in later stages. It is also at this stage that students begin to see themselves as writers as they read their drafts aloud, interrupt, evaluate, criticize, establishing roles that they would not ordinarily play in a traditional classroom setting. Whether as reader, writer, critic, or teacher, students adopt specialized roles that interlock in a community of learning, where they can fit their efforts into a creative enterprise.<sup>32</sup> They begin to imagine themselves as writers writing.

Through "play," writers can take risks that are not ordinarily possible in a traditional classroom setting and move from familiar havens to ideas that are both fresh and informing. Yet, there is a time for pushing on in order to know a subject more precisely. We need to balance frivolous interchange with the high seriousness that characterizes any game, for to sustain play there must be an element of tension and uncertainty that writers attempt to resolve. The writer seeks to make meaning congruent with intention, to make a reader understand. Like the player, he wants something "to go," "to come off." For Johan Huizinga, author of *Homo Ludens*, "It is this element of tension and solution that governs" the game.<sup>33</sup> Thus, the rhythm of learning also means discovering how to impose a workable kind of form on various kinds of information. I don't suggest that we necessarily move from romance to a more precise stage of analysis in a linear fashion. Instead, each stage will inform the other, at times subordinate, at others more predominant. Moreover, this does not mean that we impose the formalist principles that inhere in current traditional rhetoric, but that we introduce more systematic procedures of inquiry that we find in what Richard Young calls Coles' "tough-minded probing" and in new classicist pedagogy.

Although the creative process may seem "mysterious and beyond analysis," new classicist pedagogy is predicated upon the

belief that the process of origination has certain "generic features," that some "aspects of the creative process can be taught."<sup>34</sup> Richard Young describes the process in this way, acknowledging that the conception of the creative process in tagmemic rhetoric derives from the literature on problem solving and creativity, in particular from the work of Graham Wallas, John Dewey, George Miller, and Leon Festinger. I have sprinkled the terminology of rhythm and romance in this summary in order to suggest the complementary features of the new romantics and the new classicists.

The process begins with a felt difficulty, confusion, or puzzlement — a stage of romance. If the feeling persists, "an effort is made to understand its origins, to formulate it as a problem, to explore" whatever may be associated with the problem (p. 137). We begin to analyze the parts of the problem, draw connections, and get to know the fundamental details in this stage of precision, a stage that is fed by romance and which, in turn, feeds this initial stage of intellectual ferment. "This exploratory activity," Young tells us, "often leads to the intuition of one or more possible solutions that are evaluated for adequacy. If one of these solutions proves adequate, then the process is complete" (p. 137). However, at times inquiry will lead to failure, so that attempts to solve the problem can be abandoned. Yet, the process can be triggered again by renewed attempts to come to grips with the problem, the relevant information, and alternative solutions. The discipline of precision can be abandoned in favor of the freedom of romance and the rhythm of learning will run its course, the cycle resumed.

"Interspersed" in the creative process "are periods of unconscious activity, most notably between the exploration of problematic data and the intuition of possible solutions" (p. 137). Exploration can be carried out efficiently and deliberately, but the process depends on a dialectical relationship between reason and imagination. The facts of romance disclose ideas with possibilities of significance and, while these ideas are only vaguely apprehended in the early stages of discovery, subsequent exploration and analysis are barren without this initial stage.

As teachers, we can help writers gain control over the creative process, at the same time providing them with the freedom to explore ideas, to act and see for themselves. Not every phase of the process can be taught; but, we can help them to develop a competence that enables them to define, explore, and solve problems, understanding the principles of problem solving and of composing that will be applicable in different contexts. We can create arenas of thought that induce learning and free writers from the passive stance they ordinarily take in writing. In a community where they know they can take risks, where they write freely to discover meaning, at times wandering along bypaths, they can assert their expertise and assume the responsibility that belongs to them. At the same time, recognizing the need to impose a workable kind of form on the creative process, we can teach more than craft, more than a mystery.

Specifically, we can teach heuristic reasoning which, for Polya, a mathematician and author of *How to Solve It*, "is reasoning not regarded as final and strict but as provisional and plausible only, whose purpose is to discover the solution of the present problem."<sup>35</sup> Crucial here is Polya's emphasis upon the provisional nature of heuristics; this sort of reasoning prepares the mind for discovery, but does not guarantee that a writer or problem-solver will find a solution. Instead, "a heuristic procedure provides a series of questions whose results are provisional" (p. 135). The art of invention, as it is conceived by the new classicists, aids in formulating and analyzing problems, for examining the relevant

information in search of solutions, and for testing those solutions.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, the art is designed to help a writer "retrieve information already known . . . and discover new concepts and ordering principles."<sup>37</sup> While we might consider structured heuristic procedures as mechanical, perhaps as ritualistic as any formalist rhetoric, we should keep in mind the provisional nature of heuristics. Their use depends upon intuition, imagination, the knowledge a writer brings to a writing task, motive, and context.

Clearly, play is a function of heuristics, again enabling writers to prepare the mind for discovery and to become aware of the information they do not possess but usually can acquire. The attempt "to create orderly form," Huizinga tells us in *Homo Ludens*, "animates play in all its aspects. The words we use to denote the element of play belong for the most part to aesthetics, terms with which we try to describe the effects of beauty: tension, contrast, poise, balance, variation, solution, resolution . . ."<sup>38</sup> Consequently, we might see play as a kind of problem-solving activity. As in art, writers try to create orderly form by resolving tension, i.e. dissonance, a clash of values. We seek to resolve the tension between what we know and what we need to know. Most notably, the terms variation, contrast, solution, and resolution suggest the very nature of heuristics. It is this very element of play that helps writers search for new understanding by examining a subject from multiple perspectives and, in turn, to look critically at emergent meaning. Play helps writers move beyond the known, but requisite to the kind of play I have in mind is that writers define a problem that needs to be solved. Otherwise, play turns into endless wandering, heuristic excess baggage. By exploring the unknown, writers discover fresh possibilities of meaning that can lead to real communication, if we recognize that the whole purpose of communication is to disclose meaning that is not entirely predictable.

While heuristics do impose order—setting up parameters for and guiding inquiry—discovery procedures need not be rule-governed, nor should their use be confined to retrieving stored information. Their limitation falls on writers and the extent to which writers can generate probing questions. By helping writers generate a proliferation of choices, writers can sustain search and liberate themselves from a situation that may demand fairly predictable solutions.

We can have faith in the "powerful effects that come from permitting . . . student[s] to put things together" for themselves, that they will be swept into a competence required by the setting of a group.<sup>39</sup> We can teach students to interpret experience by providing ways to conduct inquiry and, in particular, to ask questions that make inquiry purposeful. By internalizing the narrative of discovery, students can develop an awareness of alternatives and develop an "as if" attitude toward these alternatives. They can go beyond the given to generate additional ideas that can be measured against experience and be used to develop reasonable hypotheses. Yet, in creating enabling situations, we can also increase the range, subtlety, and efficiency of exploration in a pattern of instruction that recognizes the need for both romance and precision in the creative process.

Further, if we integrate romance and precision, we invite students to participate in the rich possibilities of language, and importantly, address the issue of difference that Jack Selzer pinpoints in an article entitled, "Exploring Options in Composing." Here he argues that situation dictates composing habits as much as any other rhetorical choice we make, so that we should give students new ways to compose and "introduce new overall composing sequences and various inventing, arranging, and revising

tactics."<sup>40</sup> We can provide students with a repertoire of strategies that they can use in different situations and that are compatible with their level of development.

Let me make one final point. Growth occurs through talking with and listening to other writers, seeing that writing is deliberate and strategic, not governed by a set of rules. Growth in writing also occurs when we allow our students to immerse themselves in a particular subject, developing a strong sense of voice, authority, and responsibility that emerge from experience.<sup>41</sup>

Immersion may be the best word to describe a writer's relationship to his or her work. In a recent interview, John McPhee said that he "discovered that you've got to understand a lot to even write a little bit,"<sup>42</sup> a comment I think provides us with a sense that we need to immerse writers in the act of writing for themselves, for others, to see how language works in context, where it counts—with people. By developing a rhythm of instruction that recognizes the need to integrate romance and precision in the creative process, then, we can enable students to immerse themselves in their writing. In practical terms, this means that students should be allowed to work on essays for long periods of time—a full term—researching their ideas in the library and interviewing those who are most informed about the subject the student seeks information about. They can develop portfolios of writing, drafting, and revising their work throughout a given term. Finally, we should enable students to make writing their own, to take an active role in learning and to control the rhythm of their learning that begins with the romance of discovery.

#### References

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- <sup>2</sup>Elbert Harrington, "A Modern Approach to Invention," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 48 (December 1962), 373.
- <sup>3</sup>Quoted in "Paradigms and Problems," p. 34.
- <sup>4</sup>Janet Emig, "Non-Magical Thinking: Presenting Writing Developmentally in Schools," in *The Web of Meaning*. ed. Dixie Goswami and Maureen Butler (Upper Montclair, N.J.: Boynton/Cook Publishers, Inc., 1983), 140.
- <sup>5</sup>Young, p. 31.
- <sup>6</sup>Roger Sale, *On Writing* (New York: Random House, 1970), 17.
- <sup>7</sup>Young, p. 32.
- <sup>8</sup>Emig, p. 140.
- <sup>9</sup>Emig, pp. 140-41.
- <sup>10</sup>John Gage, "The 2000 Year-Old Straw Man," a review of Knoblauch's and Brannon's *Rhetorical Traditions and The Teaching of Writing*, in *Rhetoric Review*, 3 (September 1984), 100.
- <sup>11</sup>Emig, p. 141.
- <sup>12</sup>Richard E. Young, "Concepts of Art and the Teaching of Writing," in *The Rhetorical Tradition and Modern Writing*. ed. James J. Murphy (New York: MLA, 1982), 132.
- <sup>13</sup>Tilly and John Warnock, "Liberatory Writing Centers: Restoring Authority to Writers," in *Writing Centers: Theory and Administration*. ed. Gary A. Olson. (Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1985), 18.