enculturation

Art and Disciplinarity

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print version

Given the extent to which *Enculturation*'s discussion of relationships between "rhetoric" and "composition" recapitulates ancient disputes over rhetoric's province, the debate itself would seem to confirm our field's relationship to Western rhetorical traditions. Thus, I am compelled to disagree gently with Christine Farris's proposition that the field's early invocation of rhetorical history and theory was driven by the desire for a "disciplinary pedigree rhetoric could provide composition." While no argument, academic or public, escapes the circulation of cultural capital, I would maintain that rhetorical theory and history offered two things to teachers and scholars in the 60s and early 70s. It provided answers to questions concerning their own practices, which produced theories that helped enrich and revise those practices. It also offered an explanatory paradigm that could express the complexities of their practices and domains of inquiry in an institutional context that, for the most part, had made both "unrepresentable."

One element of that tradition whose significance, I believe, has been underestimated is the classical concept of "art," invoked by Richard Young and Janice Lauer. I do not mean to suggest that the relationship between Western rhetorical traditions and the field we now occupy (whether we call it "composition studies" or some other name) is either direct or manufactured. For much the same reason as these scholars, I point to art because it undermines a broad set of institutional binaries, not only the poetics/rhetoric opposition (and its related binaries of the aesthetic/the instrumental, creativity/rules) but also, especially for the purposes of our conversation, the opposition between subject matter and skill.

Binary oppositions are vexing because they predetermine modes of representation. As a means of "escaping" these binaries, I offer a thumbnail model for analyzing this disciplinary debate, pieced together from the work of Barbara Herrnstein Smith and Thomas Kuhn.[1] A discipline is created and stabilized, I suggest, by three elements:

1. Constituencies: those who participate in disciplinary communities.
2. Exemplars: what a discipline "studies." They are related to Kuhnian "paradigms," which he describes as "concrete puzzle-solutions." Exemplars in the humanities (literary studies, in particular) may be texts; they help define "subject matter," and they exist in a mutually constitutive relationship with the next element.
3. Methodologies/practices: strategies used to "explore" exemplars.

The relationship between methodologies and exemplars is mutually

constitutive, indeed, somewhat tautological. A methodology helps solve a problem in, or asks a question about, an exemplar; and an exemplar embodies solutions and answers. Conflicts concerning literary canons are contests over the choice and character of the exemplars that define the discipline. While exemplars in the humanities may be particularly well defined in the form of texts, the methodologies that secure them can range widely from the tacit to the explicit. One example of an explicit methodology is Roman Jakobson's formalist analysis, which consists in determining the conceptual oppositions that are (by this theory) the source of a poem's form. This methodology reflected modernist assumptions about meaning, context, and form; and, in keeping with the tautological character of exemplars and methodologies, it also privileged and thus secured lyric poetry as important disciplinary content (or subject matter) in literary studies.

Many humanistic traditions have fostered far less explicit methodologies for securing exemplars. Kuhn observes that a paradigm as a "puzzle solution" can "replace explicit rules" to secure the stability of a discipline (175). Especially disciplinary traditions that privilege "taste" depend on the habituation (or enculturation) of constituencies to recognize an exemplar's "inherent" truth and/or beauty. This interpretive stability is thus achieved by maintaining the homogeneity of the constituency, by both controlling access and thoroughly training new "entrants" to embody the community's values and practices. While the relationship between methodologies and exemplars is variable, and thus ambiguous, the distinction, I think, is worth making because it discloses what a disciplinary community believes can be assumed, habituated, and taught.

From this perspective, art as a concept and rhetoric as a practice raise a number of questions that may help to explain the complexity of the rhetoric/composition debate. What are our exemplars? Are they texts, practices, or both? What are our methodologies? Are they strategies for understanding texts, heuristics for producing them, or both?[2]

Though Young did not use the terms "exemplar" and "methodology," his 1982 "Concepts of Art and the Teaching of Writing" is largely a comparison of John Genung's and Aristotle's notions of rhetoric's exemplars and methodologies. By Young's account, Genung's concept of rhetoric is basically belletristic, structured by the binary opposition of creativity to skill, which Genung describes as "mechanics." Rhetoric, on the other hand, is "literature in the making," according to Genung, "concerned, as real authorship must be, not with a mere grammatical apparatus or with Huxley's logic engine, but with the whole man, his outfit of conviction and emotion, imagination and will, translating himself, as it were into a vital and ordered utterance" (in Young 130). Thus, rhetoric's "exemplar" is the creative spirit, the source of the literary canon without being strictly equivalent to it.

The methodologies (or practices) franchised by Genung are found at two extremes of the trivial and the sublime. In keeping with the belletristic tradition of taste, Genung maintains that what is most important about creativity cannot be made explicit by way of teachable methodologies or

practices: "the work of origination must be left to the writer himself [*sic*]" (in Young 130). Rhetoric may "treat of those mental habits and powers which give firmness and system to his [the writer's] suggestive faculty" (in Young 130-31). In other words, accounts or theories of creativity may be within the province of rhetoric to the extent that they affirm and reproduce literary values. Knowledge that more directly enables discourse production is restricted to rules, in the domain of "skills." Thus, the "subject matter" of rhetoric remains sublime to the extent that it is literary; its methodology, on the other hand, is trivial to the extent that it is explicit.

Young's discussion of Aristotle's concept of art has been widely, and fairly, interpreted as a critique of romantic theories of composing and a rationale for tagmemic heuristics. But his analysis is also an argument for a far more complicated notion of rhetoric's exemplar. Young references Aristotle's discussion of art in the *Metaphysics*, which grounds artistic principles in "experience" (or successful practice). Aristotle maintains that the power to "criticize or uphold an argument, to defend themselves or accuse" is something that "all men [*sic*]" do (in Young 134); at the same time, all people are not equally effective. Art explains why "some attain their end by familiarity and others by chance"(in Young 134). Though Young drew on John L. Freese's 1926 translation of Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, Kennedy's 1991 version casts more light on Aristotle's concept of rhetorical art: "Now among the general public, some do these things randomly and others through an ability acquired by habit, but since both ways are possible, it is clear that it would also be possible to do the same by [following] a path; for it is possible to observe the cause why some succeed by habit and others accidentally, and all would at once agree that such observation is the activity of an art" (1354a). Those who attain their end by chance possess what we have come to call a "knack"; they can neither articulate principles nor offer an account that explains how and why their performance is successful. In contrast, an art is the product of inductive reasoning, based on the observation of successful performance. Art is not a necessary condition of successful performance, but neither is it reducible to rules that contrast with creativity. [3]

In these terms, rhetoric's exemplars are defined by practices that can hardly be other than social. Rhetorical art is calibrated to performances that change over time, and its principles become "mechanical" skills only when they are extricated from temporal contexts. In other words, by Young's and Aristotle's definitions, arts must always be in the process of being revised. Rhetoric has "subject matter" in the conventional sense only to the extent that as an art it restricts its focus to specific practices. To the extent that social practices are dynamic, however, even a restricted focus would not produce the kind of stable subject matter we identify with traditional disciplines.

The attempt to determine an exemplar for rhetoric appears throughout *Enculturation*'s discussion of rhetoric and composition, bearing witness to the shaping force of some of the same oppositions that guided Genung's notion of rhetoric. Frequently, "composition" stands in for "skill," whereas "rhetoric" is identified with subject matter or disciplinary

content. The discussions of Christine Farris and Krista Ratcliffe suggest that these oppositions have special force in the institution of first-year writing. Indeed, first-year writing would appear to be defined by the reduction of the study of discourse practices to the level of "skill", a reduction that would seem to both a symptom and cause of excising the study of discourse from social practices. When this happens, in the context and terms of the institution as it is, the subject matter of rhetoric, more or less, disappears. Farris says as much in the following observation: "Hope for rhetoric can lie beyond the first-year English composition course; concepts like rhetorical situation and genre start to make sense when students in writing-intensive courses examine how other disciplines and professions engage in specialized practices." She does not uncritically accept this institutional "differend," pointing to efforts to redefine the province of discourse studies by Debra Dew and David Russell. As Farris notes, Dew has suggested that composition be "retooled as 'rhetoric and writing studies,' a 'disciplinary content' course," and Russell has argued that writing courses take as their subject "'the role of writing in human activities.'" On the whole, however, Farris's analysis points to the conceptual and institutional obstacles to dismantling the subject matter/skill opposition.

Ratcliffe and Farris both point to the problems and possibilities raised by identifying discourse studies with cultural studies. To the extent that this identification redefines the focus of discourse studies as "how language constructs rather than mirrors experience," as Farris puts it, the discipline is taking social practices as its exemplar. She maintains that this redefinition of discourse studies "makes possible something other than the policing of error and the cultivation of taste." However, Farris points to the persistence of the subject matter/skill opposition in describing challenges in the first-year writing program at Indiana University, one of which is the concern "that ideological critique not become the 'content' that must be delivered back undamaged." Similarly, Ratcliff observes that "without a presence of rhetorical theory, a cultural studies writing pedagogy can too easily devolve into a content-only course."[4]

It may be telling that the one voice in this discussion who has argued for abolishing "freshman composition" probably holds a perspective that is most consistent with the concept of art. Sharon Crowley maintains that the defining characteristic of rhetoric is that it gives "a central place to the systematic discovery and investigation of the available arguments in a given situation." Though at times Crowley would seem to "objectify" invention as disciplinary content or subject matter, this tendency is mitigated by the two words "given situation." As long as rhetoric is concerned with "given situations," it is focusing on the kind of dynamic social practices that distinguish art.[5]

At base, the concept of art is relatively simple: it is concerned with determining the generic features of social practices in order to engage those practices. From this perspective, the rhetoric/composition distinction has relatively little meaning, for however either term is defined it may be the subject of art if it is related to social practices. I do not mean to set up art as a kind of orthodoxy against which other

interpretations of rhetoric/composition should be evaluated. I do suggest that the concept of art may redefine, or at least productively complicate, some of the terms that have determined our attempts to interrogate and explain the distinction between rhetoric and composition.

Notes

1. See Herrnstein Smith's *Contingencies of Value* and Kuhn's "Postscript" to the 2nd edition of *Structure of Scientific Revolution*. (Back)

2. For a discussion of the related hermeneutic/heuristic binary, see Arabella Lyon. For an historical perspective on the concept of art, see *Rhetoric Reclaimed: Aristotle and the Liberal Arts Tradition*. (Back)

3. Young argues that Aristotle's concept of art as generalizations based on repeated features of performance provides both a model and rationale for the notion that "the creative process has generic features" (136). To determine these features in order to enable performance is to construct a heuristic, which Young defines as "an explicit strategy for effective guessing" that is distinct from a "rule-governed procedure . . . carried out consciously and mechanically . . . [that] always yields a correct result" (135). (Back)

4. Ratcliff then invokes Bruce McComiskey's discussion of cultural studies heuristics as a corrective to this orientation. (Back)

5. For an example of rhetorical art, see Crowley's and Hawhee's *Ancient Rhetorics*, especially Chapter 4. (Back)

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