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PERELMAN AS EDUCATIONAL FACILITATOR: THE REALM OF RHETORIC AND THE ACQUISITION OF RATIONAL DISCOURSE

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Abstract:

The paper approaches current problems pertaining to university students' written and spoken communication by suggesting how thought and expression are rhetorical in nature. It then proposes that ideas in Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca's *The New Rhetoric*, and Perelman's *The Realm of Rhetoric*, are consistent with the view presented and suggests that they can serve as a means of developing the capacity for reasoned communication through an emphasis on the individual student's relation to discourse practices and communities.

Like other disciplines in the human sciences, composition studies has for some time been going through reflection on its theoretic basis, but what opened it up with particular intensity to such questioning was the so-called literacy crisis. There is evidence that university-entering students today do not read and write as well as those of forty or fifty years ago. Involved in the problems of this situation, of course, is the question of so-called Standard English, that is, the question whether internalizing the syntactic, semantic and rhetorical conventions of formal written English is not an issue in its own right and to be addressed pedagogically in its own right. Given the evidence, however, I don't think that it makes sense to conflate problems of acquiring Standard English with problems of understanding and reasoned communication. They coincide partly, to the extent, for example, that the acquisition of Standard English is achieved in social settings which bring with them the habit of discursively articulated logic. But they are not the same. To clarify this distinction, I would ask you to recall examples of writing or speech where you could "hear" the reasoning acumen underneath the forbidding linguistic surface: that is a Standard English problem (for examples see Shaughnessy). Then I would ask you to think of instances when you had the sense that thought had not been engaged in: the unsupported strong assertion; the un-nuanced opinion; the flat research paper, which did not address its information; the retelling of long stretches of a novel's story rather than offering an argument; the dearth of sustained articulation in a seminar or the hesitancy to engage in such activity. Often, when I have suggested to a student that one's impressions need to be explained and, as it were, "sourced" according to the particular stimuli that may have occasioned them, or that the latter need to be gathered up into what might be their thrust, I have received physically tensed replies like "But I can't think like that" or "I don't know how to do that." Sometimes, if the interaction is quite comfortable, I am also told that "doing that" is not desirable.

Some compositionists approach these educational problems primarily by means of the concept of discourse community—rather, that is, than from a universalizing cognitivist orientation. In this outlook we derive support from work in the sociology of language, such as that of Basil Bernstein, and in linguistics, such as that of M. A. K. Halliday. And we think that the solution to these problems lies in a renewed pedagogy that addresses the increased cultural and social diversity of the student population; confronts the "aphoristic", or, if you prefer, "sound-bite" speech and analogous perceptual practices of the mass media (Bizzell 32); and countervails the

dearth of reflective reading linked to the dominance of the latter, by enabling communicative competence through enhancement of discourse awareness and one's relation to discourse.

It is perhaps unfortunate that Bernstein called one of his proposed linguistic codes restrictive (the other he called elaborated) because, as he and others have made clear in addressing the misunderstandings, he never meant that it was inferior either cognitively or as expression, merely that students socialized in poorer and minority families, in their reception of communication and in their expression, relied on contextual clues more than (as in elaborated code) on discursively-enunciated particularization and that this had effects on the relationship to learning in institutional settings:

On a linguistic level...in the case of an elaborated code, the speaker will select from a relatively extensive range of alternatives and the probability of predicting the organizing elements is considerably reduced. In the case of a restricted code the number of these alternatives is often severely limited and the probability of predicting the elements is greatly increased. On a psychological level, the codes may be distinguished by the extent to which each facilitates (elaborated code) or inhibits (restricted code) an orientation to symbolize intent in a verbally explicit form. (Bernstein 1: 125)

Halliday explains the general implications, making clear that these "orientations" pertain to what a person experiences in relation to different contexts:

What Bernstein's work suggests is that there may be differences in the relative orientation of different social groups towards the various functions of language in given contexts, and towards the different areas of meaning that may be explored within a given function. (Halliday 106)

Use of the codes, that is, is a function of socialization but in conjunction with the contextual features of the communicative situation: its participants, social or institutional setting, and topic.

Now it may be that a philosophical ideal of critical rationality can be developed, and it may be that argumentation, as a specific discourse for resolving differences, is susceptible to the control of such an ideal and is therefore capable of breaking free of what we might call the rhetorical dimension, or rhetoricity, or rhetoricality. I believe and hope that this is possible. But the account just given of the non-theoretically-controlled combination of thought and communication suggests that this combination is affected in its essentials by the communicational situation, and not simply in relation to the aim to persuade, but, more fundamentally, in relation to the articulation of thought: not only are what we say and how we say it affected, but also the abilities we bring to the saying.

Bernstein's contrasted codes have been suggestive to compositionists in regard to the effects of increased social and cultural diversity of the student population, the effects of mass-mediated culture, and the dearth of reflective reading which the latter effects include, in that the substantiation and nuancing of thought tends not to occur sufficiently in connection with intellectual matters and in the academic context (Bizzell 32). Also, as I have suggested, there is often a hesitancy to engage in such effort. Perelman and Olbrecht-Tyteca's new rhetoric is distinguished by its appreciation of the exigencies of the continuity between thought and communication, not as a form-and-content unity, but as an effect of contingency, and in a way that exceeds the conscious intent to persuade. Their understanding of such excess can be seen in connection with their grasp of the role of the inevitable ambiguity of the language we use, and recalls the emphasis in Gadamer's hermeneutics, and in his linking of it to rhetoric, on the contingency of understanding. And this, it seems to me, is what makes it so fruitful

for developing a composition pedagogy, and an attached pedagogy for reflective reading, that might enhance reasoned communication, particularly in the cultural conditions touched upon. For it might be used as a means of adjusting one's relationship to discourse through discourse-awareness.

Apart from the many techniques of argumentation that Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca discuss, what *The New Rhetoric*, and Perelman's later *The Realm of Rhetoric*, have to offer such pedagogies pertains primarily to the following six postulates: (1) argumentation proceeds informally, not according to the forms and rules of deduction and induction; (2) arguments are always addressed to audiences; (3) to achieve any success, in argumentation we proceed from premises which an audience accepts; (4) it is important to establish evocative presence for ideas and values attaching to the premises; (5) ambiguity is never entirely avoidable in arguments because language use is inevitably equivocal in some degree; (6) liaisons among ideas and attitudes are created and dissolved by various verbal techniques. I shall discuss these postulates first in connection with reflective reading then with composing. When we come to the latter, I shall also discuss the concept of the universal audience and what, despite its problems within argumentation theory, it may do for the activity of composing.

Reflective Reading

In reading that makes any difference, one acquires new knowledge or a new perspective, or one acquires a modification of one's existing knowledge or perspective. Such acquisition takes place through contact between what is being read and the schemata that already exist in one's repertoire. In other words, the new knowledge, or the modification of the old, must have a way in (Brent 56). This way—in consists of material that connects with elements of one's prior knowledge, or one's orientation, even when one is not originally disposed to accept an author's thesis. Becoming conscious of how one learns or is persuaded—becoming conscious, that is, not in a specialized manner but to the extent that one can realize, upon reflection, when and how one began to assent to an argument—is a process that can be illuminated and engaged in consciously with the help of postulates 3 through 6. Regarding postulate 3, for example, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca explain that

The unfolding as well as the starting point of the argumentation presuppose indeed the agreement with the audience. The agreement is sometimes on explicit premises, sometimes on the particular connecting links used in the argument or the manner of using these links (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, 65)

Preferably with short samples, at least to begin with, the student should be directed to locate the premise if it is stated, to develop it if it is only partly so, or to provide it if it is only implicit; at this stage, he or she should also formulate his or her response to the premise. Then he or she should proceed according to the next three postulates: identify procedures which give evocative presence to ideas and values and which ones in particular appeal to him or her; identify ambiguities and how she or he responded to them—which meanings did she or he choose from among the meaning possibilities?; and, finally attempt to identify techniques whereby the links of ideas or attitudes were effected or dissolved (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca indicate several techniques).

Note that, in conducting this rhetorical pursuit of the reading, what is foregrounded is not the student's judging of the argument or the trajectory of it, but rather the tracing of its movement and means, and his or her developing response to such development and means. Much current rhetorical pedagogy engages the student in the business of crystallizing arguments thereby to judge them. But a pedagogy whose goal is to find the bridges or ways—in whereby one came to be persuaded, or to conclude that no such bridges were found, sets greater store by the

student's making the connections that give him a record of his developing situated response to the reading, and therefore a gradually articulated relationship to it.

Such reflective exercise, therefore, can enable one to become conscious of the connections whereby one's thinking proceeds. This access to one's reception of argument or trajectory can only strengthen one's capacity to find one's thoughts and to link them together but, in particular, with an accompanying increased consciousness of one's prior orientation and how this was engaged, or not, by the reading. Such connecting capacity is perhaps an intermediate skill: not yet argument, but perhaps a prerequisite ability that, particularly in the current cultural conditions referred to, needs strengthening.

Composition

The strengths and the weaknesses of Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca's concept of the universal or ideal audience are perhaps deeply interdependent. In the context of their new rhetoric, with its emphasis that argument is always for an audience and cannot be judged except in connection with an audience, the concept is quite strong. A historicist element is involved in their elucidation of this concept, for, as they say, the universal audience is never actual, but is a projection by the speaker on the basis of his or her ideal of a rational and qualified audience, and, as they also tell us, history shows us that this projection has varied. It may be said, then, that if history shows us such varying, so may culture and society, for fundamental differences in belief are not limited to what can be resolved by scientific evidence, nor do Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca suggest that we attach the concept only to what may be so resolved. As a result, their coupling of idealization with historicity limits the concept to descriptive or observational adequacy.

It seems to me, however, that this coupling also enables maximum construction of what responsible and rational thinking might be within a cultural or social horizon. Yet it must be granted that in the context of a theory of argumentation that hopes to integrate descriptive and normative approaches—the pragma-dialectics theory, for example—the concept does not do enough.

I propose to use the concept of universal audience in the teaching of composition, in a manner consistent with the fruitfulness I have just ascribed to Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca's however—problematic effort to combine ideality and historicity. In doing so, I shall also combine this concept with the concept of particular audience, in order to promote awareness of expressive and professional or disciplinary conventions of discourse.

Though writing according to the concept of a universal or ideal audience will also require great attention to the quality of one's argument, the governing purpose here is for the student to sharpen his or her thoughts in relation to beliefs or thinking very different from his own and to professional or disciplinary conventions—to be able, by projecting an idealization according to one's knowledge in either case, to activate and develop such knowledge. There should be exercises which consist of hypothetical communicative situations. These should include addresses on topics or issues known to be of concern to different cultural communities or communities differing radically in belief from the student's, each projected according to information provided or researched and according to an idealized image of its responsibility and reasonableness. Then there should be exercises based on a combination of the concepts of universal or ideal audience and particular audience. The goal here is to link one's projection of an ideal of rationality with expressive and disciplinary conventions. These exercises may consist, for example, of treatments of a topic or issue addressed to different professional communities—scientists, humanists, journalists. The student may proceed according to the six postulates discussed previously,

and then the composition may be "pursued" by another student as a reader, as in the previous section.

In these ways, one finds one's thoughts and their connections, and through speech or writing enhances one's grasp of these and of the needs of expression. This seems a prerequisite for being able to communicate and to exercise reason. And Perelman's and Olbrechts-Tyteca's work, with its appreciation of the embeddedness of discourse in contingency and ambiguity, and its effort to combine historicity and ideality, enables us to link our understanding of argument to questions of receptive and communicative competence.

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