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Introduction

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INTRODUCTION

Lawrence Wheeler

Hē rhetorikē estin antístrophos tē dialektikē....

Aristotle, the *Rhetoric*

Careful readers will recall that Aristotle develops this metaphor drawn from prosody—that rhetoric is the antistrophe of dialectic—into a vindication of each field's cognitive right: rhetoric has its own province, as does dialectic. Here, at least, in the very opening sentence of the *Rhetoric* (and I would argue, indeed, throughout) rhetoric and dialectic are not joined in the subordinating form of cause-and-effect, but instead paratactically, with equal force, as equal partners in the cause of human intellection. I was playing “hookey” as a graduate student, escaping from required reading, when I first had this insight, and it has had great bearing on my teaching of writing. It has also affected the structure of the writing curriculum in the Honors Program.

I apologize at the outset for beginning in such a highly personal mode, but my teaching of writing is very largely a response to my learning how to write, and, perhaps even more importantly, a response to how I was both taught and not taught to write. There was a hiatus in my writing instruction: as a freshman in a state university, my “English

Comp" teacher was a maiden lady of short but sturdy build, very near retirement, who wore a cloche hat throughout class and believed in her Strunk and White with a fervor almost equal to that in which she believed the Protestant tracts lining the bookshelves of her small white frame house near the university. We had our writing tutorials there, in her study, politely sipping delicately flavored tea, nibbling on her homemade ginger snaps.

I left the university, planning to work for a time, since I seemed to learn very little in that first year. The government intervened; it had other plans for me. After a tour abroad, taking part in a dirty little police action in a southern Asian nation, I came back to my home town, and registered for classes through the honors program in that town's state university. Having submitted an essay with my application, I had the core humanities course waived for me, but elected to take it anyway, since the instructor promised meetings with the local writers' community, which at that time included several nationally known novelists and poets. I entertained a vague notion then of someday making my living by writing; writing ranked alongside my ambitions in the visual arts and my aspirations as a teacher, and consequently I went to class with great enthusiasm. The remarkable men and women we were to meet came down, finally, to one; she was indeed remarkable and I still recall in vivid detail each aspect of that séance, but the writing instruction I got in that course—and writing instruction had been billed as an integral feature of the course—was next to useless. The teacher, fiercely political and holding a doctorate in classical studies, was brilliant, committed, insightful, inspiring; she was also ideologically opposed to direct intervention in a student's "writing process." The phrase will, for the cognoscenti, make clear the problem (and the era), for she had fallen under the spell of Peter Elbow; we were all students alike of *Writing Without Teachers*. Writing was a group act, essentially: drafts of papers were read aloud in our "writing groups," we were subject to each others' critical comments (and little can approach the elemental brutality of the type of remarks likely to emerge from the mouths of untutored would-be intellectuals who have a misty idea of what a critical remark sounds like and are willing to imitate that idea with

their full vigor and capacity for venom), and while positive, constructive criticism was of course the aim, a certain *horror vacui* led our instructor to accept the most unreflective trash (in both senses) so long as it helped kill the hour.

Spring quarter came; independent—but group—projects were to be undertaken; the solitary was regarded with suspicion. My group knocked around for a time and finally came to a decision which still chills me: we would write a soap opera. I asked the instructor for permission to work alone and started a novel about my experiences in Vietnam. The quarter saw me produce about four hundred pages; it evoked mostly one-word comments from the instructor, for whom, naturally, the entire subject was abhorrent. That summer I sent the manuscript to a friend I saw duty with; I have never seen it again.

My point is not to beg your pity because of this sad tale of my instruction in writing; indeed, far from it. I suspect my case is not all that unusual, and I have learned from each encounter with “writing instruction.” But I was unable to reflect in any measure fully upon what had been done to me until I began to study the history of rhetorical systems; looking back, I am astonished at the cultural trajectory described by the arc of writing education in a five-year period in public universities on the west coast. I began in a writing world which regarded the questions of composition as settled: organization, discovery, expression, what-have-you; extended discussion was unnecessary—let only the light of common sense play upon the disordered fragments of the freshman writer’s mind, and lucid prose would result. Writing—good writing—was terse; it shunned cliché and the hackneyed expression; good writers preferred the shorter word; good writing had punch, was vivid. Five years later the writing world had gone topsy-turvy and “the little book” was dead. Writing was consensus; the untaught, somehow, in colloquy moved inevitably toward truth—at least so far as writing was concerned.

Each of these stances on the writing problem—the Strunk and White school, the vaguely Maoist Peter Elbow project—of course draws upon the rhetorical tradition of Western culture. Strunk and White (seven rules, eleven principles, some few odd matters of form

and pronouncements on “misused” words, and twenty-one points on style) is the settled and assured mass of precepts we find taught in times of supposed cultural stability. As Polonius in *Hamlet*, all too unaware of the chaos seething just beyond his ken, reels off speech after speech of advice, so, too, “the little book” treats the control of language as a matter long since settled. Elbow’s book is, on the other hand, the indicator of times not quite so sanguine; the writing “group” gropes through the murk of its own partial comprehension toward effective expression (is the writing group Elbow’s attempt to co-opt Aristotelean *pisteis*?). What we need to recognize, however, is that each of these is only a partial treatment of the rhetorical tradition, each conceals its indebtedness, and both eschew any presentation of rhetorical theory.

In developing the writing curriculum of the Honors Program, I have tried to deal with the problems I encountered in my own progress through an undergraduate writing curriculum. Let me first point out that I am working from an unfair advantage in comparison with the usual writing instructor; he or she is generally a graduate student teaching an “English composition” section drawing its students from throughout the university. As a consequence he or she must fall upon the device of “artificial” assignments that provide a least common denominator fit. By contrast in the “Studies in Western Culture” class which provides the lower-division humanities core for the Program, we work only with primary materials: for the first year, lecture and readings alone are the focus of writing. During the second year, students begin in the fall the research that will carry them, throughout the academic year, to the production of a major research paper in the spring.

The first assignment of the first year is the production of a lecture summary. Students get the writing assignment and some discussion of its significance the first day of the term, if at all possible. They must write a coherent essay which summarizes one of the lectures from the first four weeks of the quarter (that is, within a twelve-week quarter). I emphasize for them that they have a twofold obligation, an obligation to proper form and an obligation to the matter covered by the lecturer. Since the writing assignment is limited in length from one thousand to

two thousand words and lecture periods in the course are fifty minutes, I also emphasize that they must, clearly, organize, order and condense to portray the theoretical structure of the lecture with sufficient development. I try to suggest to them that their primary concern should be thematic: if they feel that a lecturer (there are several in this team-taught course) has extended a theme beyond the time limits of one class-meeting into another, they are free to construct their summaries to reflect that understanding, but I expect them to justify that connection. At the other extreme I try to keep them from the natural (and frequently irresistible) temptation to summarize all lectures by a given lecturer, which they do surmising that there must be an integral thematic structure in there somewhere.

Since the course, under the conditions of the NEH grant which originally funded its development, must remain open to registration from the general university, and since with even the most apparently accomplished students we can no longer count on any previous formal writing instruction, this summary has several advantages. First, it removes the obligation to invention, traditionally the most difficult task for a beginning writer. It reinforces the course's orientation toward theory, since they must identify the theoretical unity behind an often apparently disparate body of fact, illustration, argument. It obligates them to pay close attention to at least the first few weeks' lectures, since they are held responsible for the factual information covered in the lectures.

At the same time that the stuff of the writing assignment is generated by the class, the thematic focus of the class is itself partly taken up with the question of language. My first lecture in the course is on de Saussure and the principles of language in the *Cours de linguistique générale*, since their first reading assignment is Homer's *Iliad*, I then move to what structural linguistics helps reveal about the poem, both in terms of oral, formulaic literature (if you will pardon the unfortunate contradiction) and in terms of critical analysis of the poem. That is, the *Cours* suggests that language is systemic; its operation precludes absolute control by any single speaker and indeed suggests that the language-system may partially control what meanings speakers can express; likewise we ask the students to

consider the art world within which the *Iliad* takes shape as a vast system of saga material, influential even if not wholly recorded, just as we suggest to them that the world within the *Iliad* is a system partly controlling what any individual actor may accomplish (here Seth Schein's *The Mortal Hero* is immensely helpful in tracing so clearly the transformation of Achilles from loving participant in Achaian society to extraordinary, and thus inhuman, killing-machine in his *aristeia*). Since we also include the standard discussions of "mythic thought" and the "limited self-consciousness of the pre-classical world," we discuss as well the implications of the complex realization of time in the *Iliad*. We also discuss Hesiod and the intellectual revolution he represents: his concern with time, his re-orienting of the dactylic hexameter line to new expressions. In showing what he does accomplish, we also suggest how the traditional epic form restricts and channels his accomplishment. Again (thanks to suggestions made in Pucci's *Hesiod and the Language of Poetry*), we argue that the resonant ambiguities Hesiod shapes may be intentional, and hence a self-conscious examination of the boundaries of language. Thus students are prepared for the insight that each culture has an appropriate form of language practice, with its own conventions and mannered behaviors, and that part of their examination is necessarily reflexive. If we argue that the form both enables and restricts meaning in Homer and Hesiod, then we have achieved the first step in the argument against the separation of form and content. We consider further the meaning of working in a tradition when we turn to the poetry of Sappho; as both C. R. Beye and G.M. Kirkwood have argued, Sappho both adopts and adapts the epic tradition; her nomic hymns engage deities, but they are deities who do her bidding. At the same time, her casual tone, manifested despite the difficult strophic forms she employs, demonstrates a virtuoso turn, a surface of deceptive simplicity. That is, the strophic forms she uses are also part of her meaning.

The next writing assignment is one in explication, but not the explication of poetry. Instead, we ask the students to undertake the explication of a Platonic dialogue, usually the *Protagoras*, the *Cratylus*, the *Phaedo*, or the *Phaedrus*. They are to note and describe

as fully as they can the forms and structures of the work. Generally, in a Platonic dialogue we find the following kinds and types of verbal forms: a narrative frame or background, unified integral discourse ("speeches"), participatory debate, the recounting of myths, and, finally, allusion to the cultural corpus (that is, to Homer, or Hesiod, or another of the poets). In carrying out a thorough explication they note and describe the occurrence of each, indicating the background, recipient/participant, and effect of each. We do this, in class lecture, with the *Symposium* and the *Republic*, suggesting that each of the verbal forms is of equal importance; the reading of a Platonic dialogue is thus not simply the totting up of one dialectical argument after another, but instead the deft interweaving of themes sounded both implicitly and explicitly in the work. An example will serve to make the point.

The trial, the offered escape to exile and freedom, Socrates' dignified farewells and death; it is a critical commonplace to mention that the Socratic end is tripartite in form, like the tragic drama. *Apology*, *Crito*, *Phaedo*. Yet we do not always read as carefully as we might; we often fail to note that Plato is insistent upon the extraordinary length of time between Socrates' sentencing and (self)execution, and we also sometimes ignore that Plato dwells upon the cause of that delay. Socrates awaits, in prison, the return of a ship dispatched on a regular sacred mission—sacred law requires that the city be kept free of blood guilt during the period of the mission; at the very opening of the *Crito* we are reminded that this is the case: Socrates immediately asks of Crito, upon awakening, whether the galley has been sighted. The galley's return sweeps us forward into the final movement of the tragedy, yet in that movement toward Socrates' death, in the *Phaedo*, we pause once again, in the surrounding narrative frame, to note that the death had been delayed while the ship returned. Our interest alerted by this second mention of the ship (why is Plato dwelling on this ship?), we find that we are given further detail—this is the ship which bore Theseus, the seven youths and seven maidens, both to and back from the labyrinth of Minos. The ship spells Socrates' death. But we must stop here and think the myth through again: this same ship, carrying Theseus back

from his voyage of liberation of the enslaved Greeks, also signalled the death of Theseus' father, Aegeus, King of Athens, who hurled himself to his death when Theseus forgot to change the color of his sails as an augury of the happy outcome of his mission. The return of the vessel spells death for two aged men; a strict proportion aligns Aegeus and Socrates; the overarching figure, the sacred vessel, joins them and we are told once more (as we are throughout the Platonic corpus) that Socrates is lord of Athens. Thus the recollective act of memory—to recapitulate the dialogues as Socrates' trajectory toward the death—takes place under the sign of a dreadful irony.

To ask students to note and describe the verbal forms which play within the dialogues is to alert them to the possibilities of meaning within the dialogue; no longer to keep the philosophical scoreboard for Socrates versus the blackhats, but instead to recognize that the narrative frame may support or undercut the events and actions of the drama played out within that narrative frame; that the Homeric or Hesiodic allusions may lend other voices resonating with those speaking in the dialogues; that the "theme and variations" structure of speeches given in the *Phaedrus* may extend the possible meanings of all the speeches in the dialogue. In the process of learning that the detail in Plato's dialogue is there purposefully, students also learn that interpretation is a constructive process, their process, in which they decide to heighten the effect of certain elements and lessen the impact of certain others. This year, the efforts of Karen Burton, Stephen Gray, Victoria Khary, Thanh Ngo, Sharon Parker and Melody Wilson represent the assignment in explication. That three of them have chosen to work within the boundaries of the *Phaedo* suggests the inexhaustible fascination and the pathos of Socrates' end.

The final writing assignment of the first-year course asks students to show how one of the writers read during spring quarter (Euripides, Virgil, Augustine) makes use of a predecessor. We consider the idea of "predecessor" very broadly, and not restricting the idea of the predecessor to persons only. How, for example, does Augustine employ the *Aeneid*? What is Augustine's *Aeneid*? What portions of the earlier epic does Augustine explicitly engage, and how does he implicitly engage it? What are the relative strengths of the openly

quoted, and the alluded to, but concealed, passages, characters, tropes? How, then, does Augustine reconstitute the *Aeneid*, and how does he reconstitute his *Confessions* as a second great epic of journey toward "Rome?" As students gain more practice in this intertextual reading, they become more practiced at recognizing that all texts work in this fashion, that all texts are permeable, stemming from a tradition, participating in a chorus with works contemporary and earlier, simultaneously repeating the tradition and insisting on their own new voice. It is a lesson they have been studying the year long, watching Homer reshape the Gilgamesh epic, and Sappho respond to Homer; Plato re-making the heroic tradition with a Socrates who is both Achilles and Odysseus; Euripides taking Homeric diction and giving it, in the *Medea*, to the nurse—the ancient voice of the aristocratic tradition, but this time falling from an inappropriate mouth. This year, the question of the relation to tradition has exercised the talents of Mark Arvieux, Regina Eastman, Christopher Frank and Marisela Nyoka.

This writing program emphasizes the Greek and Roman tradition, but is adaptable to other curricula, other traditions. Some years ago I was invited to examine an introductory curriculum for a small private college in one of the Western states, a liberal arts college which drew its student population almost exclusively from the women of the local "community" of migrant workers and Native Americans. The small humanities faculty of the college had decided upon the "Great Books" as their basic reading material, and were preparing to take their first term, first-year students utterly unprepared through the great organs of Western philosophy, including Plato's *Euthyphro*, and the *Nicomachean Ethics*, by the reading-and-discussion method. The students would read the works, and then they would discuss, with minimal assistance from the instructor, until they came to the great truths resident within the great texts. I asked how much background the students were to be given, and was told that the instructors preferred to keep the focus on "the texts themselves." I wondered why, in a situation such as the one they confronted, they might not start with texts perhaps somewhat closer to their students' own lived experience?

Why not employ the rich literature of autobiography, and particularly the modern literature of autobiography written by their contemporaries? A range of autobiographies exists which can both draw students into the recognition that their own experiences can be formed and expressed, and that any autobiography necessarily participates with the tradition of life-writing. Autobiography is by nature the paradoxical genre that insists on the particularity and universality of the given life; it is by nature the genre which lies, for it claims that this selected and shaped, artistically wrought, fragment of a life is true and somehow whole. From an examination of the ways in which their own culture shapes its selves, students can turn to consider how other cultures do likewise.

Indeed, in its paradoxical nature, autobiography seems the ideal genre through which to begin to acquaint students with the myriad problems of "literary" study (I mean by this not only the study of literature, but also the recently emerging fields which extend the range and scope of literary analysis: philosophy as literature, history as literature, even economics as rhetoric). Autobiography is catalogued, by the Library of Congress, as non-fiction, equivalent in stature and historically problematic nature, to biography. Yet it is also art; any thoughtful definition of autobiography will recognize that the work is a selection and arrangement of parts and elements of the subject's life; it is not the full life but instead a metaphor for the lived experience of that life. It usefully illuminates problems of art and historicity as, for example, in the classical period, Thucydides' *Peloponnesian War* (the constitution of Athens and Sparta as protagonist and deuteragonist in some vast Mediterranean-wide drama) and Aeschylus' *Oresteia* (with its final endorsement of the Athenian judicial system) do. Autobiography offers a start on the questions of change and continuity in culture and tradition; it allows a window on the construction of the self and the play of that self in the field we call western culture. Yet autobiography is not alone a western form (despite what has been argued by some theorists in the field); as Marilyn J. Miller has so deftly shown in her book on the *nikki bungaku*, autobiography arises, with all its accompanying rhetorical problems, in other literatures as well. Autobiographers are imaginative

writers: they imagine a self, they construct a tradition; they suggest, by means of the autobiography, the ways in which the self is attached to the tradition, and thus autobiography offers an inroad into the new problem confronting all thoughtful students of the humanities, the pressing need for the multi-cultural examination of the range of human meaning. It is not enough for us to pass to our students fine sentiments about the need to participate in the great human conversation; we must show them, in our teaching, in the works we examine, precisely how that conversation takes place. In this year's *Anthos* we include an interesting extended comparative study of medieval autobiographical forms, Merlin Douglass' "Investigations of Self."

The problem is not whether to treat theory, but how. I would ask you to note that in Nietzsche's introductory course on rhetoric, which is, as Gilman, Blair and Parent note in their critical introduction, much the most expository, clear, rigorously ordered of Nietzsche's works, his opening paragraph deals with the concept of rhetoric and outlines the mental universe which stands as context to the early rhetorical world:

...[R]hetoric arises among a people who still live in mythic images and who have not yet experienced the unqualified need of historical accuracy: they would rather be persuaded than instructed. In addition, the need of men for forensic eloquence must have given rise to the evolution of the liberal art. Thus, it is an essentially republican art: one must be accustomed to tolerating the most unusual opinions and points of view and even to taking a certain pleasure in their counterplay; one must be just as willing to listen as to speak; and as a listener one must be able more or less to appreciate the art being applied...[w]hat is unique to Hellenistic [sic: Nietzsche's original adjective is *hellenischen*] life is thus characterized: to perceive all matters of the intellect, of life's seriousness, of necessities, even of danger, as play. (p. 3)

This "outline" of rhetoric is, rather, a subtle web: Nietzsche situates rhetoric in the lived experience of the ancient world and boldly sketches the differences between the domain of the art in its original context and its relegation to a position of quaintness in Nietzsche's

own world: how different an arena in which one might take pleasure in the conscious display of art! Nietzsche is careful to substantiate the strangeness by a quotation from Kant (here suppressed); then he returns to the antique world, and conjures up constellations of meaning with a single word: play, and its reverberations in its Greek counterparts (that is, through Greek *paízdo*, etymologically related to *país*, "child, boy, girl...etc.," but also *paideúo*, "educate," and *paideía*; it is not only Michel Foucault who has commented on the meaning of the associations between the notions of education and inferior position). Thus there can be so simple historicist treatment of any cultural phenomenon: one must examine its position in its original context and its complex filiations with other aspects of its culture; that understanding generates, in response, the need for a reflexive examination of one's own context and culture. Any sketch reveals a point of view.

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