Headnote to
What Is Being Revived?

Ede: We can see pretty dramatically how it was that you first got involved in rhetoric and moved to your position now. You're certainly considered one of the most eminent scholars in rhetoric and composition studies. How has your view of yourself and also your view of your scholarship—the articles that you've written and the books that you've published—changed as composition has changed? Do you have a different sense of your work?

Corbett: Well, there is a sense of exultation in noting what has happened in the last fifteen years with rhetorical studies and its effect on the teaching of writing in our schools. You know, I can remember being a part of a very small cadre of people who were interested in rhetoric, but we were like voices crying in the wilderness. Seeing the efflorescence of rhetoric and seeing above all the bright young people who have picked up on rhetoric and have found it as intellectually stimulating as I and some of my other colleagues did in the early days is the thing that gives me the greatest hope for the future of rhetoric. Now some of the best and the brightest of our young graduate students are taking it up and going miles beyond where we brought it. That, more than anything else, pleases me and inspirits me and makes me confident that rhetoric is here to stay.

1967

What Is Being Revived?

By the time Wayne Booth delivered his talk "The Revival of Rhetoric"[1] at the Modern Language Association meeting in New York in 1964, the term *rhetoric* had been popping up with increasing frequency in the titles of new college textbooks, in journal articles, and in panel sessions at regional and national conventions of English teachers. Teachers who had managed to bring themselves abreast of some of the other vogues that had seized the attention of the profession in the decade after World War II—interests like semantics, New Criticism, structural linguistics, transformational grammar—began to ask themselves just what this "rhetoric" was that allegedly was being revived. Even after rhetoric as a subject matter or as a discipline had disappeared from the classroom, the word *rhetoric* had lingered on, mainly in the pejorative sense of "sound and fury signifying nothing." But it became clear from recent discussions that rhetoric, at least as some people were conceiving of it, was a discipline with a long and honorable tradition. Maybe there was something here that might profitably be restored to the classroom, but what was this "rhetoric" that everyone was talking about? It is for such teachers, interested but understandably bewildered, that I should like to present a rapid survey of the rhe-

torical tradition, to show them what rhetoric once was, what it became, and what it might become.

The definitions of rhetoric that have been proposed from the time of Aristotle to the time of Kenneth Burke have varied in their wording, as the philosophical underpinnings of rhetorical systems changed or as the emphasis on the various canons of rhetoric shifted. But throughout the succession of changes, rhetoric remained the art of communication, an art governing the interlocking relationships between the discourse, the speaker or writer, and the audience. And as such, rhetoric has fairly consistently been regarded as an art governing the choice of strategies that a speaker or writer must make in order to communicate most effectively with an audience. As P. Albert Duhamel put it in an article back in 1949, "All rhetoricians have had one object: the teaching of effective expression. That object can be considered as the 'least common denominator' of mental notes which undergo accretion and modification in accordance with an author's conception of what constitutes eloquence."[2]

The notion of rhetoric as a discipline guiding the choice of the effective means of communicating with an audience was certainly implicit in the definition advanced by Aristotle. For Aristotle, rhetoric was the art or faculty of "discovering the available means of persuasion in any given case." Aristotle's *Rhetoric* was the fountainhead of the system commonly called "classical rhetoric"—a system of rhetoric that dealt primarily with persuasive oratory; that spoke about three kinds of persuasive discourse—the deliberative (the rhetoric of the public assembly), the forensic (the rhetoric of the courtroom), and the epideictic (the rhetoric of ceremonial occasions); that treated of the five parts of rhetoric—invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery; that spoke, in connection with invention, of the topics as a system for turning up arguments in a given case; that spoke of the three modes of appeal—the appeal to reason, the appeal to emotions, and the appeal of the speaker's character; that dealt with the two basic forms that the logical appeal took—the inductive example and the deductive enthymeme; that spoke, in connection with arrangement, of the parts of a discourse—the exordium or introduction, the *narratio* or the statement of the situation, the confirmation or proof of one's thesis, the refutation of an opponent's objections, and the epilogue or conclusion; that spoke, in connection with style, of such things as diction, rhythm, schemes, and tropes. It was an elaborate system, one which, in the hands of some schoolmen, got lost in its own labyrinth or became enamored of the sound of its own words. But at its best, it was a realistic, coherent, intellectually challenging system that engaged the attention of the best minds of each age during its long reign in the schools.

This system of rhetoric provided the warp upon which the most significant rhetorics for almost two thousand years were woven. But to say that the rhetorical system for two millennia was basically the same is not to say that it was rigidly monolithic. Professor Duhamel has cautioned us that to speak of *a* "classical rhetoric" is "to compound a gratuitous tag." "There were," he says, "as many conceptions of rhetoric in the period usually called 'Classical' as there were philosophies, and the rhetoric can be understood only within the commensurable terms of the philosophy."[1]

As one follows the development of rhetoric through the Roman period, the Middle Ages, and the Renaissance, it is interesting to note how the changes in the rhetoricians' philosophical orientation produce changes in the kind of rhetoric that was taught in the schools. Thus, Cicero and Quintilian, the two towering figures of Roman rhetoric, are as much the heirs of Isocrates as they are of Aristotle. For one thing, they shift from Aristotle's basically theoretical approach to a more pragmatic, pedagogical approach. Moreover, reacting against the kind of sterile formalism that had developed in some of the sophistic schools, they insisted on the union of broad learning with skill in technique, so that in their hands rhetorical training became almost a liberal arts course. De-emphasizing Aristotle's view that rhetoric had no peculiar subject-matter but could be used to talk about any subject whatsoever, Cicero insisted that the aspiring orator must know a little about everything and a great deal about such subjects as law, politics, history, and philosophy. Quintilian shared this view with Cicero and added to it the

notion that the rhetorician must be concerned as well with the ethical formation of his students. Cicero and Quintilian broadened the scope of rhetoric with their insistence that the tripartite aim of the orator was to inform, to move, and to please his audience. Their doctrine about the "three styles"—the plain, the moderate, and the grand—was a natural consequence of their extension of the scope of rhetoric.

The humanistic bias that Cicero and Quintilian gave to rhetorical training was never entirely lost during the Middle Ages, but the pre-eminent position of rhetoric in the curriculum was gradually usurped in the *trivium* by logic or dialectics. Under the aegis of such medieval rhetoricians as Martianus Capella, Isidore of Seville, Cassiodorus, St. Augustine, Boethius, and Alcuin, rhetoric extended its province to include such areas as letter-writing and the composition of sermons, and it began to align itself more closely with poetics, when poetry came to be looked upon as a mode of argumentation to be treated in terms of style, organization, and the figures of speech. Richard McKeon has well summarized the remarkable extensions of rhetoric's purview during the Middle Ages:

> In application, the art of rhetoric contributed during the period from the fourth to the fourteenth century not only to the methods of speaking and writing well, of composing letters amd petitions, sermons and prayers, legal documents and briefs, poetry and prose, but to the canons of interpreting laws and Scripture, to the dialectical devices of discovery and proof, to the establishment of the scholastic method, which was to come into universal use in philosophy and theology, and finally, to the formulation of scientific inquiry, which was to separate philosophy from theology.[4]

The history of rhetoric during the English Renaissance has in recent years been so ably chronicled in our journals and in books by T. W. Baldwin, William G. Crane, Wilbur Samuel Howell, Sister Miriam Joseph, and Donald Lemen Clark that it is not as necessary to review, for English teachers, the details of that history as it was

even as recently as twenty years ago. The broad outline of Wilbur Samuel Howell's definitive study *Logic and Rhetoric in England, 1500–1700* (Princeton, 1956) provides a convenient way of summarizing the course of rhetoric during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. During the first seventy-five years of the sixteenth century, under the direction of the two men who set the pattern for the English grammar schools, Erasmus and Vives, rhetorical training followed the traditional pattern. This traditional pattern manifested itself in three different forms in the vernacular rhetorics of the period: (1) the full-blown Ciceronian rhetorics, like Thomas Wilson's *The Arte of Rhetorique*, which treated of the five parts of invention, disposition, style, memory, and delivery; (2) the stylistic rhetorics, like Richard Sherry's *A Treatise of Schemes and Tropes*, which although acknowledging the five parts of rhetoric, concentrated on style alone; (3) and the formulary rhetorics, like Richard Rainolde's *Foundation of Rhetoric* and the many letter-writing manuals, which taught rhetoric by encouraging the imitation of models.

The last twenty-five years of the sixteenth century mark the period of the Ramist vogue. Having assigned invention, memory, and disposition or judgment to the exclusive province of logic, Peter Ramus commissioned his friend Omer Talon to produce a complementary rhetoric, which would deal only with style and delivery. Dialectics and rhetoric, which traditionally had been allied in a close ancillary relationship, were compartmentalized. As a consequence of this divorce, the intellectual or conceptualizing part of the composition process became a logic of private inquiry rather than a stage in the rhetoric of discourse. Ramist rhetoric remains an art of effective expression, but it becomes an art curiously divorced from content, with less and less concern for the speaker-auditor relationship. These two developments in Ramist rhetoric are manifested, first of all, in the fact that in the curriculum, rhetoric was the subject studied by the young pupil after he learned his grammar and before he studied dialectics, and, secondly, in the fact that although delivery was one of the two parts of Ramist rhetoric, oral expression received scant attention in the Ramist system, which tended to concentrate on the silent, frozen, spatial medium

of print. The Ramist system enjoyed a brief vogue at the end of the sixteenth and the beginning of the seventeenth century probably because it fit the changing educational outlook of the times, but it seems safe to predict now that the Ramist system will not become the philosophical foundation for a modern rhetoric in our "electronic age" of visual and aural images in dialogue modes of discourse.

The counter-reformers of the seventeenth century—Descartes, the Port Royal logicians, and Francis Bacon, to name the most prominent of them—hoped to achieve a compromise between the Aristotelian and Ramist positions, but they succeeded best in further establishing logic and rhetoric as instruments of inquiry rather than of communication, in emphasizing the superiority of external sources of proof over "artistic proofs," and in promoting the development of the plain style. By the final decade of the seventeenth century the number of new logic and rhetoric books had been reduced to a dribble.

Rhetoric exhibited one more spasm of vitality in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, in the elocutionary movement led by Thomas Sheridan and John Walker and in the texts produced by that triumvirate of Scottish rhetoricians, Kames, Campbell, and Blair. The effects of the elocutionary movement persisted through most of the nineteenth century, especially in the oratorical training and in the elocution contests that were such a marked feature of the American schools. The new vitality that had been injected into rhetoric, however, by the Scottish rhetoricians with their attempts to incorporate the findings of faculty psychology and esthetics into a new rhetoric, soon subsided. Most students of rhetoric point to the publication of Bishop Whately's *Elements of Rhetoric* in 1828 as marking the end of the long tradition of classical rhetoric.

A review of the first hundred years of the Boylston Professorship of Rhetoric at Harvard reveals what happened to rhetorical training during the nineteenth century and the early years of the twentieth century.[5] This, the most famous chair of rhetoric in America, was made possible by a grant from Nicholas Boylston, a wealthy Boston merchant, in 1771 and was formally activated in 1806. The first two holders of the chair, John Quincy Adams (1806–1809) and Joseph McKean (1809–1818), adhered closely to the prescriptions of the original statutes that the training offered be solidly rooted in the classical tradition and that it be primarily concerned with eloquence in persuasive oratory. Edward T. Channing during his thirty-two-year tenure (1819–1851) broadened the purview of his office to include lectures on literary criticism and abandoned the exclusively classical orientation of his lectures on rhetoric. The influence of Blair, Whately, and Campbell is especially evident in his exploration of psychological processes, in his concern with terms like *genius* and *taste*, and in his alliance of rhetoric with belles lettres. Having little interest in students' declamations, he gradually shifted the emphasis from speaking to writing.

The changes in scope and emphasis introduced by Channing were confirmed and extended by Francis James Child, who occupied the Boylston chair for twenty-five years, from 1851 to 1876. While doing graduate work at the University of Göttingen, Child became enamored of German research in early English linguistics and literature, and this philological interest profoundly affected the cast of his lectures. He used his podium to expound on Chaucer and to introduce his students to Anglo-Saxon literature. When Charles William Eliot introduced the elective system at Harvard about 1875, Child found further encouragement for his slighting of composition, written and spoken, and his concentration on philology and literary criticism. When Johns Hopkins, the first American university to be founded on the German model, tried to woo Child, the only way Harvard could keep him was to create for him the new office of Professor of English and to assign John Richard Dennett as his assistant to take over the rhetoric lectures. It was in the school-term of 1874–75 that Harvard established its first course in Freshman English, a course dealing with matters that previously had been taught only to sophomores, juniors, and seniors.

Adams Sherman Hill's twenty-eight-year tenure, from 1876 to 1904, rounds out the first century of the Boylston Professorship. During his term, the Boylston Professorship was incorporated into the English department and the term *rhetoric* fell out of fashion,

being replaced by the term *composition*; rhetoric's association with oratory was once and for all severed, and composition now dealt exclusively with written discourse; and the abandonment of textbooks in the rhetoric course reflected the shift from the theoretical approach to writing to the methods of imitation and practice. It was Hill too who introduced the use of literature to teach freshman composition and resorted to the four forms of discourse—exposition, argumentation, description, and narration—as his way of approaching the process of composition. He paid a great deal of attention to style, but he made such a fetish of grammatical correctness that he soon reduced rhetoric to a set of "do and don't" prescriptions.

Part of the nineteenth-century development in the teaching of rhetoric, though not associated primarily with the Boylston Professorship, was the doctrine of the paragraph, stemming from Alexander Bain's *English Composition and Rhetoric* in 1866 and fostered by such men as Fred Scott, Joseph Denney, John Genung, George Carpenter, Charles Sears Baldwin, and Barrett Wendell.[6] Barrett Wendell's successful rhetoric books helped to establish the pattern of instruction that moved from the word to the sentence to the paragraph to the whole composition. Henry Seidel Canby reversed that sequence, moving from the paragraph to the sentence to the word. It is to these men that we owe the system of rhetoric that most of us were exposed to in our own schooling—the topic sentence, the various methods of developing the paragraph, and the holy trinity of unity, coherence, and emphasis.

But even this kind of rhetorical approach to writing disappeared from our classrooms and our textbooks sometime in the 1930s. With the clamor from parents, business men, journalists, and administrators for correct grammar, correct usage, and correct spelling, rhetoric books began to be replaced with handbooks. By 1936 the study of rhetoric had sunk to such an estate in our schools that I. A. Richards could say of it that it was "the dreariest and least profitable part of the waste that the unfortunate travel through in Freshman English," and W. M. Parrish, reviewing the situation in 1947, could say, in an article addressed to teachers of speech, "English teachers . . . have almost abandoned the very name of rhetoric, and the classical tradition is now completely in our hands."[7]

A survey of the history of rhetoric does indeed reveal that this discipline, which was once very much alive and which engaged the attention and talents of some of the best minds, has for a number of years been moribund, if not door-nail dead. Whether it deserves to be revived depends largely on whether we see any intrinsic and practical value in the discipline and whether we see any possibility of a new rhetoric being developed, either on the ruins of the old system or on a completely new foundation.

Some people see the roots of a new rhetoric in I. A. Richards's work in semantics and in the works stemming from that study. Dissatisfied with the Aristotelianism of Richard Whately's *Elements of Rhetoric*, with its concentration on persuasive discourse and its forsaking of a philosophy of rhetoric for a mere set of prudential rules, Richards found a more congenial starting point for his own rhetorical theory in George Campbell's *A Philosophy of Rhetoric*. Richards felt that rhetoric should be "a study of misunderstanding and its remedies," an inquiry into "how words work."[8] Others are not so hopeful that Richards has provided the groundwork for a viable new rhetoric, because of his concentration on the smaller units of a discourse—the word and the sentence—to the neglect of the strategies of the larger units. They see his rhetoric as being more valuable for teaching students how to *read* a discourse than how to *write* one. In fact, judging from the particular animus of a work like his *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*, they view Richards as being essentially antirhetorical.

Many students of rhetoric detect a more promising basis for a new rhetoric in the work of Kenneth Burke. Burke is remarkably classical in his orientation,[9] but he has succeeded in enriching his rhetorical perspective by what he has gained from his studies in anthropology, sociology, history, psychology, and literature. Burke is one of the seminal thinkers of our time, but unfortunately, like a good many other seminal thinkers, he is not a very lucid expositor of his theory. Those of us who are not as good readers as we might be have been able to get a clearer idea of what Burke is saying through the admirable glosses of Virginia Holland and Marie Hochmuth Nichols.[10]

As more and more teachers and scholars turn their attention

seriously to rhetoric, they are discovering other sources which could contribute to the development of a new rhetoric. Dudley Bailey, among others, sees some promise in the essay on method that Coleridge first wrote as a preface to the *Encyclopaedia Metropolitana* and later included in *The Friend* in 1818.[11] Richard Ohmann rests his hopes in further explorations of the complex relationships that exist between a piece of writing and its content, a piece of writing and its author, a piece of writing and its audience, and a piece of writing and what he calls "world views."[12]

Perhaps the part of rhetoric that is farthest advanced at the moment and is rapidly approaching some teachable form is stylistics. We are all coming to be acquainted now with Louis Milic's quantitative approach to the study of style, with Francis Christensen's exploration of the multi-level sentence, and with Richard Ohmann's use of generative grammar as a method of stylistic study. For the units larger than the sentence, we are finding some exciting possibilities in Christensen's work on the generative rhetoric of the paragraph and in the tagmemic theory of Kenneth Pike, Richard Young, and Alton Becker. The symposium on the paragraph in the May, 1966 issue of *College Composition and Communication* has more sensible things to say about the rhetoric of the paragraph than have ever been gathered together between the covers of a single publication.

There is danger perhaps that in our exploration of the pragmatic, pedagogical aspects of rhetoric we may neglect a more important need—the development of a philosophy, an organon, of rhetoric. Martin Steinmann has pleaded recently for more "metarhetorical research," which can provide us with adequate descriptions and helpful evaluations of various rhetorical theories.[13] Maurice Natanson has cautioned us that we will not achieve a fruitful philosophy of rhetoric if we neglect to re-establish the link between rhetoric and dialectics that Plato and Aristotle had advocated.[14] Maybe what we need to do at this point is to pause a moment in the dialogue that we have been engaged in among ourselves in the last three or four years and lend an ear to the information and insights that scholars from other disciplines can give us about the composition process.

I would propose that Marshall McLuhan's book *Understanding Media* be made required reading for all teachers of English. One thing this book can do is help those of us whose education was gained largely through the medium of print to understand why our students, whose learning processes have been profoundly influenced by electronic media, have so much difficulty with reading and writing. We could be wrong, those of us who complain that TV has made passive automatons of its addicts; Marshall McLuhan, on the other hand, could be right when he contends that a low-definition, "cool" medium like television demands from its viewers more participation, more commitment, than frozen, linear print demands from its readers. If Marshall McLuhan's apocalyptic pronouncements about our imploding electronic world are true, then we shall have to take a good hard look at our curricula, our textbooks, and our teaching methods. In that process of reassessment, we might find that some of McLuhan's insights will be helpful to us in fashioning a rhetoric that is relevant to our age. The rhetorics of the past have all been concerned with the composition of a discursive, uninterrupted monologue. What we seem to need now is a rhetoric of the process rather than of the product, a rhetoric to guide us in forming the mosaic structure of so much of our policy-setting, information-dispensing, attitude-forming discourse today—the brain-picking sessions, the symposia, the panel-discussion, the interview—in short, a rhetoric of the stop-and-go, give-and-take dialogue, or should we say the "polylogue"?

If the same kind of topnotch people who turned their attention in the postwar years to the development of semantics, linguistics, and literary criticism apply their talents to the development of rhetorical theory and practice, then we are likely to have a vigorous revival of rhetoric, and the revival will increase its chances of creating a valuable legacy for the profession. But maybe, as Ken Macrorie recently reminded us, it would be salutary for us, as we seek to restore rhetoric to the curriculum, to keep in mind what Ben Jonson once said: "I would no more chuse a Rhetorician, for reigning in a Schoole, than I would a Pilot for rowing in a Pond."

NOTES

1. Wayne C. Booth, "The Revival of Rhetoric," *PMLA*, LXXX (May, 1965), 8–12.

2. "The Function of Rhetoric as Effective Expression," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, X (June, 1949), 344–45.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 356.

4. "Rhetoric in the Middle Ages," in *Critics and Criticism, Ancient and Modern*, ed. Ronald S. Crane (Chicago, 1952), p. 295.

5. For this survey I am heavily indebted to Ronald F. Reid, "The Boylston Professorship of Rhetoric and Oratory, 1806–1904: A Case Study in Changing Concepts of Rhetoric and Pedagogy," *QJS*, XLV (October, 1959), 239–257.

6. See Paul C. Rodgers, Jr., "Alexander Bain and the Rise of the Organic Paragraph," *QJS*, LI (December, 1965), 399–408.

7. I. A. Richards, *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (New York, 1936) p. 3; W. M. Parrish, "The Tradition of Rhetoric," *QJS*, XXXIII (December, 1947), 467.

8. Richards, p. 3.

9. See Joseph Schwartz, "Kenneth Burke, Aristotle, and the Future of Rhetoric," CCC, XVII (December, 1966), 210–216.

10. Virginia Holland, *Counterpoint: Kenneth Burke and Aristotle's Theories of Rhetoric* (New York, 1959); Marie Hochmuth Nichols, "Kenneth Burke: Rhetorical and Critical Theory," *Rhetoric and Criticism* (Baton Rouge, La., 1963), pp. 79–92.

11. Dudley Bailey, "A Plea for a Modern Set of Topoi," *CE*, XXVI (November, 1964), 111–117.

12. Richard Ohmann, "In Lieu of a New Rhetoric," *CE*, XXVI (October, 1964), 17–22.

13. Martin Steinmann, Jr., "Rhetorical Research," *CE*, XXVII (January, 1966), 278–285.

14. Maurice Natanson, "The Limits of Rhetoric," *QJS*, XLI (April, 1955), 133–139.

Headnote to
A New Look at Old Rhetoric

Lunsford: Your essay "A New Look at Old Rhetoric" deals quite a bit with the "topics" and whether the topics are useful or not useful. What is your latest thinking on the topics as a heuristic maybe in the light of the Toulmin strategy, the Burkean heuristic, and so forth?[1]

Corbett: Well, as I've many times confessed in public when people have asked me about whether I've used the topics, I didn't and I don't. I do say that when I look at something I've written I can see the topics all over the piece—they're there—but I didn't consciously use those to generate that material. I account for that because by the time I was faced with the task of writing, I had had to develop my own heuristic, whatever that is. That's another story. But what I have found is that for students who do struggle to find ideas, this almost mechanical method does help. That's before they have developed their own heuristic, but that takes some time. The topics can provide instant help and get you on your way. And although this was not something that was part of my education, I see that the topics are there in my essays. I can point to them and discern that this idea grows out of that idea and that this one grows out of this . . . I didn't consciously do that.

Lunsford: But you wouldn't go as far as Frank D'Angelo to say that topics reflect structures of the mind.[2]

[1]Stephen Toulmin, in his *The Uses of Argument* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958), proposed a model of non-demonstrative argumentation that consisted of elements he called Data, Claim, Warrant, Backing, Rebuttal, and Qualifier. Toulmin's model challenged the classical syllogistic model of reasoning and proposed that all real-world argumentation is rhetorically based.

The Burkean invention heuristic, usually called the Burkean Pentad, is an invention system based on a model of literary-critical analysis proposed by Kenneth Burke in the Introduction to his 1945 book *A Grammar of Motives* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1945). "The Five Key Terms of Dramatism," as Burke called them, are Act, Scene, Agent, Agency, and Purpose. These terms were later adapted by William Irmscher in his *Holt Guide to English* of 1972 into an invention system for composition classes. Burke's attitude toward this use of his work has been mixed.

[2]Frank D'Angelo, in his *A Conceptual Theory of Rhetoric* (Boston: Winthrop Publishers, 1975), proposes that topics of rhetorical invention, methods of rhetorical organization, and figures of style all reflect innate conceptual structures that are part of the mental equipment of all persons. This theory has been much discussed, but as yet it is not fully accepted by most composition theorists.