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Current-Traditional Rhetoric: Paradigm and Practice

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In the recent efforts to examine closely the principles which govern the teaching of writing at colleges and universities, one fact has become clear. For nearly a century, teachers of composition have been dominated by a paradigm, a set of tacit assumptions which has determined how they define and carry out their activities in research and teaching. Of the several discussions of this paradigm, Richard Young's is especially instructive. The paradigm, he explains, "determines, among other things, what is included in the discipline and what is excluded from it, what is taught and not taught, what problems are regarded as important and unimportant, and, by implication, what research is regarded as valuable in developing the discipline."[1] The overt features of this paradigm — what has come to be called "current-traditional rhetoric" — are apparent in nearly all of the numerous composition textbooks published in the last three generations: "the emphasis on the composed product rather than the composing process; the 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); the preoccupation with the informal essay and the research paper; and so on." The effect of this emphasis has been "a repudiation of teaching the composing process" and a focus on "a critical study of the products of composing and an art of editing" (p. 31).

While the external components of current-traditional rhetoric are familiar to anyone who has made even a cursory survey of composition texts in print today, the philosophical assumptions which make up the underlying paradigm are not as obvious. The most important of these assumptions are epistemological, having to do with concepts of the mind, reality, and the relation between the two. Our intention is to locate and analyze this paradigm — with a special concern for its epistemology — and to trace its implications for the rhetorical process. In doing so, we wish not only to dissect the paradigm, but to evaluate it, to make some statement about its adequacy for shaping a contemporary rhetoric. Our method, consequently, will consist of examining current-traditional textbooks to arrive at the tacit paradigmatic assumptions to be found in them. This, we think, will in turn lead to a better understanding of the nature of the rhetoric presented by the books, an understanding not possible as long as the implicit presuppositions remain unexamined.

The textbooks we have chosen are Sheridan Baker's *The Practical Stylist,* Fourth Edition (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1977), Sylvan Barnet and Marcia Stubbs's *Barnet and Stubbs's Practical Guide to Writing,* Revised Edition (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1977), Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren's *Modern Rhetoric,* Fourth Edition (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1979), and Gregory Cowan and Elisabeth McPherson's *Plain English Please: A Rhetoric,* Third Edition (New York: Random House, 1976). We chose these four texts because they seem to be especially strong representatives of the current-traditional writing text. All four have gone through revised editions, all are widely known and used, and all are respected. These books stand out for us, then, not in that they deviate from current-traditional concepts, but in that they articulate those concepts more eloquently and thoughtfully than most of the numerous texts like them.

Before considering the paradigm, a brief look at some of its historical origins will provide a useful background. The source of current-traditional rhetoric can be seen in A. S. Hill's *The Principles of Rhetoric (1878)* and J. F. Genung's *The Practical Elements of Rhetoric* (1886),[2] two college textbooks which are all but identical to the modern college rhetorics considered in this discussion. These two teachers of composition — Hill at Harvard and Genung at Amherst — were, however, not so much original thinkers as they were synthesizers of rhetorical theory coming from abroad, specifically the thought of George Campbell's *Philosophy of Rhetoric* (1776), Hugh Blair's *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (1783), and Richard Whately's *Elements of Rhetoric* (1828). These three treatises served as textbooks in American college classrooms during all or part of the first seven decades of the last century,[3] and the main features of current-traditional rhetoric can be traced to them.

In George Campbell, the progenitors of current-traditional rhetoric discovered not only their epistemological position, but their general conception of rhetoric as well. Campbell agreed with the thinkers of the "common sense" school of philosophy that the external world existed independent of the mind and that direct knowledge of this world was attainable.[4] For Campbell, the ultimate source of knowledge is sensation, not rational concepts or general truths. These sensations then make up the ideas of memory which in turn make up ideas of imagination. Sensations and ideas are related by the principle of association. This epistemology makes possible the discovery of certitude in scientific ventures. Campbell, however, considered science outside the realm of rhetoric since rhetoric deals not with certainties but with probabilities (pp. 43-46). Genung and Hill, on the other hand, extend Campbell's assertions about discovering truth in empirical investigation to the province of rhetoric, thus denying the probabilistic nature of the subject matter of rhetoric. This shift was also encouraged, it should be noted, by the success of the scientific method in the nineteenth-century.

Campbell also defines rhetoric in terms of his facultative psychology. Rhetoric is concerned with communication and is defined as "That art or talent by which the discourse is adapted to its end." Its ends are four, "every speech being intended to enlighten the understanding, to please the imagination, to move the passions, or to influence the will" (p. 1). Campbell's definition not only offers an early statement of the four modes of discourse,[5] but also provides the basis for the kind of facultative psychology which will dominate current-traditional rhetoric.

Blair's conception of rhetoric falls into a category which can be labeled vitalist. For Blair, discovering the content of the discourse is unique in every case and cannot be taught.[6] As a result, Blair excludes invention from the concern of rhetoric and focuses on style and arrangement. In doing so, he makes explicit what is only suggested in Campbell. Campbell's shift in focus from the discourse to the ends of discourse encourages a diminution of invention in composing. Furthermore, Campbell — albeit only in passing — makes genius an important source of the content of oration (p. xlviii), and devotes the second and third books of his *Philosophy* to matters of usage and style. It was Blair, however, who explicitly distinguished between what in learning to write could be reduced to rule — i.e., what is mechanical — and what must be left to the individual's resources. In doing so, Blair determined for Genung and Hill what could and could not be taught in the classroom. Blair's influence was also strongly abetted by the Romantic conception of creation with its emphasis on innate and spontaneous genius.

Whately's *Elements of Rhetoric* is in large part a response to the works of Campbell and Blair.[7] Whately, for example, also denies the place of invention in the composing process and includes rules of style and usage. His emphasis, however, represents a departure from his predecessors. Whately defines rhetoric as the "*finding* of suitable ARGUMENTS to prove a given point, and the skillful *arrangement* of them" (p. 39). His is a rhetoric based on logic, even though he does not exclude the emotional appeal. This rational emphasis may have contributed to the distrust of persuasion found in current-traditional rhetoric. It seems most certainly to have influenced Edward Tyrell Channing — Harvard's third Boylston Professor of Rhetoric and Oratory — in his redefining of the rhetorical situation so that it is almost exclusively rational.[8] Channing in turn was probably not without his impact on the rational bias of Hill, Harvard's fifth Boylston Professor.

The communication triangle, which is well known to readers of Abrams, Kinneavy, and other scholars, has been a useful tool for us in examining the philosophical assumptions of the current-traditional paradigm. We believe that an adequate conception of rhetoric must account in some reasonable way for the elements in the triangle: reality, the writer, the audience, and the discourse. We are also convinced that an adequate method of instruction in writing must give a prospective writer a conceptual framework that encourages exploration of each of the elements in the communication triangle in the attempt to bring forth discourse. Our discussion of the four texts, then, will attend first to their treatment of reality, then the writer, then audience, and finally the discourse itself. For the sake of economy, the discussion will refer to the textbooks by number as follows:

1. Baker's *The Practical Stylist*
2. Barnet and Stubbs's *Practical Guide to Writing*
3. Brooks and Warren's *Modern Rhetoric*
4. Cowan and McPherson's *Plain English Please: A Rhetoric*

Reality

For current-traditional rhetoric, reality is rational, regular and certain — a realm which when it is not static is at least in a predictable, harmonious, symmetrical balance. Meaning thus exists independent of the perceiving mind, reposing in external reality. Knowledge is readily accessible because of the consonance between the world and the faculties of the mind. Since reality is rational, it is best apprehended by the understanding. Imagination also is useful because it makes possible the production of the sensory qualities of an object or event. Emotion, on the other hand, does not contribute to our knowledge of the world because it is not rational. Because the reality that concerns current-traditional rhetoric is not probabilistic, as it was for Aristotle, or problematic, as it is for us, neither are knowledge and meaning. Error, in this scheme, is thus simply the result of inadequate observation or emotional perverseness.

These assumptions can be seen with special clarity in the discussions of the four modes of discourse typically found in current-traditional textbooks. Given the nature of reality, exposition becomes the most significant mode. One text's treatment of exposition is, in addition, unusually explicit in revealing the relationship between its epistemology and the four modes. Exposition, it is explained, "quite literally means to set forth a subject. It appeals to the understanding." Furthermore, exposition "is the most common kind of writing, for it is applicable to any task that challenges the understanding." As might be expected, in responding to a rational world which readily reveals its meaning to the observer, understanding is the most commonly used mental faculty and exposition the most called upon mode of discourse. What is simply "set forth" by the world can then be simply "set forth" by the writer in prose. The authors offer further confirmation of this view in explaining why exposition is studied: "When we study the methods of exposition, we are not following an arbitrary scheme; we are following the way in which we ordinarily observe and reason about our world." Moreover, as might be predicted for a world governed by rationality, all the modes of discourse appeal to the understanding in some manner: "argument also appeals to the understanding, but it does so, not to explain, but to convince the reader of the truth or desirability of something. Description and narration may, of course, lead to understanding, but their special appeal is to the imagination, to the reader's capacity for re-creating the immediate qualities of an object or event" (3, p. 44). Thus is posited an uncomplicated correspondence between the modes of discourse and the mental faculties.

Current-traditional texts treat description in a like manner. A typical way of presenting this mode is to provide two descriptions of a similar event, the first the work of a beginning writer and the other that of a professional. One text that does so explains the difference between the two in terms of "patience with detail, the concreteness of the passage," the specificity of the re-

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sponse of the characters described, and, most important, "the observer's physical position" (2, p. 173). The underlying assumption of this presentation is that both the experienced and inexperienced writers are responding to an identical experience, and that they should then be writing in a nearly identical way. Both should perceive the same events, in the same way, because the material world is uniform to all who make the effort to attend to it. Thus, the teacher's task is to elicit writing that corresponds to this world. This is commonly accomplished by simply reminding the student to pay closer attention to detail.

Narration is taught in a similar way. One text regards it as "one species of exposition" (2, p. 191) while another considers it unsuccessful if it includes details out of order, excessive comment, or a shifting of viewpoint (1, pp. 31-32). These failures, once again, are largely mechanical: the event was presented clearly in the real world and the writer was either careless in perceiving or careless in recording it.

Reality — the world "out there" — is thus a component of the communication triangle that receives extensive attention within the framework of current-traditional rhetoric. Predictably, there is a premium placed upon referential discourse, that is, discourse whose primary purpose lies in the act of referring to external reality. In succeeding sections we will argue that there is a concomitant diminution of expressive discourse, which is primarily writer-oriented, and persuasive discourse, which is primarily audience-oriented in its purpose. Here it is important to notice that the emphasis on referential discourse is demonstrated by the fact that current-traditional textbooks tend to approve of writing primarily to the extent that it is judged reflective of the external world. This concern for correspondence with an objective, external reality helps to explain the dominance of the four modes of discourse in the paradigm, for, as James Kinneavy has observed, "a stress on modes of discourse rather than aims of discourse is a stress on 'what' is being talked about rather than on 'why' a thing is being talked about."[9] As that stress becomes extreme, however, and demands correspondence with an objective, external reality as the all-encompassing and only test for adequate discourse, then even modes tend to become confused and distorted, and all modes tend to merge into exposition, as we have seen description and narration do. Argumentation suffers the most, though, because the world of the paradigm is, *ipso facto,* not arguable. Disagreements become differences about matters of information. Evaluation, which is sometimes proposed as an alternative term for argumentation, suffers the same fate. In an epistemology in which meaning inheres in external reality and not in a transaction between the observer and reality, evaluation and judgment become meaningless or irrelevant concepts, and argumentation, like narration and description, merges into exposition, consisting only of "reasoned analysis" (2, p. 149).

The Writer

The assumptions underlying current-traditional rhetoric imply three distinct kinds of constraints upon the writer. First, they tend to foreclose heuristic processes, thus limiting the kinds of discovery procedures that are assumed to be at the writer's disposal in relating to and using reality in the generation of discourse. Second, they radically reduce the perceived importance of the writer even in relation to the management of the discourse. Third, they restrict the kinds of behavior that are assumed to be appropriate in the writer's relation with the audience.

Broadly speaking, the processes one may follow in working through any kind of cognitive or creative act are of three kinds: algorithmic, heuristic, and aleatory. The three categories represent areas along a continuum of procedures from strictly rule-governed with absolutely predictable outcomes (algorithmic) on the one hand, to strictly random with totally unpredictable outcomes (aleatory) on the other. Heuristic procedures comprise a wide middle ground of activities that are neither wholly rule-governed nor wholly random. The conceptual tools comprising classical invention — Aristotle's *topoi,* for example — are instances of heuristics. A *heuristic* may be defined as a systematic way of moving toward satisfactory control of an ambiguous or problematic situation, but not to a single correct solution. Because the three kinds of procedures do constitute a continuum, the boundaries setting one kind off from another are necessarily blurred, and there inevitably are arguments about whether a given procedure is algorithmic or heuristic. Further, one may find numerous definitions of a heuristic that differ from (and probably improve upon) the definition just offered. Precise definition of the three areas, however, is less important for our immediate purposes than is the fact that there are the three kinds of procedures.

It was precisely the failure to discriminate these three kinds of procedures that led Hugh Blair in 1783 to reject the heuristic procedures of classical invention as mechanical algorithms: ". . . one would think they [classical rhetoricians] meant to teach how a person might *mechanically* become an Orator, without any *genius* at all. They gave him *receipts* for making Speeches, on all manner of subjects" (II, 181 emphasis added). Imbued with a radical dualism, Blair undertook to redefine the province of rhetoric: ". . . it is one thing to discover the reasons that are most proper to convince men, and another, to manage those reasons with most advantage. The latter is all that Rhetoric can pretend to" (II, 180). Ironically, in reacting to what he perceived as mechanical, Blair reduced rhetoric to a residue that truly was mechanical.

One need not search far in modern texts to find that this legacy is still with us: "The stylistic side of writing is, in fact, the only side that can be analyzed and learned" (1, p. 1). However, the other side of the dichotomy, the vitalist side, continues to whisper "genius," and the text writers, discomfitted, seek to ease their readers' (and perhaps their own) malaise through exhortations to relax and be creative: "Although some of what you are asked to do in this book may seem rather structured, it's not intended to stifle your creativity. The exercises you're asked to do, and the patterns you're encouraged to follow, should lead you to greater freedom in your writing, but it will be a more controlled freedom, deliberately directed toward the end you want to accomplish. Good writers must always find their own ideas, choose the best words to express those ideas, develop a sensible order, and work out their own support and examples" (4, pp. xvi-xvii). Yet, if a student's very difficulty lies in not knowing *how* to do these things good writers do, then the observation that one simply does them becomes not a comfort but an implied accusation: "You, student, will never be a good writer because you are not doing these things now." One text suggests, "Even if you are not sure that you have a thesis and an organization, start writing" (2, p. 26). It stops short, however, of providing enough concrete procedural suggestions to comprise a heuristic, and the student is again left with the demoralizing sense that the composing process is totally beyond rational control. The only thing remaining in the view of the paradigm that can be controlled — and can be taught — is an array of mechanical procedures, which in fact are techniques for editing the finished product, the very product which the student could not effectively produce in the first place.[10]

The current-traditionalist's conception of the composing process as mysterious and unteachable is, however, in the main im-

plicit. When composing is dealt with explicitly, it reflects the reduction of knowing to an objective mechanical activity. Still, it must be noted, even here there are traces of vitalist assumptions. Since meaning inheres in external reality, it follows that not only the content but also the organization and indeed even the thesis of a composition would likewise inhere in external reality. Hence, the writer is advised, "Find your thesis (1, p. 2). The thesis exists outside the writer. It becomes something which the writer casts about in search for, rather than something that grows internally and is the motivating force behind the writing in the first place. The writer is next advised, "Sharpen your thesis" (1, p. 4). This advice would seem to be leading toward the elucidation of a process, either heuristic or algorithmic, but what follows instead is a series of results, not a process, suggesting that vitalist assumptions about the process are continuing to operate. The third phase of advice removes any remaining doubt about where a thesis comes from: "Believe your thesis" (1, p. 5). If the epistemology allowed for meaning to grow from a transaction between the world and the writer, then it might allow for writing and for a thesis that *begins* in belief or commitment. The advice to believe one's thesis would then be unnecessary.

Further results of this epistemology can be seen operating throughout the texts in their advice to the writer on finding and limiting a topic. Topic, thesis, and organization seem to come to the writer in whole cloth so that the composition is almost predetermined: "If, when you look at your main idea sentence, you cannot think of three or four paragraphs that would logically develop from it, discard that sentence and find another one" (4, p. 12). In another text, the student is assured that the external world is logical because it is unified. The test of unity tells when one has arrived at an objective truth, because "unity is not a limitation imposed from the outside. It is inherent in the subject. If we decide that 'George Washington' is too general and vague to give us a true subject for a composition—that is, that it lacks unity—and settle on 'What the Frontier taught George Washington,' we can do this only because the frontier *did* teach Washington something, and because, no matter how deeply related this fact is to Washington's whole career, it can be thought about as separate; it has a natural unity." The authors go on to assure the reader: "We recognize unity. We do not impose it" (3, p. 21).

As one moves to an examination of the writer in relation to the audience, one can see the paradigm continuing to militate against the writer. For example, one text recommends that traces of the self be removed from the statement of the thesis so that it becomes an objective account rather than a report of a subjective impression. The result: "You become the informed adult, showing the reader around firmly, politely, and persuasively" (1, p. 6). Another advises, ". . . when you write you are the teacher" (2, p. 19). The writer's main function has now become essentially negative: to avoid getting in the way and muddying the lucid exposition of the external world.

Predictably, the texts spend little time discussing expressive writing. One text has a brief section on the journal, a genre one would expect to be almost solipsistic in its emphasis on self-expression. However, the text recommends the use of the journal not as a tool for self-expression but as an aid in acquiring fluency (2, p. 445). Thus the tendency of the paradigm to reduce the significance of the writer and to emphasize the mechanical aspects of composition remains consistently strong, even when the texts address a genre that would characteristically elevate the importance of the writer.

The Audience

The same assumptions that tend to diminish the importance of the writer also tend to diminish the importance of the audience. Just as the writer is perceived as the teacher or as "the informed adult," the audience is perceived as a pupil, an essentially passive receptor of information. In short, then, the current-traditional paradigm tends to reduce the entire communication model to neutral observers in a neutral world exchanging neutral messages.

One result is that audience analysis receives little or no attention. Given the epistemology, there is no real need for it since the audience, like the writer, is perceived to be participating rationally and objectively in the observing of a rational, nonproblematical world. No particular audience seen through this lens should differ materially from any other audience. Hence, there is no reason to distinguish among different audiences. One text included here recommends asking three short questions about the audience in generating information about any topic (2, pp. 6-7), and all the texts make passing mention of the importance of engaging the interest of the audience. However, the kind of audience analysis found in Aristotle, Campbell, or Whately simply has no place in the current-traditional paradigm because of its anti-rational implications. To consider the audience is to shift from the focus on objective truth to the emotional subjectivism of persuasion.

In fact, persuasion, which was the *raison d'etre* of classical rhetoric, occupies an uneasy place in the rhetoric of the current-traditional paradigm. Persuasive discourse, discourse which has goals primarily related to the audience and to moving the audience tends to disappear from composition instruction informed by the current-traditional paradigm, only occasionally reentering through the back door in the fusion (and confusion) with the mode of argumentation. Two of the three bases of persuasion in Aristotle's *Rhetoric,* the ethical and emotional appeals, are foreclosed altogether by the rational, mechanistic epistemology. *Logos,* the remaining basis of appeal to the audience, is reduced to a simple reporting of the facts. Given a uniform, knowable world, disagreement can only happen when one party is ignorant of one or more pertinent facts. To achieve agreement, the writer simply reports these facts clearly and concisely, and the decoder's world view is then corrected and is once again congruent with that of the writer and with reality. The only alternative persuasive strategy such an epistemology allows is still worse: a cynical *withholding* of information, a deception.

An examination of the textbooks considered here reveals the ambiguous role of persuasion in the paradigm. In a chapter entitled "Writing to Persuade," one text gives the following advice: "Although emotional appeals by themselves are not enough to support a belief, there's nothing wrong with emotion as a way of getting readers interested" (4, p. 260). Even matters of belief become largely rational, and emotion can be used only to gain attention. Later, in giving advice on "Slanted Words," the same authors encourage "definite, specific language" but warn against making appeals to the emotions: "1. Are the vivid words used to make meaning clearer or just to get readers to purr—or snarl? 2. Is the appeal to your emotions or to your mind?" (4, p. 302). Another text offers the following definition of persuasion: "To persuade is to win over, or to convince. These two are not the same thing; if we win people over by, say, an appeal to their emotions, we have not convinced them, only conquered them. To convince them we must persuade them by presenting evidence and reasonable arguments for our opinions" (2, p. 144). This text then goes on to define what is essentially the ethical appeal—"We must present ourselves as writers worth reading"—but does so strictly in terms of the writer's style: spelling, appropriate diction, definition, examples. A third text is more

aware of the distinction between argument and persuasion and devotes a chapter to each. Furthermore, the section on persuasion goes a long way to correcting the cynical definition of persuasion which had appeared in an earlier edition of the text: "Persuasion is the act, primarily verbal, by which you get somebody to do what you want and make him, at the same time. think that this is what he wanted to do all the time."[11] The overall treatment of persuasion and argument, however, reveals that the authors prefer argument to persuasion, a position perfectly consistent with the epistemology of the current-traditional paradigm. Indeed, we would argue that this epistemology invariably will stand in the way of a satisfactory treatment of the audience and of discourse which arises out of a need to move the audience.

The Discourse

If, as has been pointed out, one of the overt features of the current-traditional paradigm is its emphasis upon the composed product rather than upon the composing process, then the effect would seem to be an elevation of the importance of the discourse. But the epistemology suggests otherwise since it posits only a single criterion of adequacy: congruence with that objective, knowable external reality. Whether the discourse is responsive to a need arising from one of the other elements in the communication model — the writer or the audience — loses significance in the same proportions as those elements lose significance relative to the transcendent and determining importance of the external reality. Some modern rhetoricians — Lloyd F. Bitzer and Scott Consigny, for example — have talked about "rhetorical situations," complex systems of dynamic interrelated elements that include the rhetor (writer or orator), the audience, an exigency or urgent need to communicate, and certain other elements or constraints.[12] A piece of discourse is judged in terms of how effectively it responds to the rhetorical situation out of which it was generated. On the other hand, the epistemology of the paradigm does not allow for this kind of complex and relative judgment of discourse. Within the paradigm, the discourse tends to be seen as an artifact rather than as a response to or an expression of a personal or social need, problem, or goal. Divorced from the dynamics of an authentic rhetorical situation, the discourse must be judged as adequate or inadequate according to its congruity with the fixed, knowable reality or with other artifacts that have been judged and admitted to the canon.[13]

One may ask how one piece of discourse is to be distinctive from any other discourse, given the powerful impetus for conformity that grows from the epistemology of the current-traditional paradigm. The answer lies in the concern for style, for here is the one avenue by which one may write distinctive prose, given the assumptions behind the paradigm. Hence the elevation of style in the texts: "From the freshman's first essay through the senior's last paper (and on through the doctoral dissertation and the corporate annual report) the expository problems are always the same. Indeed, they all come down to two fundamental questions: one of form, one of style. And even form is spatial styling. Since, in general, writing well is writing in style, I have found it practical to teach writing almost as a tactile art, in which students learn how to shape their material and bring out the grain to best advantage" (1, p. v). It is not surprising, then, to read in the critical literature of the discipline that the job of the rhetorician is "to choose wisely between ways of saying the same thing, between synonymous expressions."[14]

Conclusion

As mentioned earlier, scholars have pointed out that J. F. Genung's *The Practical Elements of Rhetoric* and A. S. Hill's *The Principles of Rhetoric,* both written in the latter decades of the nineteenth century, are the prototypes of the current-traditional textbooks that have dominated composition instruction ever since. It should now be clear that the philosophical roots informing these textbooks extend back even earlier. We are convinced that these roots were intact some two hundred years or so ago, and that even many of the overt features of the paradigm were suggested by the rhetorics of Campbell, Blair, and Whately. It is our contention that the current-traditional paradigm is even more powerfully and profoundly entrenched than has been supposed. And if we are correct in our analysis of the metaphysical and epistemological assumptions informing the paradigm and the implications of those assumptions, then the current-traditional paradigm represents a danger to teachers, students, the wider purposes of our educational enterprise, and even our social and human fabric.

The fact that a debate has ensued for decades within English departments on the issue of what should and can be taught in the composition course appears to have obscured rather than clarified the alternatives that are available. This debate has been dominated by the two polar positions: those who would teach composition as stylistic correctness or facility and those who would teach composition as an act of genius. The former have defined composition essentially as algorithmic. The latter, restless under the strictures imposed by algorithmic definition, reject all methodical procedure, defining composition as an aleatory process and approaching the teaching of composition as a purely evocative act. It is critically important to note, however, that these two polar positions converge on the underlying philosophical issues. Their epistemologies are wholly consistent with one another. Both ignore the problematical character of knowledge and meaning, and, hence, of discourse. To view composition as a complex heuristic procedure is to acknowledge — even to embrace — the assumption that the knowledge and meaning are tentative, problematical, elusive, and partial. The *via media* of the heuristic, rather than being a compromise between the other two positions, reflects a radically altered view of the world and of knowledge and meaning. And the long-standing debate in the English departments, rather than having been *about* a paradigm of composition instruction, turns out to have been *within* the paradigm. Thus, in a curious way even the centrifugal tensions pulling against one another within the paradigm have added to its endurance because the cacophony of the debate has camouflaged the underlying theoretical accord.

Do the textbook writers and the practitioners of composition instruction actually believe that the way we know is adequately represented by an epistemology that is innocent of Freud, Einstein, and Heisenberg, to say nothing of other disconcerting insights the twentieth century has given us about ourselves and our world? We think most do not. It seems likely that in many cases practitioners simply do not recognize the disjunction between their epistemology and their practice. As Richard Young has said, "The main difficulty in discussing the current-traditional paradigm, or even in recognizing its existence, is that so much of our theoretical knowledge about it is tacit."[15] Since the theory is tacit, we may not be conscious of its implications. Hence, it is possible for the momentum of tradition to sustain an inconsistent practice over decades without any sense of dissonance. And it is possible for the author of a text that epitomizes the paradigm to describe himself in the preface as being inescapably in the lineage of the heirs of Aristotle (1, p. vi). Such a statement does not seem dissonant until one looks carefully at the epistemological implications of the instructions to the writer that are summarized in the table of contents on the next page:

"Find your thesis. Sharpen your thesis. Believe your thesis." One purpose of this paper has been to make explicit this disjunction between the epistemology writing instructors probably hold and the epistemology they imply through their practice within the current-traditional paradigm.

Of course, even if a composition teacher senses a dissonance between epistemology and practice there remain powerful impulses for continuing to conform to the paradigm. The logistics, economics, and politics of the selection and use of instructional materials tend to militate in favor of the paradigm. In fact, it follows from the definition of a paradigm that there is limited availability of nonconforming material. More critical than the issue of materials selection, however, is the way in which any materials are used. For example, an institution might give free rein in the choice of materials and yet have a philosophy of governance demanding accountability based upon quantifiable, measurable behavioral objectives which are themselves sustained by a tacit set of mechanistic and objectivist assumptions. These concerns are clearly beyond the scope of our investigation, but they are part of a context teachers must recognize and must consider.

Some may wish to defend the current-traditional paradigm against our charge that it is reductive. They may point out that virtually all instruction in all disciplines necessarily entails reductions. Our aim here has been to distinguish counterproductive reductions from useful reductions. All models of the composing process, for example, are reductions. Some are useful, and so beneficial; some are not useful, and perhaps pernicious. When C. S. Lewis read a particular British upper-form textbook that was written in the mold of the current-traditional paradigm, he was so appalled that he was compelled to write *The Abolition of Man*. Lewis argues eloquently that to insist upon a strict disjunction between reason and emotion — to insist that good writing is simply a clear and concise representation of the objective, true, ultimately knowable world — is both contrary to the best that is known in modern science and is ultimately destructive of our humanity, leading to the abolition of man.[16] Similarly, Richard Ohmann, in *English in America: A Radical View of the Profession*, comments on the kinds of thought processes that are encouraged by the current-traditional composition instruction and traces the same kinds of mechanistic and objectivist patterns in many of the policy statements and rationales for U.S. policy during the Vietnam war. He then speculates: Is it possible that there is a causal link?[17]

At least partly out of a sense of the inadequacy of the current-traditional paradigm, several diverse conceptions of rhetoric, including a renascent classical rhetoric, have emerged. John Warnock has commented on a common feature that runs through this diversity: these new conceptions of rhetoric are distinguished, most importantly, not by their content or by the scope of their compass, but by the way in which the writer, the reader, and their relationship are imagined.[18] In other words, a change in the way the human elements in the communication process are imagined constitutes a change in the way meaning is seen to occur and to be shared. Such a change is epistemological, but it has profound ramifications that are ethical, social, and political. Because of the importance of these ramifications, we need to scrutinize carefully the epistemology implied by our practice in the teaching of composition.

NOTES

[1]Richard Young, "Paradigms and Problems: Needed Research in Rhetorical Invention," *Research on Composing: Points of Departure*, ed. Charles R. Cooper and Lee Odell (Urbana, Ill.: National Council of Teachers of English, 1978), p. 25.

[2]Albert R. Kitzhaber, "Rhetoric in American Colleges," Diss. University of Washington, 1953, pp. 98-108. Young, pp. 32-33.

[3]Warren Guthrie, "The Development of Rhetorical Theory in America, 1635-1850," *Speech Monographs*, 15 (1948), pp. 61-71.

[4]George Campbell, *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*, ed. Lloyd F. Bitzer (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1963), pp. 38-42.

[5]The immediate source of the influence in current-traditional rhetoric is Alexander Bain who is, in this matter, a descendant of Campbell. See Kitzhaber, pp. 191-195.

[6]Hugh Blair, *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, ed. Harold F. Harding (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1965), II, pp. 180-182.

[7]Richard Whately, *Elements of Rhetoric*, ed. Douglas Ehninger (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1963), editor's introduction, pp. xxiii-xxx.

[8]Wallace Douglas, "Rhetoric for the Meritocracy," in Richard Ohmann, *English in America: A Radical View of the Profession* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), pp. 110-117.

[9]James L. Kinneavy, *A Theory of Discourse* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1971), p. 28.

[10]By way of contrast, see Peter Elbow, *Writing Without Teachers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973). Elbow shares the sense of ineffable mystery at the bottom of the composing process, but he builds upon that mystery a complex of procedures comprising an inventional heuristic.

[11]Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, *Modern Rhetoric*, Third Edition (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1970), p. 238.

[12]For a discussion of rhetorical situations which also debates fundamental epistemological issues, see Lloyd F. Bitzer, "The Rhetorical Situation," *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, 1, No. 1 (1968), pp. 1-14; Richard E. Vatz, "The Myth of the Rhetorical Situation," *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, 6, No. 3 (1973), pp. 154-161; Kathleen M. Hall Jamieson, "Generic Constraints and the Rhetorical Situation," *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, 7, No. 3 (1974), pp. 162-170; and, especially, Scott Consigny, "Rhetoric and Its Situations," *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, 7, No. 3 (1974), pp. 175-186.

[13]Glenn Matott, "In Search of a Philosophical Context for Teaching Composition," *College Composition and Communication*, 27, No. 1 (1976), pp. 25-31, presents a philosophical justification for writing instruction based upon acknowledged models of excellence.

[14]Martin Steinmann, Jr., "Rhetorical Research," *New Rhetorics*. ed. Martin Steinmann, Jr. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1967), p. 20.

[15]Young, pp. 30-31.

[16]C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York: MacMillan Paperback Edition, 1965).

[17]See footnote 8.

[18]John Warnock, "New Rhetoric and the Grammar of Pedagogy," *Freshman English News*, 5, No. 2 (1976), p. 2.

Polarity in the Composing Process

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In his insightful essay of 1976, "Paradigms and Problems: Needed Research in Rhetorical Invention," Richard Young de-