

In the Library

IN THE CLASSICAL TRADITION

Amy J. Devitt

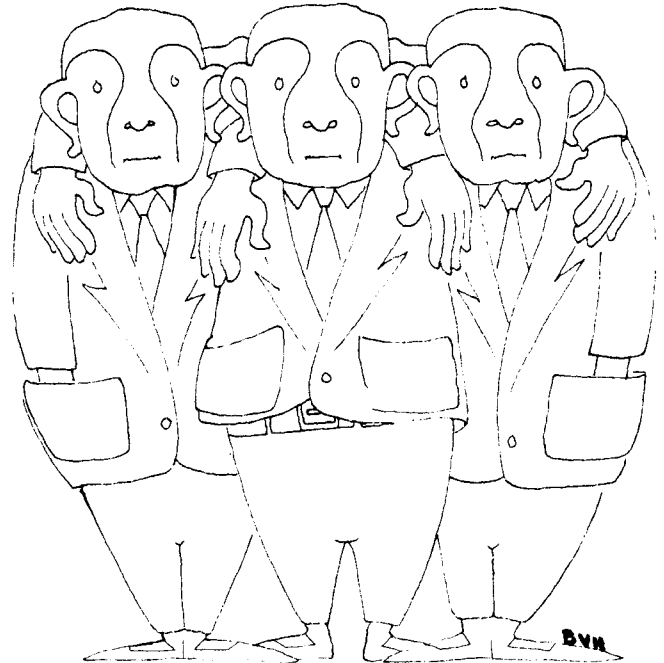
John Grove

In the perennial search for the ideal "substance" of composition courses, some theorists and teachers in the 1960's argued for a new kind of "substance" in the classroom: teaching the student how to express her creative self. Other teachers decided that this approach really provided no subject matter at all; and they kept on searching. Many believed they had finally found the answer in 1965, when Edward P. J. Corbett published his textbook Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student. Because he believes that the self-expressive approach produces few creative writers and many confused ones, Corbett argues in Classical Rhetoric and other articles that the most fruitful "substance" for composition courses is just what the title of his 1965 text implies, an adaptation of classical rhetoric. For Corbett, study of classical rhetoric improves students' reading of modern prose (see Corbett's Rhetorical Analyses of Literary Works); and such study allays students' fears about writing because it is prescriptive rather than proscriptive, focusing student writers' attention where it belongs, on the audience, and providing much-needed guidelines for writing.

Corbett's Adaptation of Classical Rhetoric

Corbett incorporates much traditional theory, but he explicitly adapts some of its principles in Classical Rhetoric. He accepts, for example, Aristotle's definition of rhetoric as "the art dealing with the discovery and use of 'all the available means of persuasion in any given case,'" but he enlarges that definition by arguing that rhetorical principles apply to any writing which attempts to affect an audience in any way. Such writing includes the traditional modes of discourse--argumentation, exposition, description, and narration. Since Corbett sees persuasion as the most dominant form of writing, he focuses his attention on argumentation, as did classical rhetoric.

The principle of classical rhetoric which Corbett deems crucial is this: "The subject, the occasion, the audience, and the personality of the speaker or writer will dictate the means we should employ to effect our purpose." He recommends that the writer begin with a standard method which rhetoric has established, discover and order the parts of an essay in a specified manner, and then decide how the situation dictates manipulation of the classical pattern of the essay.



SUPPORTIVE DETAILS

This standard method which the writer adapts to the situation is actually a linear process of movement through orderly steps. Although Corbett accepts the classical method, he narrows its five traditional components to three: discovery of arguments, arrangement of material, and style. According to Corbett, rhetoric begins after the student has conceived of what she wants to say and has stated that idea in a single declarative sentence--a thesis statement. The student's first step, then, is to discover useful arguments by exploring the traditional topics, a list of statements or questions designed to provide the writer with what to say. Next the student arranges her material into an essay. Again Corbett modifies

the traditional conception, this time reducing the classical five-part essay to a four-part one: introduction, statement of fact, confirmation (or proof), and conclusion. The final step in the writing process is "'thinking out into language.'"

Because form and content are related integrally, Corbett treats style as a matter of choosing among a number of possible expressions in a language. Choosing the "better" expressions involves working for diction that has purity, propriety, and precision and working for a style that suits the situation. This may be achieved by using the figures of speech.

In the study of style, Corbett focuses on another cardinal principle of rhetoric: Deviate from the standard method in order to best affect the audience. The student's presumed ability to deviate effectively accounts for Corbett's statement that "style is the most teachable of the skills involved in composition."

Corbett's Case for Imitation as Access to Style

Corbett advocates imitation as one of the ways to teach style. By copying, restructuring, and imitating the writing of professionals, the student will gain (1) awareness of the resources of language, (2) practice in varying styles, and (3) recognition of different effects produced by different patterns. The final goal, though, is not to have the student

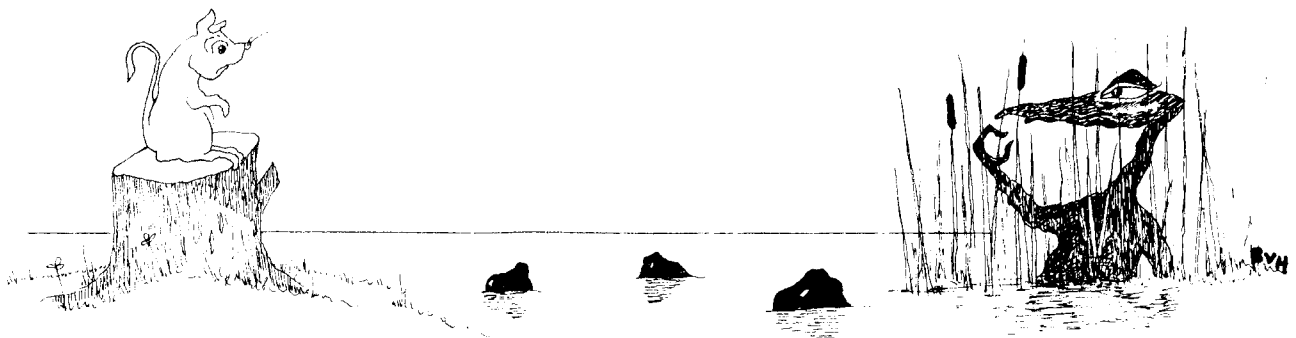
blindly imitate but to free her to use the new-found resources in unique and personal ways. In an article devoted to the topic of imitation, "The Theory and Practice of Imitation in Classical Rhetoric," Corbett states the desired result as "that internalization of structures that unlocks our powers and sets us free to be creative, original, and ultimately effective. Imitate that you may be different."

That internalization of structures sets the writer free is an implicit principle in all of Corbett's work. Yet Corbett implies a definite hierarchy, for the writer will not and cannot be set free until she has internalized the specific structures noted. In the section on style in Classical Rhetoric, for example, Corbett assumes that the student has a basic competence in grammar, for only with that competence, he states, can a writer proceed to develop rhetorical and stylistic effectiveness. His Little English Handbook attempts to provide the student with the necessary grammatical competence.

The essence of rhetoric demands adapting the discourse to the situation. The fact that Classical Rhetoric has few specific guidelines for such adaptation, while it has an abundance of guidelines for the standard method, implies Corbett's sense that the deviations are instinctive or intuitive and hence unteachable:

"As in most rhetorical activities, we must develop instincts for what is

Got it by sentence combining



Dubious Inference (left) is tempted by Emerging Selfish Interest to leap from safe assumption by way of specious premises towards Utterly False Conclusion.

most appropriate and most effective. Because such instincts are among 'the nameless graces beyond the reach of art,' rhetoric cannot equip the student with those instincts; it can only point the way" (p. 155).

Effective deviation, then, requires instincts that cannot be taught, that must be developed through practice. Similarly, one cannot "adapt" a standard method until one has internalized that standard method. So Corbett's work focuses on teaching rhetoric's standard methods, the structures that the student must know, before she can be set free to be creative with those structures.

In his article "The Usefulness of Classical Rhetoric," published just two years before the appearance of Classical Rhetoric, Corbett states:

"What most of our students need, even the brightest ones, is careful, systematized guidance at every step in the writing process. Classical rhetoric can provide that kind of positive guidance" (p. 164).

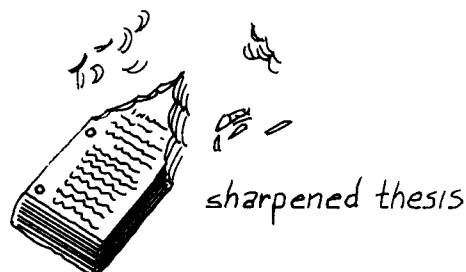
While other rhetoricians today focus on the situation which produces a discourse as the primary subject to be taught and derive guidelines from that situation, Corbett teaches the guidelines first, treating adaptation to situation as a modification of the standard method. He believes the student acquires rhetorical sophistication through practice in mastering a standard form and learning to deviate from it in ways appropriate to given situations. In offering such a schema, he provides for many teachers of composition the rigorous discipline and the "substance" which they have been seeking.

Baker and Warriner: Classroom Texts

Sheridan Baker and John Warriner also believe that students benefit from instruction in principles and precepts of writing, by imitating good writers, and by writing themselves. Their textbooks (cited in the "Select Bibliography") have

been used extensively in college and secondary school classrooms.

Baker's texts deal with all aspects of developing and polishing writing style, from finding a thesis in a topic and sharpening that thesis to developing style. His graphic representation of the structure of a well-written essay gives a



"keyhole" configuration to the classic five-paragraph essay. Baker advises the student to begin in broad terms, narrowing and focusing into a thesis. This thesis is then supported with details arranged in order of increasing importance. To conclude, the student moves from a restated thesis back to the more general context. In addition to his graphic aid, Baker offers advice on ordering details in essays, including spatial, temporal, cause and effect, problem and solution, comparison and contrast, and inductive and deductive schemas. All of this material is accompanied by examples and exercises to give students practice in the skills.

Syntactic exercises are also included, covering topics such as parallel construction, correcting wordy sentences, and complex and compound sentences. The handbook section of the text touches on the history of the English language, grammar, punctuation, capitalization, and usage.

The Warriner series of textbooks also explicates rules and provides exercises for the student. In English Workshops 1-5 and Composition: Models and Exercises 1-5, Warriner provides for practice in imitation and invention as well as specific exercises.

(cont. on p. 55)

Sheridan Baker (cont. from p. 29)

neighbors'." If you say, "This film is good," you transform the personal report into an evaluation, an intellectual proposition to be illustrated as valid before the whole universe. This is growing up, this shift from believing that ideas are good because you hold them to realizing that they are good because they are good, and can be so demonstrated. Writing confirms this realization as you persuade others that what you believe true is indeed true. Writing reveals that you can trust what you think, not because it is yours--that kindergartener's "I"--but because it has demonstrable validity. So writing is one of our essential means of realizing our maturity. Writing teaches us that our ideas are valid, not merely personal and adolescent whimsies, and it teaches us to think as we attempt to prove those ideas so.

Writing formulates our thoughts. It is our supreme teacher. All of us know that having to write about something is our most effective means of learning about it, grasping it for ourselves as we try to explain it to others. Our schools have sadly neglected this elemental means of learning. Do you want to understand how an internal combustion engine works? Get the basics in mind, and then write out your understanding for someone else, adding details and connections you hadn't even thought were there. You will understand it as never before. Writing is our supreme means of understanding, of discovering our thoughts, of learning, of grasping things in the mind. Reading a book is following a stream of understanding. Writing one is a whole Mississippi. The simplest single page of freshman composition writing demonstrates this process. Writing is discovery of thought. Writing is learning. Writing is maturity. We should use it in all our classrooms for all it is worth.

Sheridan Baker, author of The Complete Stylist and The Practical Stylist, teaches at the University of Michigan.

Amy J. Devitt, John Grove

(cont. from p. 34)

John Warriner's Warriner's English Grammar and Composition Complete Course, used extensively in high school classrooms, is divided into six parts: grammar, usage, sentence structure, composition, mechanics, aids to good English, college entrance and other examinations. The grammar and usage sections cover the familiar topics found in the earlier Warriner's texts such as parts of speech, parts of a sentence, subject-verb agreement, correct form and use of verbs, correct use of pronouns. Devotees of sentence diagramming will find everything from adjective clauses through subordinate clauses in the chapter on parts of speech. The glossary of usage at the end of part two is provided as a reference tool for correcting usage errors.

The greatest portion of the text is devoted to composition, including instruction on paragraphs, precis, factual reports, research papers, and business letters.

Amy Devitt teaches Introductory Composition and Expository Writing at the University of Michigan where she is a Ph.D. candidate in English language.

John Grove is a language arts consultant for the Warren Consolidated Schools, Warren, Michigan.

Edward P. J. Corbett (cont. from p. 28) just how much other systems of rhetoric and composition represent variations, extensions, refinements, or modifications of the classical system. I can promise quite confidently that readers will not find much that is wholly new in these other systems. The classical rhetoricians did not say it all once and for all, but what they said they said very well.

Edward Corbett has published extensively in the field of rhetoric and composition. He is presently teaching at Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio.