

# Metatheories of Rhetoric: Past Pipers

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In 1964, when Dudley Bailey published his essay, "A Plea for a Modern Set of Topoi," he cried to a discipline of English that had little interest in composition research and theory. Only a small minority of English scholars had begun to investigate the tacit assumptions underlying composition pedagogy and to develop alternative theories. But now, only two decades later, the situation has radically changed. Books and journals abound with theoretical and empirical research on composition; new graduate programs in rhetorical theory emerge each year. This richness of rhetoric within the province of English is nothing short of remarkable. But it may puzzle those who have recently entered the profession or who have suddenly become aware of this phenomenon. They may wonder how such interest awakened or why composition studies have taken the direction they have.

I have often asked myself these questions as I have looked back to the period in the sixties when I became interested in composition problems and discovered others so inclined. What drew us to research which was then so professionally unrewarded? The answer to that question is interwoven with the circuitous history of rhetoric itself and with the development of the discipline of English, a story already well-chronicled (Kitzhaber, 1953 and 1963; Applebee, 1974). This essay will not duplicate that history but will identify some major influences that I will label "metatheoretical" because they pointed out, directly or indirectly, what an adequate rhetorical or composition theory ought to include, ought to explain. These metatheories acted as pathfinders, as pipers whose voices drew composition theory down certain paths.

Although some of the earliest voices we heard came from different fields, a num-

ber of them merged to propose a conception of composition broader than of writing as the creation of a well-wrought urn. Wayne Booth called for his now-well-known rhetorical stance, a balance among the available arguments about a subject, the voice of the writer, and the interests and peculiarities of the audience (Booth, 1963). Such a conception was revolutionary in those days when textbooks rarely treated any aspect of situational context. Another spokesman for a broad conception of rhetoric was Kenneth Burke who envisioned a universe of language as symbolic action in which rhetoric functioned as an art of identification, "rooted in an essential function of language itself...the use of language as a symbolic means of inducing cooperation in beings that by nature respond to symbols" (Burke, 1969, p. 43). Burke deemed rhetoric essential for social cohesion, a broader and nobler view than the prevalent ones that considered rhetoric as verbal embroidery or as masked deception.

This more extensive conception of rhetoric was bolstered indirectly by the work of Kenneth Pike who argued that language could only be adequately understood in relation to a unified theory of the structure of human behavior (Pike, 1967). His idea of interlocking hierarchies influenced the development of tagmemic rhetoric which argued that intelligent syntactic or rhetorical choices could only be made in relation to larger contexts such as whole discourse, immediate rhetorical situation, and cultural contexts (Young, Becker, and Pike, 1970). During this period, Charles Morris' semiotics influenced the development of another theory of discourse by James Kinneavy (Morris, 1946; Kinneavy, 1971), a theory that extended composition beyond a preoccupation with exposition to other forms of writing. Moffett and Britton also

developed new classifications of discourse (Moffett, 1968; Britton, 1975) with similarities that Kinneavy has identified (Kinneavy, 1980). These reclassifications of discourse, stemming from semiotics, Piagetian psychology, or inductive research, not only challenged the reigning emphasis on expository writing, asserting the importance of expressive, persuasive, and literary discourse, but also argued against the pervasive confusion of aims and modes represented in the quartet--description, narration, exposition, and argumentation.

In harmony with these voices describing a broader province for rhetoric and composition, a number of scholars spoke of new epistemological ends. Booth advised a restoration of respect for probability, a sine qua non for meaningful writing in which good reasons support probable judgments. He explained that our modern culture's excessive reverence for facts and its relegation of everything else to mere opinion had created a climate inimical to teaching writing (Booth, 1974). A more radical treatment of probability was being developed at this time by Michael Polanyi who challenged the bastion of certainty itself, the sciences. Polanyi rejected the objectivist ideal of knowledge that insisted on complete exactitude, objectivity, and explicitness, advocating instead a passionate active commitment that involved risk and required choices, that led to judgments informed by grounds less compelling, judgments arrived at cooperatively by the enquirer and his accredited audience (Polanyi, 1962). Sam Watson would later characterize Polanyi's work as inherently rhetorical (Watson, 1981). During this same period, scholars like Scott, McKeon, and Perelman began to describe rhetoric as epistemic, arguing that the act of acquiring knowledge was a rhetorical process of intersubjective

choice-making and symbol-using (Scott, 1967; McKeon, 1971; Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969). These voices blended to draw composition theorists toward the view of writing as essentially an investigative process, a tool for inquiry, rather than as merely an act of reporting, of providing supportive facts for preconceived judgments. This conception also turned attention to the need for arts of inquiry, for accounts of how good writers discover, support, and communicate probable judgments and new understandings (Emig, 1970).

This view of writing as a way of learning and discovery was supported by an emerging interest in invention. Harrington reminded the profession that rhetoric had always lost life and respect to the degree that invention had not had a significant and meaningful role (Harrington, 1962).

Bailey urged the development of new sets of topoi. Studies of creativity and problem solving stimulated interest in the genesis of creativity, in the processes of discovery, and especially in the role of heuristics as aids to effective inquiry. Torrence and Guilford studied the abilities operative in learning and creating. Wallas, Newell, Simon, and Shaw examined the stages and processes of inquiry and problem solving (Lauer, 1967 and 1970). Lonergan analyzed the movement toward insight, speaking of its genesis as the "known unknown" (Lonergan, 1957). Parnes and Gordon experimented with methods of enhancing creativity (Parnes, 1967; Gordon, 1961). These studies contributed to the development of new exploratory models for writers and eventually to revised notions about the genesis of composing as well as about pedagogies for teaching the composing process. More specifically influential on new theories of invention were Pike's

tagmemic model and Burke's Pentad which composition theorists and textbook writers adapted to create new sets of topoi. These new exploratory guides as well as the entire emphasis upon invention that began in the sixties developed, therefore, in large measure in response to a variety of multidisciplinary voices that not only called for a reinstatement of invention but also investigated the nature of inquiry, offering a basis for new sets of topoi.

Another path opened in the sixties led to a view of writing as a collaborative activity. Philosophers advocated that rhetoric be viewed as a situation of risk in which both writer and reader change, rather than as a one-way exercise of control or manipulation of a reader (Natanson and Johnston, 1965). Kenneth Burke saw the goal of rhetoric as a consubstantiality and identification achieved through a dialectical process of naming (Burke, 1969 and 1962). Polanyi insisted on the importance of the community in the tacit component of inquiry and its necessity for original advances in knowledge (Polanyi, 1958). Carl Rogers, posited threat reduction as a basis for successful communication (Rogers, 1961). All of these interactive views of rhetoric began to assail the prevailing conception of writing as the creation of a product whose inherent meaning was unaffected by readers. Although deconstructionists would later refine this view, composition theorists had already begun to work in the sixties with a collaborative conception of writing.

A final influence I want to mention here was the work of Walter Ong whose studies

of literacy exercised a more subtle influence on the development of composition theory and pedagogy (Ong, 1967, 1968, 1971). Those who listened to him began to realize that any adequate theory must reckon with such complex cultural influences as changing technologies, shifting conceptions of education, and primary and secondary orality.

Composition research that began in the sixties, therefore, harkened to a variety of voices that suggested new ways of viewing writing theory and pedagogy. These pipers led to a reconception of the province of composition as more extensive than exposition or persuasion, as more meaningful and complex than isolated treatments of words, sentences, and paragraphs. They stimulated a view of writing as a process of inquiry, as a way of learning, capable of being facilitated by arts of invention. They opened up a perspective of writing as an interactive search for meaning rather than as the delivery of preconceived judgments, as the conquest of an audience, or as the creation of a well-wrought urn. They fostered the development of the inventional arts of beginning and exploring. And finally they prompted the investigation of multiple influences on the development and enhancement of literacy. Some of these paths brought theorists to forks in the road from which they took new directions; but many paths still offer important avenues for investigation. What remains characteristic of composition theory and pedagogy is its continued openness to multidisciplinary studies as a source of leads in its investigation of the complex human activity of writing.