Four Philosophies of Composition

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MY RESEARCH INTEREST in philosophies of composition and their curricular and pedagogical implications had two immediate causes.[1] The first was my reading of Charles Silberman's Crisis in the Classroom (1970). Although the book is primarily about elementary and high schools and although I am not persuaded of the soundness of Silberman's proposals, I found the book valuable in two ways. First, it highlighted the existence of serious problems in American education. Second and more important, Silberman said the problems were the result more of mindlessness than of maliciousness. The problem was not, he said, that evil or incompetent people were in charge but that educators exhibited a consistent mindlessness about relating means to desired ends. The second precipitating event was my rereading of M. H. Abrams's The Mirror and the Lamp (1953). Abrams analyzes four overriding theories of literature and literary criticism, each emphasizing one of the four elements in an artistic transaction.[2] Since the elements in an artistic transaction are the same as those in any communication, it seemed that Abrams's four theories might also be relevant to composition.

Any theory making the reader primary and judging literature by its ef-

fect, Abrams labels pragmatic. When the universe shared by artist and auditor becomes the primary element and measure of success, then, Abrams says, we have a mimetic theory, such as that of Pope and the Neo-Classical period. Emphasis on the personal views of the artist, such as in the Romantic period, Abrams labels the expressive position. And finally, theories emphasizing only the internal relationships within the artifact, Abrams calls objective criticism.

Abrams's analysis made me wonder whether a parallel set of four philosophies of composition might exist, each one stressing a different element in the communicative transaction. If so, each would provide—as do the philosophies Abrams outlined—both a description of the composition process and a method of evaluating the composed product. Furthermore, the existence of four such philosophies might help to explain both the widely recognized variations in English teachers' evaluations and (perhaps) what Kitzhaber in Thomas, Theories, and Therapy referred to as the "bewildering variety" of freshman composition courses.

For application to composition, I prefer to make two shifts in Abrams's terminology. I will keep the term expressive for philosophies of composition emphasizing the writer, and the term mimetic for philosophies emphasizing correspondence with "reality." But philosophies emphasizing the effect on a reader I will call rhetorical, and philosophies emphasizing traits internal to the work I will call formalist.

My thesis is that this four-part perspective helps give a coherent view of

[2] M. H. Abrams, The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition (New York: Norton, 1953), pp. 2-29.

what goes on in composition classes. All four philosophies exist in practice. They give rise to vastly different ways of judging student writing, vastly different courses to lead students to produce such writing, vastly different textbooks and journal articles. Moreover, the perspective helps to clarify, though not to resolve, a number of the major controversies in the field, including the "back-to-the-basics" cry and the propriety of dialectal variations in student writing.

Let me clarify each of these four philosophies and simultaneously attempt to classify a number of major theorists according to the value philosophies implicit in their writings.

Adherents of formalist theories judge student work primarily by whether it shows certain internal forms. Some teachers, for example, judge a paper a failure if it contains one comma splice or five spelling errors. Those are judgments based purely on form. Indeed, the most common type of formalist value theory is a grammatical one: good writing is "correct" writing at the sentence level. In the classroom, one studies errors of form—in order to avoid them. But forms other than grammatical can also be the teacher's key values. I have heard of metaphorical formalists, sentence-length formalists, and topic-sentence formalists, to name a few. And Janet Emig in *The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders* (1971) concluded that "most of the criteria by which students' school-sponsored writing is evaluated concern the accidents rather than the essences of discourse—that is, spelling, punctuation, penmanship, and length" (p. 93), four formalist criteria.

Few major writers accept formalist values, but two seem to me to do so. Francis Christensen elevated the form he designated as the cumulative sentence to primacy in value. He wanted "sentence acrobats." Similarly in his provocative and provoking *The Philosophy of Composition* (1977), E. D. Hirsch

builds an elaborate argument for what he calls "relative readability." Such a phrase has its origins in a reader-centered value theory, but Hirsch elevates such sentences to goods in themselves rather than goods because they communicate to the reader. He says that "relative readability is an intrinsic and truly universal norm of writing" (p. 89) and that "there are ways of making quite objective comparisons between passages . . . on the criterion of communicative efficiency" (p. 61). In other words, we can take a pair of passages and determine which is the better embodiment of "semantic intent"—without reference to a reader, or to the writer using them, or to the reality they reflect. This is a formalist philosophy of composition. And one assumes that Hirsch is designing a program to teach students at the University of Virginia how to produce relatively readable sentences. One's value theory shapes his or her pedagogy.

Although formalists are hard to find these days, adherents of the other three positions and of courses built around them are not.

Expressionism as a philosophy about what writing is good for and what makes for good writing became quite common in the late sixties and early seventies, perhaps gaining its chief emphasis with the famous Dartmouth Conference in 1967. Expressionists cover a wide range, from totally accepting and non-directive teachers, some of whom insist that one neither can nor should evaluate writing, to much more directive, experiential teachers who design classroom activities to maximize student self-discovery. The names most commonly associated with the expressive value-position are John Dixon (in England), Ken Macrorie, and Lou Kelly—the latter two of whom have written textbooks about their courses.[3] There

[3] Ken Macrorie, *Telling Writing* (New York: Hayden, 1970) and Lou Kelly, *From Dialogue*

were, in fact, quite a few expressive text-books, including James Miller and Stephen Judy's *Writing in Reality* (1978) and a fascinating book by Dick Friedrich and David Kuester called *It's Mine and I'll Write It That Way* (1972). Half of this book consists of suggestions for classroom activities, while the alternating chapters are a journal kept by one of the authors about a class he taught using those materials. Expressivists value writing that is about personal subjects, and such journal-keeping is an absolute essential. Another keynote for expressivists is the desire to have writing contain an interesting, credible, honest, and personal voice; hence the title of Donald C. Stewart's text, *The Authentic Voice* (1972).

Expressive views even show up in some surprising places. Ross Winterowd remarks early in *The Contemporary Writer* (1975) that "most people in the real world outside of school do not need to write very much" (p. 4). Consequently, he tells the student reader, "There's a very good chance that learning to do self-expressive writing will constitute the greatest benefit that you gain from *The Contemporary Writer*" (p. 8). Using Jung's comments on the function of dreams, Winterowd says that the purpose of such writing is "to restore our psychological balance" by reestablishing "the total psychic equilibrium" (p. 8). Taking "psychic equilibrium" as the major goal of writing leads to quite a different evaluative position from taking, say, "changes in audience opinion" as the prime goal.

The most common presentation of the third philosophy of composition, the mimetic, says that a clear connection exists between good writing and good thinking. The major problem with student writing is that it is not solidly thought out. Hence, we should either teach stu-dents how to think or help them learn enough about various topics to have something worth saying, or we should do both. Thus the first mimetic approach emphasizes logic and reasoning, sometimes formal logic as in Monroe Beardsley's *Writing with Reason* (1976), sometimes less formal logic as in Ray Kytle's *Clear Thinking for Composition* (2nd ed. 1973). Sometimes the mimetic-logical emphasis is on propaganda analysis—the detecting of hidden assumptions, emotional appeals, and fallacies in reasoning. All discourse does contain unstated assumptions; the problem with such assumptions arises only if they are also unacceptable assumptions, and usually, they are unacceptable because they violate reality as we know it. That is, an unstated or hidden assumption may be a writing weakness if writing is viewed from a mimetic perspective. Similarly, a fallacy is fallacious precisely because it contradicts what we accept as truth. Hastiness is not the problem with a hasty generalization; the problem is that reality as we know it rarely squares with such generalizations. Thus the teaching of sound reasoning as a basis for good writing is an essentially mimetic practice.

The other major mimetic approach says that students do not write well on significant matters because they do not know enough. One resulting methodology is to emphasize research during the prewriting stages; another is to emphasize heuristic systems. Still another is the use of a topically arranged anthology of readings. If a student reads four essays taking both sides on a controversial issue—say, capital punishment—then he or she supposedly will know enough to be able to write about that topic; that is, the writing will be closer to the "real situation" and thus better—from a mimetic perspective.

In almost any issue of *College Composition and Communication*, several writers espouse the fourth philosophy,

to Discourse: An Open Approach (Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman, 1972).

the rhetorical one. Such a philosophy says, in essence, good writing is writing adapted to achieve the desired effect on the desired audience. If the same verbal construct is directed to a different audience, then it may have to be evaluated differently.

Leading adherents of this view are E. P. J. Corbett, Richard Larson, and most other theorists who emphasize an adaptation of classical rhetoric. This group also includes the textbook writers who emphasize a writer's commitment to his or her reader as shaping discourse: Robert Gorrell and Charlton Laird in the *Modern English Handbook* (6th ed. 1976), Michael Adelstein and Jean Pival in *The Writing Commitment* (1976), and James McCrimmon in *Writing with a Purpose* (6th ed. 1976).

Given this four-part perspective, I was much intrigued by one of Peter Elbow's articles.[4] I had already read his *Writing without Teachers* (1973) and had had some trouble classifying him. But in this article, Elbow explained that his theories of free writing, collaborative criticism, and audience adaptation are really classical theories masquerading as modern theories. That is, he said that although most teachers judge student writing either on the basis of its truth or its formal correctness, his courses are built on judging student writing by its effect on an audience. Aristotle in modern dress.

Classifying Elbow as a rhetoricist illustrates an important point. As I said, teaching procedures have to harmonize with evaluative theories. More precisely, one's philosophy about what writing is for leads to a theory of what constitutes good writing. That philosophy, in turn, leads to a concept of pedagogical goals, and the goals lead, in turn, to classroom procedures. But the relationship between goals and procedures is complex,

4 Peter Elbow, "A Method for Teaching Writing," *College English*, 30 (Nov., 1968), 123ff.

because handled in certain ways, procedures that might usually be associated with one value position can be used to reach quite another end. Elbow's techniques *seem* to put him with the expressivists, but at least in 1968, Elbow saw himself, accurately I think, as a rhetoricist.

Similarly, I mentioned previously the expressivist penchant for student journals, but I also use journals, and I use them most often in the service of a quite different goal: critical thinking about reading assignments. To the extent that I use journals to teach writing, I am using them in the service of a mimetic set of values.

A reasonable response to this model might be, "Yes, those are four positions; they exist, but they are not mutually exclusive. Nor are they a problem. One can either hold to all of them simultaneously or pick and choose among them, depending on which one seems appropriate for a given piece of writing." James Kinneavy's very impressive *A Theory of Discourse* (1971), in fact, proposes that there are four types of writing growing from the four elements in a communicative act: reference discourse, expressive discourse, persuasive discourse, and literary discourse, each to be judged on its own terms. Moreover, the National Assessment of Educational Progress uses three types of writing growing out of three of the communicative elements: expressive (self-centered), expository (world-centered), and persuasive (reader-centered).

That a separate type of writing arises from an emphasis on each communicative element is certainly an attractive position, one that might provide an elegant basis for designing comprehensive composition courses. But such a view leads to both theoretical and practical problems, not the least of which is that it gives us no direction in selecting which writing types merit greater emphasis in our courses. Furthermore,

when used as an approach to evaluating writing, such a classification runs into all the problems inherent in determining intent in a text. Most teachers have seen student writing that was impossible to classify as one of Kinneavy's four types of discourse and that would be evaluated quite differently depending upon which of the four philosophies one applied.

My research has convinced me that in many cases composition teachers either fail to have a consistent value theory or fail to let that philosophy shape pedagogy. In Silberman's terms, they are guilty of mindlessness. A fairly common writing assignment, for example, directs the student to "state and explain clearly your opinion about X" (censorship, abortion, the Dallas Cowboys). There is nothing wrong with such an assignment. But if a student does state his or her opinion and if the opinion happens to be based on gross ignorance or to contain major contradictions, the teacher must, to be consistent, ignore such matters. The topic as stated asks for opinion; it does not ask for good opinion, judged by whatever philosophy. In short, the assignment implies an expressive value-theory. It does not say, "Express your opinion to persuade a reader" (which would imply a rhetorical theory), or "Express your opinion so that it makes sense" (which would imply a mimetic theory), or even "Express your opinion correctly" (implying a formalist theory). To give the bald assignment and then judge it from any of the perspectives not implied is to be guilty of value-mode confusion.

Modal confusion is not easy to locate, since one almost has to be inside a classroom to see it. A few instances, however, have been reported in the literature. Walker Gibson has told the story of visiting a high school class in which the teacher was emphasizing the idea of a *persona* within a piece of literature. She then shifted to composition and had a

boy read aloud a paper he had written. She next asked the class, "Now what's the trouble here? What voice did you hear in that paper? Is it Jimmy's voice? Is that Jimmy speaking or is it some artificial, insincere voice?" To this, the student responded, "I don't *have* to sound like *me.*" Gibson notes that he agreed with the student; the teacher had failed to relate her appreciation of the author-speaker distinction in literature to the student's writing.[5] For me, she had shown in her evaluation that she was at least momentarily committed to an expressive philosophy: "Good writing is sincere writing; it sounds like the real author." There is nothing wrong with an expressive philosophy, but there is something seriously wrong with classroom methodology which implies one variety of value judgment when another will actually be employed. That is modal confusion, mindlessness.

The worst instance of modal confusion I have come across was reported by Lawrence Langer in a *Chronicle of Higher Education* article entitled "The Human Use of Language: Insensitive Ears Can't Hear Honest Prose" (January 24, 1977). He tells the story of a forty-year-old student who in childhood had been in a Nazi concentration camp in which her parents had been killed. She had never been able to talk about the experience except to other former inmates, not even to her husband and children. Her first assignment in freshman composition was to write a paper on something that was of great importance to her. She resolved to handle her childhood trauma on paper in an essay called "People I Have Forgotten." Langer quotes the entire paper of eight paragraphs and about three hundred words, calling it "not a confrontation, only a prelude." It is a moving and painful piece with a one-sentence opening

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[5] Quoted in McCrimmon, *Writing with a Purpose,* 6th ed., p. 181.

paragraph, "Can you forget your own Father and Mother? If so—how or why?" The paper was returned with a large D-minus on the last page, emphatically circled. The only comment was "Your theme is not clear—you should have developed your first paragraph. You talk around your subject."

From the perspective of my four-part model, there was a conflict of evaluative modes at work here. The assignment seemed to call for writing that would be judged expressively, but the teacher's brief comment was *not* written from an expressivist point of view. It may imply a formalist perspective (good writing requires directness and development). Or it may rest on an unstated rhetorical perspective (for a reader's benefit this paper needs more directness and development). It is scarcely adequate in either case, and in either case, this sort of judgment was not what the student had been led to expect. There was once more a mindless failure to relate the outcome valued to the means adopted. My hope is that the four-part paradigm I have adopted from Abrams may reduce such mindlessness in the future.

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On a Photograph of Poe

Always the kidder, you would not say "cheese."
How you must have laboured to achieve just the right
Outbringing of this effect: that cadaverousness
Of complexion; the bloated flesh hangs barely touching bone;
The pallid temples flare above that catatonic stare.
Always perverse, you would not watch *that* birdie.
And the moustache—how that perfectly careless shag
Hides a mouth which begs for the life-testing mirror.

I have an urge to tickle your feet, to expose you.
You are not the midnight strap-hanger some say you are.
There are those of us who know you much better.
We have searched your dreamy chambers in Truth's day-star
To find joy-buzzers, joke books, and squirting hyacinths.
We've been there when you emptied your sleeve of laughter.

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