WHY DOES RHETORIC
NEED A THEORY OF READING?

Douglas Brent

Throughout history, rhetoric and poetic have always been intimately related, easily trading theory and technique. These borrowings have tended to occur most easily in the canon of *elocutio*: the figures have been passed back and forth between the two discourse arts to such an extent that a "rhetorical" view of literature often means no more than an attention to the use of tropes and schemes (Vickers' *In Defense of Rhetoric* is the most recent example of this tendency). This paper will argue that modern rhetorical theory and literary theory should be connected through the canon of *inventio* as well. Because new views of knowledge place reading at the centre of the inventional process, we must expand our notion of what invention means. In order to do so we should look in part to literary theory for inspiration, because literary theory has for years been inquiring actively about the structure of the reading process in ways that rhetoric has only recently realized are important.

This paper is a part of a much larger study that I am undertaking in order to build a theory of reading as rhetorical invention. Toward the end I will sketch briefly what some of the components of this theory might look like. However, the main purpose of this paper is agenda-setting: I want to explain why I think we need such a theory and where I think we should look for the elements of it.

Let me illustrate the need for an expanded theory of invention by examining the theory of one modern rhetorician. In *Modern Dogma and the Rhetoric of Assent*, Wayne Booth argues that modern philosophers have taught us to believe one of two extreme points of view. Knowledge originates either in scientific, objective observation of the "real" world, or in emotional, highly personal apprehension of values. Both extremes--both "modern dogmas"-- preclude rhetoric: objective observations do not need to be argued for, and emotionally apprehended values cannot be. As a result, "Passionate commitment has lost its connection with the provision of good reasons" (xi).

His answer is to recast a very old idea--that knowledge is discovered through dialectic--in a new form. To do this he uses modern ideas on the social construction of knowledge, particularly those of Michael Polanyi. For Booth as for Polanyi, knowledge is not created through the isolated self interacting with the physical world, nor even by groups of selves attempting to achieve Platonic certainty through the discursive testing of logical propositions. Rather, knowledge is developed communally "through a willing assent to the process of making an intelligible world with my fellow creatures" (105). Thus the self is "a field of selves":

> It is essentially rhetorical, symbol exchanging, a social product in process of changing through interaction, sharing values with other selves. Even when thinking privately, "I" can never escape the other selves which I have taken in to make "myself," and my thought will thus always be a dialogue. (126)

I choose Booth to illustrate this attitude to rhetoric not because he is the only or even the main exponent of it, but simply because he does so with particular clarity and insistence. This interactive view of knowledge interpenetrates every dimension of modern rhetoric. In *Invention as a Social Act*, for instance, Karen Burke LeFevre argues for social construction as a basis for composition theory. It is also at the root of Burke's vivid metaphor of the "unending conversation":

> Imagine that you enter a parlor. You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion, a discussion too heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. In fact, the discussion had already begun long before any of them got there, so that no one present is qualified to retrace for you all the steps that had gone before. You listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar. Someone answers; you answer him; another comes to your defense; another aligns himself against you, to either the embarrassment or gratification of your opponent, depending upon the quality of your ally's assistance. However, the discussion is interminable. The hour grows late, you must depart. And

you do depart, with the discussion still vigorously in progress. (*The Philosophy of Literary Form* 110-11)

My point is that the use of the term "rhetoric" for this process of building a world through symbolic interaction extends its meaning in some important ways. Persuasion is not the end of rhetoric but a necessary means. As Booth puts it,

> The supreme purpose of persuasion in this view could not be to talk someone else into a preconceived view; rather it must be to engage in mutual inquiry or exploration. In such a world, our rhetorical purpose must always be to perform as well as possible in the same primal symbolic dance which makes us able to dance at all. (137)

This definition of rhetoric essentially collapses rhetoric and dialectic into one process with social interaction, not deductive logic, at its core.

This view of rhetoric as essentially dialectical (or perhaps of dialectic as essentially rhetorical) destroys forever any possibility of a two-stage model of rhetoric in which knowledge is discovered by some other means and then transmitted by rhetoric. This model is associated most closely with Plato, but we also see a form of it in Aristotle, who treats rhetoric primarily as a means of discovering arguments to support a point of view, not as a means of discovering the point of view itself. It survived through the eighteenth-century in the "managerial" view of rhetoric espoused by Blair and Campbell, and in the twentieth century can be recognized in composition textbooks that tell students to go to the library first, then come back and start writing. This last incarnation is not quite on the same level as Plato's progression from dialectic to rhetoric, but it has the same effect: it severs rhetoric from discovery of knowledge.

Collapsing this into a single process of rhetorical inquiry impels a radical revision of our view of invention. Invention is traditionally seen as a forward-looking process. It funnels out from the single rhetor toward the audience and moves forward in time from the framing of a discourse toward its delivery. If we see rhetoric as part of an epistemic conversation, however, we can see that it also involves another movement, from the rhetor back into the vast network of conversation that helps him develop his views. In other words, a full

account of rhetoric must take account of the fact that the rhetor is himself an audience. Before he comes to the point of attempting to create belief in others, he has created belief in himself through interaction with countless other selves. If the inventional stage of rhetoric is to have any meaning now, it must mean more than the devising of arguments to support a point of view. It must mean constructing the point of view itself through the consumption of others' rhetoric.

Having brought the problem into the arena of rhetoric, we commit ourselves to answering the sort of very practical questions that rhetoric, as a fundamentally practical art, is always prone to ask. We must ask not just "What is it?" but also "How does it work?" Booth phrases this problem as the question, "When should I change my mind?"

Part of this inquiry involves constructing a rhetorical theory of reading. In our modern literate world--or at least, in the world of educated and intellectually mature adults--it is through reading that we make contact with many of the other selves, some long dead, through which we build our own selves. If we are to explain this type of invention, we must be able to explain how a rhetorician reading is able to take a disparate group of claims made by individuals, each with her own perspective on the world and her own reasons for seeing it as she does, evaluate them, and actively construct a single view satisfactory to himself. In short, we must develop an account of how readers sort through the bids made for their assent.

The problem with building such an account from within rhetoric is that rhetorical theory is not particularly expert at asking how we do this. Deciding when to change our minds on the basis of other people's texts implies at least two steps. We end by evaluating claims, accepting some and rejecting others. But first we must *interpret* others' texts, for we cannot judge another's beliefs until we think we understand what they are. Rhetoric, a process that "has its end in judgement" as Aristotle puts it, has developed quite a few ideas about this second stage, but says very little about the first.

Traditional rhetoric simply had to have faith that an audience could interpret accurately. Rhetoric is traditionally defined as the art of using language to influence others' behaviour and belief. This implies that discourse is a reasonably reliable means by which one

person can affect another. The rhetor must know that what he puts into his discourse will be roughly reflected in what the audience takes out. Otherwise persuasion is meaningless, for the rhetor has no predictable influence on his audience. To do his job, the rhetor must believe human beings act not at random, but rather for reasons that he can predict and use.

This assumption, however, has been treated simply *as* an assumption, an article of faith. The idea that it could be otherwise never occurred to the ancient rhetoricians. The idea occurs to Wayne Booth, for he spends quite a bit of space in *Modern Dogma* insisting that meaning is shareable:

> Not only do we talk and write and create art and mathematical symbols and act as if we shared them: we really do share them, sometimes. Sometimes we *understand* each other. . . . In short, we know other minds, sometimes, to some degree. That we often do not, and that the knowledge is never complete, is at this point irrelevant, though it has sometimes been talked about as though we were hopelessly alone. (114)

Booth never tells us who it is that talks about it this way, but it is not hard to guess who he wants us to think of: Bleich, Fish, Derrida, de Man, and all the other literary critics who solve the problem of unstable interpretation by denying that texts have any stable meaning, or that it matters.

This is an attitude that, if sincerely held, would make rhetoric impossible by denying its most fundamental postulate: that we can influence each other through language. Booth is certainly right to argue that we simply know, without needing proof, that it can not be so. We could not get on with our lives if it were so; to believe otherwise is, in the words of Bertrand Russell, "one of those views which are so absurd that only very learned men could possibly adopt them."

But for rhetorical theory as opposed to daily practice, this common-sense assertion of faith finally will not do. A theory requires not just an assertion that, but a model of how. In addition, the relationship between rhetoric and literature is too close for us simply to wave away theories of indeterminacy. In fact it is now

closer than it has ever been. In *A Speech-Act Theory of Literature*, for instance, Mary Louise Pratt shows fairly convincingly we can not locate the difference between literature and non-literature in formal features of the text or in the presence or absence of fictivity. Every attempt to do so is undercut by countless counter-examples. Louise Rosenblatt makes the same case in *The Reader, The Text, The Poem*. If there is any difference between rhetoric and literature it is not in the thing itself but in its use. The point is that if literary texts may have no stable meaning, and we cannot reliably distinguish literary from non-literary texts, then we have to ask how *any* texts have stable meaning. If we are trying to expand the canon of invention to include reading, we have to account for the way reading can be a reliable basis for changing one's mind.

Let us review the argument as developed so far:

1. To remain relevant in a social-constructivist age, rhetoric has to be able to absorb the social-constructivist view of knowledge.

2. To do so, we must develop a theory of how we construct knowledge through consumption of others' rhetoric, a process that includes reading.

3. To explain reading as part of rhetorical invention in turn requires dealing with--not just denying--arhetorical theories of reading that are too powerful to be ignored.

We have opened a Pandora's box that the ancients had the good sense to leave closed.

But just as certain branches of literary theory can create problems for an epistemic rhetoric, other branches can help build solutions. Whereas rhetoric has until recently dealt with the problem of indeterminacy largely by taking determinacy on faith, literary theory has been forced to grapple with problems of interpretation directly. Interpretation is the main business of literary criticism, and the differences of interpretation that even the simplest work of literature can generate so dwarf the problems generated by most rhetorical texts that it seems safe to declare literary theory the undisputed expert in this area. I wish to stress, however, that I am not primarily interested here in explaining the rhetorical effect of specifically *literary* texts, an inquiry that dominates the work of rhetorical critics such as Wayne Booth. Rather, I am after something

much more general. I want to borrow from literary theory some of the insights that can be applied to the building of a general theory of the rhetorical effects of *all* types of texts, including those which are typically described as "non-literary." Rhetoric needs to be able to explain how all the textual voices in the great conversation, from literary works through scientific, philosophical, and historical works, down to everyday instances of rhetorical influence such as the daily newspaper, get themselves interpreted in ways that allow the rhetorical building of self to occur.

There are two main bodies of reading theory that can help explain how readers construct meaning. One is discourse processing theories of comprehension. These theories use empirical data to build cognitive models of meaning-building. These can be a rich source of insights about interpretation, and are especially interesting because they deal primarily with non-literary texts. In my larger study I will deal extensively with such theories. Here, however, I want to narrow my scope to the other body of theory that can help us build a model of rhetorical reading: "reader-response" or "audience-oriented" theories such as those of Louise Rosenblatt and Wolfgang Iser. This body of theory is particularly interesting because it deals with the extreme case of interpretive difficulty, that is, literature. If these critics can find ways to account for stable meaning in the notoriously unstable world of literature, then *a fortiori*, their methods should help us explain meaning-building in all texts, literary and non-literary.

As a first step toward a rhetoric of reading, I believe that there are at least three concepts from reader-response theory that rhetorical theory should take note of: the "virtual work," the "repertoire," and the "wandering viewpoint." Let us begin with the concept of the "virtual work."

Rosenblatt argues that interpretation involves more than a reader and a text. The reader creates a third entity, which she calls the "poem" as opposed to the "text":

> It is not an object or an ideal entity. It happens during a coming-together, a compenetration, of a reader and a text. The reader brings to the text his past experience and present personality. Under the magnetism of the ordered symbols of the text, he marshals his resources and crystallizes out from

the stuff of memory, thought, and feeling a new order, a new experience, which he sees as the poem. (12)

She calls this process "evoking" the poem.

In *The Act of Reading*, Iser takes a similar view. For Iser, texts "initiate 'performances' of meaning rather than actually formulating meanings themselves" (27). This "performance" of meaning, like Rosenblatt's "poem," is not identical with either the text or the reader:

> [It] must be situated somewhere between the two. It must inevitably be virtual in character, as it cannot be reduced to the reality of the text or to the subjectivity of the reader, and it is from this virtuality that it derives its dynamism. (21)

Although Iser argues that the meaning of a text is evoked by the reader, this "is not the same as saying that comprehension is arbitrary, for the mixture of determinacy and indeterminacy conditions the interaction between text and reader" (24).

This concept gives new focus to a model of rhetorical reading. Once we see the process of reading as a process of evoking a virtual work, we stop asking what is "in" texts or "in" readers. Rather, we ask about the nature of the *transaction* between readers and texts. More precisely, what about this transaction is determinate and what indeterminate?

Iser's concept of the "repertoire" helps answer this question. Iser defines the repertoire as "all the familiar territory within the text. This may be in the form of references to earlier works, or to social and historical norms, or to the whole culture from which the text has emerged" (69). This repertoire, Iser argues, is different from the reader's mass of personal associations. It is organized as "schemata," pre-existing patterns which condition the way the reader forms meaning:

> The text mobilizes the subjective knowledge present in all kinds of readers and directs it to one particular end. However varied this knowledge may be, the reader's subjective contribution is controlled by the given framework. It is as if the schema were a hollow form into which the reader is invited to pour his own store of knowledge. (143)

The important feature of schemata is that they are shared. By providing a hollow form into which the reader's personal store of knowledge is poured, they act as a structure of constraints, giving public form to the reader's private associations. In one sense, these schemata are clearly also "in" the reader: it is the reader's familiarity with this territory that allows it its power to shape meaning. Yet these schemata are sufficiently stable across readers that Iser can speak of them as being "in" the text, forming a mould for the reader's more personal associations. They are actually "in" the transaction between text and reader, guiding the individual act of evoking a virtual work through powerful social forces.

The third concept that I want to point to is Iser's "wandering viewpoint." Although a text is linear, the virtual work is not. The virtual work is not on the page but is a construct in memory. We cannot attend to an entire work, even an entire virtual work in memory, at the same time, so the reader's focus must continually change depending on which segment of the growing work she is attending to at a given moment. Iser uses the term "theme" for the view of the work that the reader is involved with at a given moment; the other potential viewpoints, which continue to affect the reader but are not currently focal, constitute the "horizon." As the reader's viewpoint moves through the work, the present theme becomes horizon as another view becomes focal.

The wandering viewpoint helps explain not only not only how interpretation varies, but also how those variations are systematic. Remember the larger rhetorical situation in which the act of rhetorical reading is situated. The reader reads not merely for the proximate goal of evoking a meaning from the text, but for the more long-term goal of updating knowledge and belief. When trying to decide what to believe, the reader will actively search for specific pieces of material that relate to the questions she is asking. The viewpoint wanders in response to the kinds of things the reader wants to know.

Of course these questions are unstable. The act of acquiring answers, or partial answers, to some questions throws up new ones. This is like the well-established concept of the "research cycle": the reader, armed with a very general question, explores sources to find answers that modify and refine the question, which leads him to

different sources and back into the same sources with a new focus. But the wandering viewpoint puts a new edge on this old idea. It suggests that the reader's questions guide not just which texts he will go to, but how he evokes a virtual work from those texts.

Like the repertoire, the reader's questions are neither entirely predictable nor entirely unpredictable. A writer knows some of the sorts of questions that his text is intended to answer, for he knows something about the portion of the human conversation in which it is intended to take its place. Each part of that conversation revolves about certain questions that occupy a certain discipline at a certain period of history. The writer who understands the ongoing conversation in which his work will be read can predict--though without certainty--the general shape of the questions that readers will be using his text to answer. The rhetorical situation, then, is a vital part of the transaction between writer, text and reader.

This is far from a complete model of interpretation. It does suggest, however, some of the ways in which the interpretation of a text depends on a mixture of public and private forces. This in turn suggests what the rhetor can know about the audience that will enable him to predict response, and inversely, what the audience knows the rhetor knows.

I wish to stress that meaning can never be seen as totally determinate. Every minute we are confronted by minor and major cases of mismatch between what a writer intends and what a reader understands. As Kenneth Burke points out in *A Rhetoric of Motives*, rhetoric must always exist in the quarrelsome realm between perfect identification (in which perfect interpretation would be inevitable but unnecessary, since there would be no differences between people) and complete division (in which no correspondence between intention and reception could ever occur except by random chance). But I am not arguing for a theory of complete determinacy. Rather I wish to do for interpretation what Booth argues we must do for knowledge. The logical positivists, he argues, "have saddled us with standards of truth under which no man can live" (xii). To be able to say we have any knowledge at all, argues Booth, we must set the standard of knowledge lower, so that the variable, contingent understanding that rhetoric produces can still merit the label "knowledge." We must do the same with interpretation. We can never be sure that we know exactly what another means, and the

other can never be sure she knows that we know. But if we set ourselves rhetorical rather than ideal standards--that is, if we can be content with a mixture of determinacy and indeterminacy--we can begin to build models of how it is that "we know other minds, sometimes, to some degree."

As I indicated at the beginning, this paper is preliminary to a much larger study in which I build and illustrate the model that I have barely suggested here. This model is constructed from insights combined from reader-response criticism, discourse processing theories of comprehension, and rhetorical theory. All I have done in this brief paper is to argue for two preliminary claims: that a modern epistemic rhetoric cannot be complete unless it includes an account of reading as an inventional process, and that literary theory can offer us some important insights that we can use in building such an account.

WORKS CITED

Booth, Wayne C. *Modern Dogma and the Rhetoric of Assent.* Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1974.

Burke, Kenneth. *A Rhetoric of Motives.* Berkeley: U of California P, 1950.

---. *The Philosophy of Literary Form.* Berkeley: U of California P, 1941.

Iser, Wolfgang. *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1978.

Lefevre, Karen Burke. *Invention as a Social Act.* Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1987.

Pratt, Mary Louise. *Toward a Speech-Act Theory of Literary Discourse.* Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1977.

Rosenblatt, Louise. *The Reader, The Text, The Poem: The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work.* Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1978.