

2006

The New Critic Teaches Writing: Brooks and Warren's Modern Rhetoric

Jonathan S. Cullick

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.wku.edu/rpwstudies>



Part of the [American Literature Commons](#), and the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Cullick, Jonathan S. (2006) "The New Critic Teaches Writing: Brooks and Warren's Modern Rhetoric," *Robert Penn Warren Studies*: Vol. 6, Article 7.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.wku.edu/rpwstudies/vol6/iss1/7>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by TopSCHOLAR®. It has been accepted for inclusion in Robert Penn Warren Studies by an authorized administrator of TopSCHOLAR®. For more information, please contact topscholar@wku.edu.

*The New Critic Teaches Writing:
Brooks and Warren's Modern Rhetoric*

JONATHAN S. CULLICK

Modern Rhetoric, and its later edition titled *Fundamentals of Good Writing*, is the only composition textbook that resulted from the collaboration between Robert Penn Warren and Cleanth Brooks. Critics have paid scant attention to *Modern Rhetoric*, unlike its famously influential cousin, the 1938 *Understanding Poetry*. In general, scholars have not considered textbook studies to be among the more glamorous ways they can spend their time. Textbooks follow reliable patterns. Driven only by sales potential, educational publishers seek proposals that offer something unique to the market . . . but not too unique. The industry adheres to the simple rule that what will sell in the future is what has sold before, and if a competing company produces something original, then one's own company must imitate that originality to get a slice of the newly created market pie. Consequently, most new textbooks, regardless of their packaging, look somewhat like their predecessors and competitors. This rule is especially evident in the market for first year composition courses, which serve as gateway or core prerequisites in a majority of schools. Because of the ubiquity of these courses, the writing instruction market is huge. Publishers even compete against themselves, producing multiple texts with the same pedagogical approach on the assumption that if one does not sell, perhaps the others will. With comparisons among composition textbooks sometimes being slight, it is no wonder that scholars spend little time parsing them.

The anxiety of subordinating creativity to marketability might account for Warren's frustration with the experience of writing *Modern Rhetoric*. On one hand, Warren was an enthusiastic teacher of literature whose classes attracted many students who later would recall him as an energetic, brilliant instructor. At the University of

Minnesota, where he was teaching during his collaboration with Brooks on *Modern Rhetoric*, the student newspaper reported that students were packing into his courses, even standing in the back of the room to hear his recitations. However, Warren made distinctions between teaching activities and what he considered his true work. As he told one interviewer, he considered textbook writing to be “totally separate” from his creative work of writing poems and novels.¹

That sense of separation was all the more intense with the project of writing a composition textbook. His letters to Cleanth Brooks leave little room for uncertainty about his unenthusiastic feelings toward *Modern Rhetoric*. Early in the project he says, “I can’t say that my heart is set on the business” (28 Jan. 1943), and two years later, he writes, “I simply can’t get going on the composition book” (5 June 1945). In various letters, he refers to it as “that damned [Harcourt Brace] book” (7 Dec. 1944) and “the damned thing” (24 Feb. 1947). After discussing other topics in one letter, he matter-of-factly changes the subject: “About the God damned text book” (3 May 1946). As the project nears completion on January 15, 1949, he writes, “I got you into this. Can you ever forgive me?”²

Why did he take on such an unsatisfying project? According to the letters, the motive was the financial potential of that enormous freshman textbook market. On July 31, 1945, he says, “Damn it, we’ve got to do the HB book. We’ve got to get rich.” On May 3, 1946, he writes, “Let’s push the thing through and make a million dollars and forget the agony.” On June 30, 1947, he jokes, “God bless us one and all and let’s finish this damned book and make a million dollars and blow it all on riotous living to recover our souls.” And on January 15, 1949, as he contemplates the prospect of sales, he says, “The only ray of cheer is your remark that McCallum expects to unload 20,000 copies the first year. He damned well better do that and continue to do that until we are old and gray or it won’t be worth it.”³

¹Joseph Blotner, *Robert Penn Warren* (New York: Random House, 1997), 112, 165, 220, 253, 257; Floyd C. Watkins, John T. Hiers, and Mary Louise Weaks, eds., *Talking with Robert Penn Warren* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1990), 132.

²James A. Grimshaw, ed., *Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren: A Literary Correspondence* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1998).

³Grimshaw, *Literary Correspondence*.

The efforts and frustrations seem to have paid off. A letter from J.H. McCallum of Harcourt Brace to Brooks and Warren on 21 July 1949 attests to the institutions that had already placed orders for freshman or advanced writing courses. The list of thirty-five schools includes Boston College, University of Illinois, University of Minnesota, University of Wisconsin, University of Miami, Centenary College, University of California at Berkeley (some courses), UCLA (some courses), Howard University, University of Chicago, University of Arizona, University of Michigan, Oberlin College, Del Mar College, and Brigham Young University. “A very heartening beginning, I think you will agree,” McCallum states, “And I am sure there is more to come.” By 1958, the text would pass the 20,000 mark. By 1980, James Berlin and Robert Inkster were calling *Modern Rhetoric* a “widely known and used” text and were holding it up as a model of popular writing texts published during the post-war period.⁴

As artifacts of academic if not popular culture, textbooks and the socio-pedagogical contexts of their production are well worth study. *Modern Rhetoric* takes us to a period in which several forces were converging: the conclusion of World War II and the G.I. Bill, which brought an influx of middle class students entering college; the General Education movement, which resulted from the ballooning student population; the rise of New Criticism and Current-Traditional rhetoric; the emergence of composition studies as a valid field of scholarship; and the further marginalization of composition instruction, where contingent faculty, already in poor working conditions, were relegated to the status of a permanent academic underclass. During the post-war period, changing student demographics had an effect on pedagogy, and the composition textbook market responded. *Modern Rhetoric* was a product of these times and of the social, economic, theoretical, and pedagogical forces that shaped the modern university and the context of writing instruction.

The influx of students into post-secondary institutions beginning in the mid-1940s brought changes in pedagogy. The General

⁴Grimshaw, *Literary Correspondence*; James A. Berlin and Robert P. Inkster, “Current-Traditional Rhetoric: Paradigm and Practice,” *Freshman English News* 8, no. 3 (Winter 1980): 1.

Education movement began, and Current-Traditional rhetoric and New Criticism enjoyed parallel popularity that would influence later pedagogy long after they were challenged by the emergence of new process, linguistic, and cultural theories in the 1960s. *Modern Rhetoric* presents a unique opportunity to observe a moment in the history of academia when these parallel pedagogies converged, when two New Critics shifted their attention from the text as finished literary product to the text as student work in progress.

The book's publication followed many years of rising middle class American anxieties about language, especially writing skills. In "Rhetoric in the Modern University," Robert Connors charts the effects of this anxiety on composition instruction. The latter half of the 19th century saw the onset of the trans-Atlantic usage debates; as linguistic correctness became a cultural preoccupation, publishers responded with self-help usage books. In 1874, the anxiety reached the point that historians of composition tend to think of as America's first literacy crisis. Harvard University implemented its entrance examination and, upon finding the writing skills of incoming students wanting, instituted the first year writing course, a response that colleges and universities around the country would emulate. By the turn of the century, almost all post-secondary schools were mandating some kind of composition requirement for their newly matriculated students. The emphasis in these courses would not be on the process of composing, but rather on correctness in the final product: clarity, organization, grammar, spelling, mechanics, format, and presentation—hallmarks of what would be called the Current-Traditional rhetoric.

The challenge of grading for correctness was the large numbers of students, which made the labor of teaching such courses intense. No scholar wanted to engage in this tedious work, so the professoriate abandoned the teaching of rhetoric, and the new job of socializing all the "unwashed" freshmen was relegated to poorly trained teaching assistants and adjunct faculty with low pay, few benefits, and no job security. In 1913 the MLA-sponsored "Hopkins Report" was published, revealing these conditions, which, unfortunately, have persisted.⁵

⁵See Robert J. Connors, "Rhetoric in the Modern University: The Creation of an Underclass," *The Politics of Writing Instruction: Postsecondary*, Ed. Richard Bullock and John Trimbur (Portsmouth, New Hampshire: Boynton Cook, 1991).

Wallace Stegner's *New York Times* review of *Modern Rhetoric* reflects faculty attitudes toward this state of affairs. He observes, "There is a compulsion upon our colleges, sometimes rebelliously evaded but seldom successfully ignored, to put all students through the mill called Freshman English in the catalogues, unprintable names among the students, and The White Man's Burden among the English Departments which administer it." Warren's feelings about teaching composition were clearly of their time period. In an interview he said, "I can't imagine a worse fate than teaching just writing."⁶

Yet that was precisely the fate of many potential faculty who would be the primary audience for the textbook he and Brooks were creating in 1949, the same year in which the Conference on College Composition and Communication was founded to promote respect for composition as a discipline and improved working conditions for those who teach it. In his essay "Textbooks and the Evolution of the Discipline," Robert Connors charts the parallel developments of the textbook market and the status of composition teaching in academia. Connors observes how textbooks "have always responded to the preferences of the teachers cast up by the culture." With the booming post-war enrollments in courses that were already labor-intensive when classes were small, qualified faculty became more difficult to recruit. Consequently, such classes were usually staffed "by a low-level teacher who depended utterly on his textbook for both content and pedagogy. . . . Textbooks went from servants to masters, and teachers were correspondingly demoted until finally they were little more than grading assistants to the textbook author. . . . The text rather than the teacher [became] the centerpiece of the course."⁷

In other words, in Connors' argument, the rise of the textbook market and the decline of the job market are two arms of the same shifting balance. As composition came to be seen as a necessary course for socializing a broader student population into the academic

⁶Wallace Stegner, "The Art of the Right Word," *New York Times Book Review*, 16 July 1950: 5; Watkins et al., *Talking With Robert Penn Warren*, 92.

⁷Robert J. Connors, "Textbooks and the Evolution of the Disciplines," *College Composition and Communication* 37, no. 2 (May 1986): 178-180.

community, and as demand increased for faculty to teach these courses, the textbook rose in stature. Departments hiring contingent, temporary faculty could hope to assure quality instruction and curricular coherence with their adoption of a single textbook for the first-year writing course. The textbook would teach not only the students but the teacher as well. In those pre-disciplinary days, before composition was seen as a field with its own professional organizations and journals, the textbook would serve as a training guide for the teacher. Connors notes, "Composition was the only college-level course consistently carried on by people whose only real training came from the rules and tenets found in the textbooks they asked their students to buy."⁸

Modern Rhetoric provides this training in its first main section, five chapters that survey the modes or forms of discourse—exposition, argument, description, and narration—each divided into sections that set forth concepts, provide examples, present models with analyses, provide exercises for student practice, and list assignments for writing projects. The modes chapters are then followed by a larger section of seven chapters on the paragraph, the sentence, style, diction, metaphor, tone, and rhythm. Each of these chapters is organized according to the formula of presenting the concept, providing examples for imitation, and requiring practice for acquisition of the skill. The inclusion and structure of these chapters constitute a paradigm that remains popular in several present-day texts, such as *The St. Martin's Guide to Writing*, *The Prentice Hall Guide for College Writers*, and *The Longwood Guide to Writing*.

What all of these textbooks have in common is that each chapter serves as a self-contained unit that packages all the tools the instructor and students need. For this reason, this type of textbook design is often referred to as the "cookbook" or "toolbox" approach. As Brooks and Warren write in the "Letter to the Instructor" that introduces the book, "The text is not designed to teach itself," but it was written with the aim of giving the instructor more material than he might need "to provide for the instructor's work chest as many tools as possible." For adjunct faculty hired at the last minute,

⁸Connors, "Textbooks," 190.

for less experienced part time instructors, and for graduate teaching assistants who do not have access to courses in pedagogy or teaching practica, the text serves as an all-in-one syllabus and methods guide.⁹

Just as faculty working conditions would determine the content of the book, so too would the General Education movement, which arose in response to the new influx of students. An academic trend toward a core curriculum, General Education was intended to respond to the new student population by acculturating them to college as well as providing them with a common core of cultural knowledge deemed necessary during the period of Cold War. By the time of the G.I. Bill and the influx of students in the 1940s, Connors notes, "Almost every [composition] text covered obligatory elements like the levels of composition—word, sentence, paragraph, whole composition—and modes of discourse—narration, description, exposition, argument—as well as a number of minor fields that shifted with the book's emphasis—grammar, spelling, punctuation, figures of speech, outlining, proofreading" and so forth. This building-blocks approach to language that Connors refers to, structured upon the modes of discourse and attention to surface correctness, compiled in a complete teaching toolkit, were key features of Current-Traditional rhetoric.¹⁰

Texts such as *Modern Rhetoric* would reflect James Berlin's categorization of Current-Traditional as an "objective" theory of rhetoric, a theory that is

based on a positivistic epistemology, asserting that the real is located in the material world. From this perspective, only that which is empirically verifiable . . . is real. The business of the writer is to record this reality exactly as it has been experienced so that it can be reproduced in the reader. Language here is a sign system, a simple transcribing device.

Consequently, "Truth . . . exists prior to language. Language is regarded at worst as a distorting medium that alters the original

⁹Cleath Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, *Modern Rhetoric* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1949), xvii. (Hereafter page numbers for *Modern Rhetoric* will be cited parenthetically in the text.)

¹⁰Connors, "Textbooks and the Evolution of the Disciplines," 189.

perception, and at best as a transparent device.”¹¹

Because errors in articulation and missteps in the sequence of ideas create static in the transmission of reality, Current-Traditional rhetoric emphasizes clarity, unity, and correctness. The view of language as transcriptive of reality is also why Current-Traditional rhetoric focuses so strongly on the modes and forms of discourse (e.g., description, narration, definition, comparison/contrast, analysis, and so forth). The more a writer can learn and adhere to accepted, predictable forms, the more closely he will come to represent reality. Consequently, Current-Traditional rhetoric privileges exposition, an empirically referential discourse, over expressive or persuasive forms of writing, which shift attention to the writer or the audience. Current-Traditional pedagogy de-emphasizes the intuitive aspects of writing, such as discovery, and holds that the techniques or mechanics of writing—arrangement and style—are what can be taught.

The development in literary pedagogy parallel to the Current-Traditional rhetoric was New Criticism. As Berlin identifies Current-Traditional as a pedagogy of the mechanics of writing for a broadening student population, Eagleton identifies New Criticism as a pedagogical method well suited to the broad population of students entering the university in the 1940s. Selden and Widdowson note, “[New Criticism] encouraged attentive close reading of texts, and, in its intellectual and historical abstraction, [it also encouraged] a kind of democratization of literary study in the classroom.” It was “pedagogically economical . . . a way of coping with masses of individuals who had no ‘history’ in common.” Coping with those incoming masses through democratic, “pedagogically economical” instruction in clear exposition and surface correctness was precisely the goal of Current-Traditional rhetoric.¹²

In a 1980 essay in *Freshman English News*, James Berlin and Robert Inkster called *Modern Rhetoric* “especially strongly representative of the Current-Traditional writing text.” Berlin and

¹¹James A. Berlin, *Rhetoric and Reality: Writing Instruction in American Colleges, 1900-1985* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987), 7-8.

¹²Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 50; Raman Selden and Peter Widdowson, *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*, 3rd ed. (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1993), 13-14.

Inkster note that *Modern Rhetoric*, with its emphasis on exposition and modes, posits “an uncomplicated correspondence between the modes of discourse and the mental faculties.”¹³ The contents of the book bear witness to their observation. Similar to Brooks and Warren’s other textbooks, *Modern Rhetoric* begins with a “Letter to the Instructor” and “Letter to the Student,” followed by an introductory section describing the nature and relationships among the parts of the Aristotelian rhetorical situation—writer, reader, and subject. The first chapter addresses the challenge of finding a subject, organizing information about it, and achieving unity, coherence, and emphasis (more about these introductory sections below). As noted previously, the book takes a modes-of-discourse approach in fully equipped chapters, a structure similar to that of many other past and current “toolbox” writing textbooks.

Modern Rhetoric does differ from these other popular texts in two significant ways: the sequence of the chapters and the conceptualization of the writing process. Present-day texts progress from experiential writing (e.g., personal experience, observation, description, and narration) to source-based writing (e.g., exposition, profile, report) to critical/textual writing (e.g., analysis, critique), and ultimately the most critical, source-based, audience-based writing (e.g., persuasion and argumentation). *Modern Rhetoric* reverses this order. Chapters in present-day texts also tend to progress internally, guiding the student through heuristics of discovery in which the student generates topics of interest and then explores her initial thoughts, feelings, and impressions about the topic as a way of determining a plan for development and organization. *Modern Rhetoric* does not use this process model; instead, each chapter provides models, analyses, and exercises for students to practice and emulate. Brooks and Warren follow the classical precept-imitation-exercise formula for rhetorical training that dates back to Quintillian.

These two differences between *Modern Rhetoric* and present-day texts illustrate the distinction between Current-Traditional rhetoric and the rhetoric of process, which rose in reaction to it. Contemporary texts, with their emphases on the personal in early

¹³Berlin and Inkster, “Current-Traditional Rhetoric,” 1-2.

writing assignments and in the exploration process of every assignment, take an expressive approach, grounded in the student's individual experiences, interests, desires, and concerns. With its emphasis on the expository mode and a more objectivist process, *Modern Rhetoric's* roots are plainly in Current-Traditional theory. Where *Modern Rhetoric* does part with Current-Traditional is in its early emphasis on argument, though this is not a significant departure. The chapter is not about persuasion, which would necessitate a focus on *ethos* and *pathos*—writer and audience—typical of an expressive approach to instruction; the chapter is on argument, with a focus on *logos*. The chapter's extended discussion of propositions, syllogisms, and fallacies illustrates the privileging of logic typical of Current-Traditional pedagogy.

The Current-Traditional approach would lead one to expect a handbook section to teach correctness. However, the contents of *Modern Rhetoric* did not include a section on grammar, usage, punctuation, mechanics, or source documentation. Originally it was to have been published with a handbook section written by Harold Whitehall. The royalties would have been divided with 25% to Whitehall and 37.5% each to Brooks and Warren. However, the handbook was dropped because of the book's already large size, 928 pages with the anthology of readings and appendices (532 without the anthology of readings), and primarily because of negative reader reports in response to Whitehall's decision to shape the handbook according to contemporary grammar theory rather than traditional grammar. Readers stated that the grammar section was too technical to be within the grasp of the average freshman. In a letter to Whitehall, James Reid of Harcourt Brace included these reader reports, noted the complexity of the handbook section, and informed him that the manuscript's reviewers recommended its removal from the book because it would have a negative impact on sales. The publisher proposed instead that he publish a handbook for freshmen separately.¹⁴

As a product of its circumstances, *Modern Rhetoric* exemplifies the textbook market's expectations for a book to serve the contingent

¹⁴See James M. Reid's letter to Harold Whitehall, 1948, Special Collections, M.I. King Library, University of Kentucky.

faculty and burgeoning student population filling the classrooms. Brooks and Warren composed a textbook that fulfilled market expectations for institutional needs and classroom needs: a complete writing course toolbox for adjunct faculty as well as Current-Traditional pedagogy for students. Numerous other toolbox textbooks taking the Current-Traditional approach appeared in the same period as *Modern Rhetoric* and they continue to appear in various incarnations. However, what makes the Brooks-Warren textbook compelling for study is who wrote it. The authors were, of course, two of the leading proponents of that other major pedagogical movement of the same period, New Criticism. Where the Current-Traditional theory was an approach to teaching the production of student texts, the New Critical theory was an approach to teaching the reception of literary texts.

As the authors say in the textbook's "A Letter to the Instructor" that prefaces the book,

The revived interest in "rhetorical" problems has, in most minds, been associated with reading rather than with writing. There has been a great effort to enrich the reader's response to the texts of poetry, drama, and fiction. Yet one would expect this new interest in rhetorical problems to have some application, also, to the problem of writing. (xiii)

Brooks and Warren are referring here to what they call "the study of linguistic behavior . . . the discoveries and recoveries made in criticism, in semantics, and in related fields" since the 1920s, which they say "ought to yield something of significance to the teaching of English composition" (xiii). *Modern Rhetoric*, they explain, "attempts to garner for composition some of the fruits of this revived interest in rhetorical techniques" (xiii). With *Modern Rhetoric*, then, two New Critics shifted their attention from the text as product to the text as process, from the interpretation of literary texts to the generation of student-authored texts. At the same time, the authors went beyond the parameters of the publishing industry. Even though it is a writing textbook, *Modern Rhetoric* imports the vocabulary and pedagogy of New Criticism. Note that "the study of linguistic behavior" in their "Letter to the Instructor" includes criticism, which

of course means New Criticism.

It comes as no surprise, then, that the authors identify “the basic practice of this book and the authors’ best claim to possessing a method” as “the constant analysis of specific passages” (xiv). What is notable here is that the book’s methods depart from the modern textbook method of writing activities, such as the workbook exercises that became popular in the first half of the twentieth century or the process-oriented heuristics that became popular in the second half. “Indeed,” the authors state, “this book may be described as a tissue of such analyzed passages” (xiv). Their stated objective in this approach is to avoid generalization, teach by example rather than by precept, and avoid teaching written style in the abstract. Brooks and Warren tell the teacher that these goals justify their exclusion of the handbook section:

Indeed, the authors of *Modern Rhetoric* were so convinced of the value of such integrated [reading] selections that, when faced with the need to omit something if the volume were to be kept less weighty than an unabridged dictionary, they elected to drop handbook material rather than Readings. (xvii)

The authors are correct in noting that the instructor can make use of any number of standard handbooks on the market, for such texts were and are a Current-Traditional staple of writing instruction. “There are, of course,” they assure the teacher, “a great many exercises that provide opportunities for the student to try his own muscles” (xiv), but the pedagogy of exposing students to models of good or bad writing echoes the neo-classical *belles lettres* approach to rhetorical training that became common in the eighteenth century. With the book’s attention to metaphor and tone, which the authors defend as attentiveness to the writer’s fundamental tools, the close reading of model passages takes a decidedly New Critical turn.

The authors’ insistence on unity completes this turn. “Another feature of this text” presented in the “Letter to the Instructor” “is the recurrence of topics and the overlapping treatment of topics” (xv). Even though writers must learn about individual elements, “they learn by trying to take care of all the various elements at

play” (xvi). Thus, Brooks and Warren tell the teacher, “This book, in short, tries to make a practical solution to the problem of one-thing-at-a-time but also everything-at-once” (xvi).

“To write well you must think straight. And to learn to think straight is the aim of your education” (1). So begins “A Letter to the Student,” Brooks and Warren’s second introduction, which continues to emphasize unity. This “Letter” explains that a writer must keep three considerations in mind: the *medium* of language and its principles, which a writer must observe; the *subject* of the writing, which will “dictate the nature of the treatment”; and the *occasion*, which consists of reader and writer, whose motivations are expressive or communicative (2). The authors emphasize how these elements are integrated within the writer rather than discrete parts that can be separated. In a section subtitled “Keeping the Balls in the Air,” the authors stress the simultaneity of the elements:

In the process of writing there is no one consideration to which the writer must give his attention first. . . . In this book we shall take up various topics individually, and you may find it helpful when you are revising a theme to consider one question at a time. But the final piece of writing is always a fusion. (6)

The first chapter, titled “General Problems and First Theme,” teaches the young writer the textual elements of unity, coherence, and emphasis. Echoes of New Criticism resound throughout the chapter. The authors begin by arguing for writing as an integrated set of skills, explicitly rejecting the discrete skill method of the Current-Traditional building-blocks approach. They note that “it might be argued” that one should begin with the smallest units of language and work up through larger units, “but we could reply” that we use units of language in relation to other units: “We are first, and finally, concerned with the nature of our complete utterance, our over-all idea, our main intention” (11). It is an argument for organicism.

In a historical overview of the discipline similar to Connors’ and Berlin’s histories, Elizabethada Wright and Michael Halloran identify the typical organizational scheme for Current-Traditional textbooks. They progress “from words, to sentences, to paragraphs,

and finally to the whole discourse. The underlying metaphor is of the discourse as something constructed carefully from parts, much as a machine is assembled from its parts, or as science in the Baconian inductive mode assembles discrete observations into general principles." Consequently, the written rhetorical text is "a knowledge-bearing object, a mechanism by which professional expertise can be made available for use." As we have seen, the chapter sequencing of *Modern Rhetoric* adheres to this mechanistic approach. This is the same objectivist method that led one reviewer to say, "In all fairness it [*Modern Rhetoric*] ought to be used with the same close application that is commonly reserved for laboratory handbooks in science, which it somewhat resembles in its systematic methods."¹⁵

Yet, while providing a Current-Traditional rhetoric textbook for teaching discursive prose, *Modern Rhetoric* critiques the mechanistic nature of Current-Traditional pedagogy, persistently presenting a New Critical case for the poetic.

The first chapter explains how to find a "true subject" (an arguable idea suitably focused for writing). The chapter's argument for unity states that unity is neither external nor arbitrary or imposed, but internal to the needs of the subject. The section on coherence observes that "the elements of the discourse must stick together" (16). The section on emphasis promotes the use of internal structure to achieve stress—through position, proportion, rhythm, and repetition—as preferable over imposed tools such as underlining, italics, capitals, and exclamations.

The book's final chapter, titled "The Final Integration," argues for "the inseparability of form and content" (499) and asks the student writer to consider style, particularly rhythm, as the ultimate tool of textual harmony. The chapter's introduction explains, "We shall be primarily interested in the interplay of elements—in the total harmony which results from the blending of the various elements" (489). Arguing for the unity of form and content, they say, "We have observed that lack of rhythm is frequently a symptom

¹⁵Elizabethada A. Wright and S. Michael Halloran, "From Rhetoric to Composition: The Teaching of Writing in America to 1900," *A Short History of Writing Instruction from Ancient Greece to Modern America*, ed. James J. Murphy (New Jersey: Hermagoras Press, 2001), 233; Ernest Samuels, review of *Modern Rhetoric*, *College English* 12 (1950): 54.

of disordered discourse," and beyond being an "index of clarity," rhythm can create "emotional heightening" (491). The chapter follows with presentation of a prose passage of Emerson analyzed according to poetic scansion.

The next section, "Style as Harmonious Integration," echoes the organicism of *Understanding Poetry* in telling the apprentice writer that "it is as part of the whole that any element of style is to be judged" (498). In their well-known, often-quoted "Letter to the Teacher" that prefaces *Understanding Poetry*, Brooks and Warren argue, "A poem should always be treated as an organic system of relationships, and the poetic quality should never be understood as inhering in one or more factors taken in isolation."¹⁶

One of the concluding sections in this chapter of *Modern Rhetoric* is titled "The Inseparability of Form and Content," which argues, "A good style represents an adaptation of means to a particular purpose," and the elements of style "are not ornaments, but conveyors of meaning" (499). Good style is "the perfect garment of its content" and "is perfectly adapted to its content" and "the outward manifestation of the content" (500-501). The chapter concludes with discussions of style as a sincere expression of a writer's personality, what Brooks and Warren call "improper intrusion of the writer's personality," and "style cultivated by reading" (515, 521). This final section advises, "One cannot learn how to write unless he learns how to read" (522), making the case for imitation as a method for the writing student to discover his own way of being original. Like all the chapters that precede it, this chapter relies upon examples from classic and modern works of literature.

These kinds of literary sections were enough to cue the critics. One critic argued, "'Language,' for Brooks and Warren, seems to be the equivalent to something like 'literary language,' or 'competence in language,' to something like 'literary competence.' This is a competence beyond the capabilities of 'the ordinary student,' for whom the textbook is intended; yet Brooks and Warren tell that same student that failure to achieve it, inability to produce

¹⁶Cleath Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, *Understanding Poetry*, 2nd ed. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960), xv.

elegant prose, will leave him fumbling in a twilight world." Wallace Stegner had a similar observation about the book's frequent use of extended analyses of literary passages to serve as models for the student writer. Their method, Stegner suggested in a passage that echoes with the influence of New Criticism, "is more likely to produce perceptive readers than original writers."¹⁷

The criticism of the book's use of literary models may also account for another criticism, that the book is not accessible to the majority of students entering the university in the mid-twentieth century. One reviewer, criticizing the book's formal style, called it "a trifle wordy or even stodgy," noting that the authors are "Brooks of Yale and Warren formerly of Yale," and concluding by saying that the book "will find more use in Ivy League institutions than in those which must take all comers." "The complete Brooks and Warren [textbook]," another critic suggested, "long since eminent as a full course in freshman English, is because of its extended, almost encyclopedic nature a manual for teachers rather than a working text for students." Another observed, "It is clearly not a text that will teach itself," and "for the lower half or two-thirds [of students, it] . . . is likely to remain esoteric doctrine. The solution would seem to be to separate the strong students from the weak, the linguistically mature from the immature, and give to each group the textbook fitted to its capacities." A *New Republic* review observed, "It may be aimed too high for the average novice: toward a pure style rather than toward competent communication free from ugly errors."¹⁸ What might rest behind these critiques is the textbook authors' theoretical orientation toward the high literary. In their introductory "Letter to the Instructor," Brooks and Warren tell the teacher that the text makes much use of close analysis of textual models, explaining, "Most students, even poorly trained students, are intensely interested in the workings of language" (xiv). If this was their perception of the student audience, then Brooks and Warren's optimism may have run a little too high.

¹⁷R.J. Reddick, "Grammar and Rhetoric," review of *Modern Rhetoric*, *Centrum* 1, no. 1 (1973): 62; Stegner, "The Art of the Right Word," 20.

¹⁸Cecil B. Williams, "In Wand'ring Mazes Lost: Freshman Composition Texts," *College English* 20, no. 6 (March 1959): 315; Lyle H. Kendall, review of *Modern Rhetoric*, *College Composition and Communication* 12, no. 4 (December 1961): 252; Samuels, review of *Modern Rhetoric*, 54-55; D.A. Stauffer, review of *Modern Rhetoric*, *New Republic* (1950): 21.

One of the concerns critics initially voiced about *Modern Rhetoric* was that, despite its title, it was actually not modern at all in its use of linguistics. As one reviewer said, the book "cannot be accused of being unduly influenced of 'modern linguistic principles and data'." Another reviewer opined, "Brooks and Warren do not have much acquaintance with the results of linguistic research during the last twenty-five years—or the past century." A little less critical, Wallace Stegner said that the book is full of "old fashioned concepts" and called it "a traditional, not a revolutionary book" which differs from those of the previous thirty years "only in its meticulous thoroughness and the excellence of its illustrative matter." Most generous was the reviewer who, comparing the book to *Understanding Poetry*, said that it is "wholesomely reactionary" and as challenging as their more famous book of a dozen years ago.¹⁹ Reviewers may have been picking up their cues from the authors, who, contrary to their endorsement of modern linguistics, declare in the first paragraph of the "Letter to the Instructor," "The authors are conscious of presenting a book that will seem in some respects quite conventional and even old-fashioned. . . . This textbook makes no pretension to being newfangled or modish" (xiii).

Behind the criticism is the fact that Brooks and Warren created a writing textbook that rejected some of the mechanics of Current-Traditional rhetoric and endeavored to complicate the reductive dichotomy between rhetoric and poetic. As a result, there is much *Understanding Poetry* in *Modern Rhetoric*. The rhetoric/poetic dichotomy was present in the history of English departments that preceded the Brooks-Warren collaboration on this book. As James Berlin defines the terms, "Rhetoric is concerned with symbolic action in the material world, with practical consequences as an end, while poetic is concerned with symbolic action for itself, with contemplation of the text for its own sake," and here one can reference Aristotle's two treatises on rhetoric and poetic to see the difference. Originally, rhetoric and poetic co-existed and were even considered compatible, but as Berlin observes, "In time . . . this

¹⁹R.J. Reddick, "Grammar and Rhetoric," review of *Modern Rhetoric*, *Centrum* 1, no. 1 (1973): 61; Karl W. Dykema, review of *Modern Rhetoric*, *College English* 12 (1950): 56; Stegner, "The Art of the Right Word," 5; Samuels, review of *Modern Rhetoric*, 54.

relationship changed—unfortunately, much to the detriment of freshman English—as rhetoric became petrified in a positivistic configuration while poetic continued to develop and grow.”²⁰

That “positivistic configuration” Berlin refers to is the Current-Traditional approach, while the growing poetic he refers to is New Criticism. Berlin notes that while the philological approach to literature was being challenged, “Current-Traditional rhetoric, on the other hand, despite the numerous challenges to it . . . continued to be a force in most English departments and survives even today.” Berlin suggests, “One reason for this staying power is that the freshman course has been proffered as a concession on the part of the English department to the scientific and meritocratic interests of the university.” And thus Berlin concludes:

To demonstrate the unique and privileged nature of poetic texts, it has been necessary to insist on a contrasting set of devalORIZED texts, the kind of texts described in Current-Traditional rhetoric. . . . There is obviously also a power relationship implied in this arrangement. In tacitly supporting the impoverished notion of rhetoric found in the freshman-writing course, academic literary critics have provided a constant reminder of their own claim to superiority and privilege, setting the range and versatility of their discipline against the barrenness of Current-Traditional rhetoric, the staple of the freshman course.

Brooks and Warren go to great lengths in their textbooks to “set up poetry in opposition to science,” that is, to privilege the poetic above the rhetorical. As Berlin describes the book, “Their composition textbook, *Modern Rhetoric*, demonstrated explicitly their relegation of rhetoric to the scientific. . . . Brooks and Warren tried to claim for poetry a realm separate from rhetoric and superior to it, yet sharing with it a concern for a text existing independent of creator and reader.”²¹

Brooks and Warren often addressed the poetic/rhetoric dichotomy head-on. In the *Understanding Poetry* section titled, “Confusion between Scientific and Poetic Communication,” they

²⁰Berlin, *Rhetoric and Reality*, 25-26.

²¹Berlin, *Rhetoric and Reality*, 25-29.

argue, “People are constantly confusing the two sorts of communication. This confusion that causes people to judge formal poetry as if it were science is the source of most of the misunderstandings of poetry and of literature in general.” This concern for separating poetry from rhetoric accounts for their critique of the pedagogical practices of paraphrasing and didacticism, or what they call message hunting. They conclude, “The value of science we all know,” but “much of our experience eludes the statements science can make.”²²

In the 1936 textbook they wrote with John Thibaut Pursuer, *An Approach to Literature*, which precedes *Understanding Poetry* by two years, they draw the distinction that will develop in their future texts. In the introduction, “Why Do People Read?” they specify what makes literature unique: “It is surely not the kind of information that one finds in a book of chemistry.” In the poetry section, they argue, “Poetry, along with literature in general, differs from science in that it is interested, not in the communication of ideas merely, but of ideas and feelings about the ideas—or rather a fusion of the two.” In the fiction section, they argue for the unity and coherence that will characterize their definition of organicism in *Understanding Poetry*.²³

As an introduction-to-literature textbook, *An Approach to Literature* features the three major generic divisions typical of such texts—fiction, poetry, and drama. However, it does include a fourth section on discursive prose, which addresses non-fictional exposition. What makes this section on non-fictional exposition especially interesting is what it does *not* say. It is the shortest section of the book, totaling only two pages in contrast to the eight-page drama section, the eight-page poetry section, and the seventeen-page fiction section. What *is* included in those two pages on nonfiction prose is an argument *against* the exclusion of the poetic from the rhetorical. Calling discursive prose the most common form of writing, the authors comment that this is the form of writing that values logic and clear presentation “inasmuch as

²²Brooks and Warren, *Understanding Poetry*, 8, 20-21.

²³Cleath Brooks, John Thibaut Purser and Robert Penn Warren, *An Approach to Literature*, 4th ed. (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1964), 1, 280.

our age prides itself on its recognition of the sanctity of 'fact' and its respect for common sense." They follow this concession to the benefits of rhetoric with a rhetorical question that argues for the benefits of poetic. They ask, "Does not a story or a poem have its own kind of clarity?" They follow this question with an argument for the inclusion of the poetic within rhetoric: "Even the most specialized technical languages are not completely divorced from these concerns [of style]; even mathematicians refer to the 'elegance' of a demonstration, and lawyers to the 'style' of a brief."²⁴

The second chapter of *Modern Rhetoric* argues for the inclusion of poetic for the student learning rhetoric in the composition classroom. Titled "Two Kinds of Discourse" and placed in an introductory position in the book immediately following the first chapter's presentation of unity, coherence, and emphasis, this chapter categorizes two discourses—objective and subjective—and two types of writerly intention—scientific and artistic. Within the modes of everyday discourse—narration, description, exposition, and argument—the authors explain, "Our basic intention is not often purely scientific or purely artistic" (37). In a passage that blurs any lines between the scientific and poetic, with special attention to defending the poetic, the authors state:

We must not assume that all thinking can be conducted in a terminology that is technical and objective, and that all emotional language is vague and confused. To take extremes again, the poet may use language as precisely in his kind of discourse as the physicist in his. (37)

"Technical and objective terms represent a *reduced* language," Brooks and Warren explain (with their emphasis on the word "reduced"), "core meanings from which personal interpretation and implied meanings and suggestions have been removed. It is a specialized language which is developed by abstracting—cutting away—from the richer and more complex language of our ordinary experience" (38). To illustrate that these discourses are not entirely distinct or exclusive, the authors state that rather than "arranging

²⁴Brooks et al., *Approach to Literature*, 431.

our terms in neat oppositions" with a two-column chart dividing the scientific and artistic, they picture the discourses within a pie chart. Artistic discourse of suggestive and subjective language accounts for approximately 85% of the pie, and the scientific discourse of technical and objective language is accorded only 15% of the pie. For purposes of practical communication within the modes of everyday communication, the scientific is a small subset of daily communication.

This argument for the poetic and artistic is deeply related to the Brooks/Warren pedagogy of close reading of passages as a means of writing instruction. The textbook's effect is to do for writing instruction what the authors had already done for literary instruction: to argue for the inherent value of the aesthetic in a world that increasingly values only the empirical and mechanistic. Terry Eagleton calls New Criticism "An aesthetic alternative to the sterile scientific rationalism of the industrial North . . . The poetic response unlike the scientific." Similarly, in their introduction to critical theory, Seldon and Widdowson note that while I. A. Richards argued in *Practical Criticism* (1929) that "criticism should emulate the precision of science," New Criticism holds "literary works as icons of human value deployed against twentieth-century cultural barbarism" even as it presents a purportedly "'objective,' 'scientific,' 'disinterested' . . . criticism of the text."²⁵ Brooks and Warren wrote a composition textbook to teach the student that effective writing, even in the discursive modes of an objectivist rhetoric, is informed by aesthetic values. Therefore, the best education for a writer, even the non-professional writer of transactional modes for the business of everyday life, must be an education in the poetic. The best writerly education is a literary education.

Brooks and Warren were involved in a project to rescue writing from the merely mechanical approach of the Current-Traditional pedagogy and return it to the classical notion of intellectual virtue. In his foreword to *Brother to Dragons*, Warren states, "Historical sense and poetic sense should not, in the end, be contradictory, for if poetry is the little myth we make, history is the big myth we live,

²⁵Eagleton, *Literary Theory*, 46; Seldon and Widdowson, *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*, 11.

and in our living, constantly remake.”²⁶ Arguing, like *Modern Rhetoric*, against a clear distinction between the scientific and artistic, this statement places both poet and historian together as writers. In reference to the classical etymology of the term *poet*, the historian, the writer of rhetoric, is also a maker.

In *Modern Rhetoric*, Brooks and Warren conceive of the apprentice writer as a potential maker, who must learn not merely the tools or mechanics of the activity but, more importantly, the intellectual discipline necessary for a deeper understanding of the art of rhetoric. In this way, they were recovering the classical notion of rhetoric as a *techne*, an art, craft, or technical skill. Recall that Aristotle classified intellectual virtues as the theoretical (*episteme*), the practical (*praxis*), and the productive (*techne*). *Techne* is not simply the ability to make something in a mechanical sense, as the mechanical in his schema is not even an intellectual virtue. Rather *techne* is the application of skill for the purpose of making a mental image or idea into a realized product. The ability to actualize a plan or design is what Aristotle considers to be “a productive state that is truly reasoned.” As Malcolm Heath explains, “Aristotle defines *tekne* as a productive capacity informed by an understanding of its intrinsic rationale,” and for Aristotle, “the evolution of human culture is in large part the evolution of *tekne*.”²⁷

In their “Letter to the Student” that begins *Modern Rhetoric*, Brooks and Warren call the writer of expository and persuasive prose “a conscious craftsman” (6). Current-Traditional pedagogy conceives of the writer as a transcriber of reality using the transparent medium of language; thus, writing teachers have spent much time trying to train student writers by teaching them conventions of organization and correctness. Brooks and Warren certainly valued these conventions, but they also reacted against the reductive idea that the student-writer needs nothing more than training in the mechanics. Their composition textbook argues that the writer, like the poet, is a maker, a craftsman; and writing is not merely a mechanical activity into which the student can be trained; it is an intellectual pursuit that the student must be taught to value.

²⁶Robert Penn Warren, *Brother to Dragons* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1996), xiii.

²⁷Aristotle, Introduction to *The Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. J.A.K. Thomson, revised Hugh Tredennick (New York: Penguin, 1976), 208; Aristotle, Introduction to *Poetics*, trans. Malcolm Heath (New York: Penguin, 1996), ix.