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Rhetorical Genre Theory and the Enactment of Faith in the Composition Classroom

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In James Berlin's *Rhetoric and Reality: Writing Instruction in American Colleges, 1900-1985* he argues that "every rhetorical system is based on epistemological assumptions about the nature of reality, the nature of the knower, and the rules governing the discovery and communication of the known" (4). Beginning with the debates between Plato and the sophists and running through the history of rhetoric to the likes of Wayne Booth on one side and William Covino on the other, rhetorical theorists have always been interested in debating the nature of reality, knowledge, morality, ethics, and T/truth. How one defines the status of these, what Kenneth Burke calls "God Terms," has a significant impact on the relationship that rhetoric has to these ideas. Over the years, composition scholars have taken up this debate as well and have discussed how this debate may influence our pedagogical practices within composition classrooms. As Christians, we believe in the objective nature of the Truth of God's Word (II Timothy 3:16), and therefore do not need to debate that fact. However, the ways that belief influences our pedagogical practices is still in need of discussion. Therefore, in this paper, I will discuss my own composition courses and address how I attempt to integrate faith and learning through the use of rhetorical genre theory.

Since genre theorists emphasize the fact that genres portray community ideology, they focus on the need to critique genres rather than just blindly following the conventions of those genres. Because of the relationship between genres and ideology, learning to write is much more connected to faith than most students understand. Therefore, in this paper, I will argue that

rhetorical genre theory can work to help bridge the gap between faith and composition by helping writers fight against disciplinary ideologies and assumptions with which they may disagree, and can act as a perfect mechanism for students to integrate their faith into their own disciplines through their use of disciplinary genres.

Biblical Foundations

I believe that the Bible, as the inerrant word of God, should be the fundamental underlying bases for everything I do. This belief, however, is fundamentally incompatible with much of the ideology prevalent in contemporary culture, and so Christians must spend their lives resisting (and at the same time attempting to influence) culture. As argued by Chris Anderson, One of "the aims of Christianity … is to exist in creative opposition to power" (8). For example, Paul explains that we must "watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned" (Romans 16:17). He later admonishes us to "See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces of this world rather than on Christ" (Colossians 2:8). Throughout the Scriptures there are references to resistance, the need to guard our hearts and minds to keep from being deceived and falling into false beliefs. For example, Ephesians 6:11-17 compares the Christian life experience to a battle in which we need to clothe ourselves with armor and take up weapons of war:

> Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes.
> For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the
> authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in
> the heavenly realms. Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil

comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to

stand. Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the

breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that

comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with

which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of

salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

In this passage, Paul emphasizes that we will have to fight against evil throughout our lives. This is true also in higher education because so many of the academic disciplines are based on ideologies and assumptions that we, as Christians, disagree with. For this reason, at Cedarville, we emphasize the need to look at our disciplines from a Biblical worldview. Many of the theories and pedagogical approaches in my own discipline of composition studies are based on postmodern ideas that in general, we disagree with.

In order to keep ourselves from being deceived, we must understand what we believe and why we believe it. Therefore, we must be consistent in studying the Bible so that we do not fall away from what we know is true. As Paul tells Timothy: "But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (II Timothy 3:14-16). The author of Hebrews continues Paul's battle metaphor, discussing the Scriptures as our main offensive weapon: "For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart" (Hebrews 4:12). Only through having a strong understanding of Biblical principles will we have the ability not only to resist evil, but also positively influence the world for Christ.

Rhetorical Genre Theory and the Enactment of Faith

The theme of resistance to cultural ideology is a major aspect of my composition course which is based on the principles of Rhetorical Genre theory. As part of my course, I ask my composition students to read texts by Stanley Fish, Anis Bawarshi, and other composition and literature scholars in rhetorical and literary genre theory. The first of these texts that students read comes from Anis Bawarshi's *Genre and the Invention of the Writer: Reconsidering the Place of Invention in Composition.* In this text, Bawarshi works to define genre in order to show how teaching composition students about genres can make them more effective in writing for the multiple writing situations that they will encounter both within and outside of the university. Bawarshi argues that "a genre is not simply a classification, a way of describing something that is produced before or outside of its rhetorical and conceptual framework" (8). In other words, genres are not just neutral "containers" of information. Rather, genres are "dynamic discursive formations in which ideology is naturalized and realized in specific social actions, relations, and subjectivities" (7-8). In order to argue for this definition, Bawarshi begins by arguing against the idea of writing being an autonomous individual activity. Instead, drawing on Caroline Miller and other genre theorists, he argues that writing is a social action. In Caroline Miller's foundational article "Genre as Social Action," she famously defines genre as "typified rhetorical action based in recurrent situations" (159). With the idea that genres are social actions, they become more than merely text-types, defined by their formal features, but instead are defined by the actions that they perform for specific communities of readers and writers. Genres are products of a community of users who have, over time, agreed to produce them in certain ways. The "social turn" in composition, according to Bawarshi, "recognizes that there is more at work on the text

than the writer's seemingly autonomous cognition; there are also various social forces that constitute the scene of production within which the writer's cognition as well as his or her text are situated and shaped" (5).

One of the major "social forces" that Bawarshi discusses is community ideology. He emphasizes the fact that genres "are ideological configurations" (9), that they are sites "in which ideology is naturalized and realized" (7). In other words, the ideology of the community of users is articulated through the genres they use and the ways those genres have developed over time. For example, scientists typically believe in the objective nature of knowledge: knowledge is out there in the world, and it is the job of the scientist to find and record that knowledge as objectively as possible. As a result of this belief, the genre of the scientific research article was formed, with its use of passive voice (because it doesn't matter who did the experiment or from what perspective, the results would be the same), its heavy reliance on experimental and quantitative data, and the strong emphasis placed on objectivity and repeatability. On the other hand, those in the humanities have generally placed more emphasis on perspective. To them, it matters who is speaking, what perspective is being taken, etc. Therefore, they tend to rely on argument genres, use active voice verbs in order to show who is doing the acting, and value qualitative data because they believe it is important to show the experiences of people, etc. Thus, when I begin to teach students about genres, the first thing they must learn is that "correct" writing is only correct for a particular community at a particular point in time because every community "owns" different genres, and those genres change over time (See, for example, Charles Bazerman's discussion of the development of the scientific research article in "Shaping Written Knowledge: The Genre and Activity of the Experimental Article in Science").

Furthermore, because genres portray community ideology, genre critique is important because no one wants to inadvertently articulate ideologies with which they disagree.

We know that, as Christians, we are commanded to "be not conformed to the world, but be transformed" (Romans 12:2). Genre theory gives students the tools to resist community ideology and transform the genres they are asked to write. As explained by Bawarshi, within "larger spheres of language and activity, writers negotiate multiple, sometimes conflicting genres, relations, and subjectivities, so that there is always the potential, in some genres and in some situations more than others, for generic resistance and hybridization … The articulation of genre is also the possibility of its transformation" (11). In other words, there is always room for resistance. Genres change over time as individuals attempt to use them in different ways to reach different kinds of goals. Therefore, if students learn to investigate the ideological assumptions behind the genres they write, they can resist and transform those that portray assumptions that oppose their Christian beliefs. Bawarshi's claim that "to write is to position oneself within genres—to assume and enact certain situated commitments, identities, relations, and practices" (14) emphasizes that genre critique is vital in order to prevent Christian students from enacting identities or commitments, etc. that undercut or argue against their faith. As previously mentioned, many academic disciplines are not based on values and commitments that Christians agree with, and so we must be discerning when using the genres of those disciplines.

In following Bawarshi and other genre theorists, I employ "genre analysis as a way for students to access, position themselves within, and participate critically in genred discursive spaces and the commitments, relations, identities, and activities embedded within them … This approach challenges us to teach writing not so much as 'composition' but as rhetoric—as a way of being and acting in the world, socially and rhetorically, within genres" (Bawarshi 14). Asking

students to analyze and critique genres gives them a way to think about their faith and how they enact that faith in all areas of their lives; it gives them the tools to think about how they want to portray themselves both socially and rhetorically to the world; and it gives them access to the ideological assumption behind disciplinary genres so that they can push back against those assumptions if they must.

Along with Bawarshi and other genre theorists such as Amy Devitt, I also have my students read Stanley Fish's "How to Recognize a Poem When You See One." In this text, Fish (one of the founding fathers of Reader Response literary theory) argues that "meanings are the property neither of fixed and stable texts nor of independent readers, but of interpretive communities that are responsible both for the shape of the reader's activities and the texts those activities produce" (322). In making this argument, Fish relays a teaching experience in which he told his religious poetry class that a list of names was a poem and then set them to work interpreting the "poem." The students came up with an elaborate interpretation of the religious themes of the poem, causing Fish to conclude that "interpretation is not the art of construing but the art of constructing. Interpreters do not decode poems; they make them" (327). Fish uses this example as evidence that texts do not have inherent meaning, but only gain meaning through their interpretation by a community of interpreters who communally agree on the interpretation. For Fish there is no "true" meaning or "true" interpretation; there is only consensus: what the members of the community can agree on. His students created an elaborate interpretation of the "poem" not because the words on the board were inherently poetic, but because the students believed that it was a poem; the students *created* a poem out of the words.

Fish's major goal with this example is to answer the question "How do you recognize a poem when you see one?" Most people would answer that question by saying that poems usually

rhyme, that they have line breaks, etc. In essence, "recognition is triggered by the observable

presence of distinguishing features. That is, you know a poem when you see one because its

language displays the characteristics that you know to be proper to poems" (326). However, this

explanation does not work with his example. The "poem" was just a list of names; it did not

contain any of the "observable features" that we usually attribute to poems. Fish's students

> did not proceed from the noting of distinguishing features to the recognition that they
>
> were confronted with a poem; rather, it was the act of recognition that came first – they
>
> knew in advance that they were dealing with a poem – and the distinguishing features
>
> then followed. In other words, acts of recognition, rather than being triggered by formal
>
> characteristics, are their source. It is not that the presence of poetic qualities compels a
>
> certain kind of attention but that the paying of a certain kind of attention results in the
>
> emergence of poetic qualities. (326)

Fish concludes that "all objects are made and not found, and they are made by the interpretive

strategies that we set in motion" (331). However, he wants it to be clear that he does not mean

that each individual is free to interpret texts however they want to. He stresses that "the 'you'

who does the interpretive work that puts poems and assignments and lists into the world is a

communal you and not an isolated individual" (331). As he explains, "No one of us wakes up in

the morning and … reinvents poetry or makes up a new educational system … we do not do

these things because we could not do them, because the mental operations we can perform are

limited by the institutions in which we are already embedded" (331).

Fish's theory of interpretive communities espoused in "How to Recognize a Poem" and

many other texts he has written over the past few decades has had profound effects on the

literary studies community. I assign this text in my composition class because of its emphasis on

community influence on textual production. It helps students see that each disciplinary community will interpret their writing differently; therefore they must learn to produce texts that will be more likely to prompt the interpretation they want from their readers. This text also parallels much of genre theory. Bawarshi, for example, explains how "we recognize, interpret, and in the spirit of reader-response theory, also construct (and deconstruct) the discourses we encounter using the genre function. Genres, in short, function as sites of action that locate readers in positions of interpretation" and function "as conceptual frameworks for interpretation" (28-29). I have found Fish's text to be useful in helping students think through how to write for a specific community of readers, and students generally have lively discussions of his text. However, I also push students to challenge Fish for his relativism. In our discussion, I ask students to think about Fish's theory of interpretive communities in light of our belief in the objective Truth of God's word. In answering this question students must consider the different kinds of truth since Fish is not talking about Absolute Truth; he is talking about consensus. The conversations we have about this text include questions such as: Do we agree with Fish that texts have no inherent meaning, that the meaning only comes through interpretation? For example, what if the text we are talking about is the Bible? We do believe there is an inherent meaning in the Bible. We know that "no prophesy of the scripture is of any private interpretation" (II Peter 1:20). However, the Bible is the only text that is infallibly Absolute Truth, and so when we approach that text, we must approach it in different ways than we approach other texts, because as an Absolutely True text, it is a very different kind of text than all others that we will encounter in our lives. These discussions help students to think about how textual production works and how to think about their beliefs about how texts work. Students must learn to think about how their beliefs relate to everything they do. Oftentimes students just think about reading and

writing as a basic skills that don't need interrogation, but, in fact, because of the relationship between genres and ideology, learning to write for a particular community is actually a process much more tied to faith than students understand when first coming to my course.

Along with text by rhetorical and literary genre theorists, students in my composition courses also read texts by scholars who think through the issue of how people of faith can work within disciplines that rely on secular theories (for example, Richard Edlin's "Keeping the Faith: The Christian Scholar in the Academy in a Postmodern World"). Because of the very direct correlation between genres and ideology, I ask students to begin thinking about their own disciplines and the theories those fields are based on. We then discuss how they might fight against ideologies they disagree with, especially in regard to their writing. If a genre portrays an ideology that students disagree with, then the common sense thing to do is avoid that genre or try to change it. However, there are consequences to doing that: they won't be taken seriously within their disciplines; they won't get their work published; they will have a hard time convincing people that what they say it true; etc. The idea of resistance to genre conventions is discussed by Ann Johns in her "Discourse Communities and Communities of Practice: Membership, Conflict, and Diversity," another text that I have my students read. Johns emphasizes the fact that it is often only the senior members of a discourse community that are given the freedom to resist genre conventions and ideological views in their writing, an idea which leads to discussions of how to resist without being removed from the community, being seen as "rebellious" (as Johns discusses), and other consequences that may occur because of resistance. As a result of all of these conversations, students gain what composition scholars call "genre awareness." Students begin to think about the ideological assumptions behind the genres they are asked to write; they analyze and critique those genres, and think about how they might manipulate those genres to

help them more effectively reach their rhetorical purposes without giving in to assumptions with which they disagree. The course culminates in a final major paper that requires students to "analyze and critique [their] discipline[s] in an effort to discover the ways that [they] may need to actively resist the ideologies and assumptions held within those disciplines" (assignment prompt). The assignment prompt asks students to draw "on the texts we have read throughout the semester" and

> answer such questions as: What does it mean to say that genres portray community ideology? How might you resist genre conventions that portray ideologies that you disagree with? What are the specific disciplinary ideologies that you may need to actively resist? What might be some of the consequences of that resistance? How might you positively integrate your faith into the work of your discipline? What might be the reaction to that integration?

Through the discussions that lead up to this paper and through the writing of the paper itself, students learn to think about how genres work, how genres are used by particular communities to accomplish particular goals, and how genres portray community ideology. They then learn to think through strategies of resistance to community ideology and consider how they might use their writing to resist while at the same time positively influence the people they will encounter in their disciplines.

Conclusion

In Chris Anderson's *Teaching as Believing: Faith in the University* he asks an important question: "How do any of us who are Christians teach what we teach, in whatever field, at the public university, or at any university, even religious universities—the American university, the

postmodern university, the university where it sometimes seems that everyone is welcome except believers" (2). In order to answer this question, Anderson argues that Christianity is not completely contradictory to the life of the university. Although many people believe that "faith is divorced from reason, that religious life and religious texts can't be seen as in any way related to the intellectual life of the university" (6), Anderson disagrees and insists that Christian university professors need to learn to live "divided no more" (3). "The founders," Anderson argues, "never intended the separation of church and state to become the wall that it has become in the last fifty years of American law and politics" (7), and thus, we need to find a way "to restore the place of spirituality in the lives of faculty and in the intellectual life of the campus" (8). In my own courses, I attempt to restore the place of spirituality in the field of composition studies through the use of rhetorical genre theory which helps student learn to integrate their faith into their own disciplines through the use of disciplinary genres.

When it comes to writing, it is important for students to think about interpretive and discourse communities, and rhetorical situations in order to pick the most effective genre, fight against ideologies, and write with authority within a particular discipline. As Christians, resistance to cultural norms and beliefs will be a consistent part of our lives. The more I can help my students bridge the gap between faith and composition, the more effective they will be at assessing disciplinary ideologies, analyzing and critiquing genres, and effectively responding to rhetorical situations they will encounter in the university and out of it, all while reflecting on their faith and its relationship to all aspects of their lives. As argued by James Berlin,

> In teaching writing we are providing students with guidance in seeing and structuring
> truth from falsity, reality from illusion. A way of seeing, after all, is a way of not seeing,
> and as we instruct students in attending to particular orders of evidence … we are

simultaneously discouraging them from seeing other orders of evidence … Our decision,

then, about the kind of rhetoric we are to call upon in teaching writing has important

implications for the behavior of our students—behavior that includes personal, social,

and political. (7)

In other words, it is not just about teaching students to write. It's about teaching students to look

at the world through a particular lens; it's about teaching students to produce texts that will be

seen by others through a particular lens. As mentioned in the introduction to this paper, because a

strong relationship exists between rhetoric and truth, ethics, reality, etc., in teaching rhetoric we

also help students construct texts that align with what they, as Christians, believe to be true, real,

and right, and to use rhetoric to argue for those positions.

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