Through most of the history of Western civilization, poetry was written and read by people for whom rhetoric was the major craft of composition.

“To the extent that our own time regards poetry as having the ends of rhetoric – if not exemplary eloquence than persuasive discourse—the two arts remain all but inextricable.”

Walt Whitman, MFA?

For modern and contemporary American poets, Walt Whitman has been a touchstone and sometimes an obstacle. Ezra Pound felt so overshadowed by Whitman’s influence that he wrote his poem “A Pact,” which was a kind of declaration of independence from Whitman’s strangulating influence. D.H. Lawrence wrote similar poems in an attempt to shake off some of Whitman’s heavy influence on his poetry. Allen Ginsberg was so entranced by Whitman’s work that he imagined himself, in his poem “A Supermarket in California,” accompanied by Whitman as he shopped for peaches, bananas, and pork chops. Just about every serious contemporary poet owes some debt to Whitman.

In the preface to *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman wrote “The proof of a poet is that his country absorbs him as affectionately as he has absorbed it,” and Whitman has certainly succeeded under this criteria. Whitman’s poetic apprenticeship was markedly different from the training typically undergone by today’s would-be Whitmans. Let’s take a closer look at the theoretical underpinnings of the workshop model, the early history of the establishment of the workshop model at the University of Iowa, and the manner in which this model spread throughout the American university. Then let’s contrast workshop
methodology with the means that Whitman used to develop his skills as a poet.

The first creative writing course at Iowa, called “Verse-Making Class,” was taught in 1897—five years after Whitman’s death—by George Cam Cook. It “possessed the elements of the basic ‘workshop’ gathering: writing by the participants, criticism, and general discussion of ‘artistic questions.’”[4] Cook, a heavy drinker, “never reported an absence” but students came “to see what charming truancy their teacher would next devise and gravely lead them to.”[5]

The Iowa workshop as it exists today got rolling in 1931, when the first creative masters thesis, Paisley Shawl, by Mary Hoover Roberts, was accepted at Iowa.[6] The workshop’s influence grew in the 1950s due to successful publication by some Iowa students and some good publicity. According to Stephen Wilbers, author of a history of Iowa’s creative writing program, “The first real breakthrough in publicity occurred in February of 1952, when Poetry magazine devoted half of a special issue to poetry written by Iowa Workshop writers.”[7] Articles praising Iowa’s creative writing program appeared in Time, Esquire, and Writer’s Digest in the late 1950’s.[8]

The Iowa workshop model, popularized in the 1950s, formed the basis of the creative writing workshop familiar to today’s creative writing students. According to Wilbers, “The heart of the program was the ‘workshops’ themselves. These involved small groups of students meeting weekly with an instructor, discussing the work submitted, and offering suggestions to each other on how to improve it.”[9] Whitman would not have thrived in such an environment. He had nothing but harsh criticism for the work of his trinomial contemporaries: John Greenleaf Whittier, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Edgar Allen Poe, and William Cullen Bryant.[10] Maybe they would have benefited from some time spent in workshop with Whitman. Maybe they would have revised some of their poems based on his comments. More likely, they would have wanted to box his ears.
Wilbers’s book contains an entire chapter full of comments by Iowa teachers who believe that creative writing can’t be taught. Students of these teachers who didn’t believe in teaching founded scores of creative writing programs. “The 1960s was the decade in which creative writing programs or ‘writers’ workshops’ became commonplace in universities and colleges across the country. Many of these workshop programs were founded, directed, and staffed by Iowa Workshop graduates.”[11]

The appendix to Wilbers’s book, published in 1980, lists twenty-five graduate programs founded or directed by Iowa graduates. A quick glance at the AWP Official Guide to Writing Programs reveals that at least eighty graduate creative writing programs now have Iowa graduates on staff. So now we’re in this absurd situation in which the dominant teaching methodology in creative writing pedagogy is modeled on the ideas of professors “who view art as the product of unfettered genius” and believe that “the idea of teaching or learning the art of writing as one might teach or learn mathematics” is “repugnant.”[12]

Wilbers admits that the workshop model isn’t for everyone. “Depending on individual temperament and needs, a writer might flourish from the association with other writers or flounder from the
pressure of competition.” Yet the workshop model is basically the only available model of poetry writing instruction. What happens to those students whose temperaments and needs are not served by this model?

We need a rhetoric of poetry writing instruction in place for teachers who don’t view the classroom as an arena for competition and don’t want to pit students against each other. We need it for those student writers who don’t respond well to competitive workshops. If the prevailing teaching methodology leaves some of its students floundering, dedicated teachers will want to have other methods available to help them reach those students who have just as much right to flourish as those for whom the workshop model is a good fit.

Whitman’s own self-education provides an instructive model for a rhetoric-based alternative to the Iowa workshop model. While Whitman had contempt for poetry-writing contemporaries, he scrupulously studied the styles of the successful orators of his day, “whose techniques are felt in his poetry.” Whitman came of age during a golden age of political oratory, and he learned from some of the best. For example, though Whitman was unimpressed by Daniel Webster’s Whig politics, he was dazzled by Webster’s eloquent cadences, and he went to hear him speak whenever possible. He also admired the speeches of some of America’s women suffragettes. According to Whitman biographer David S. Reynolds, “Whitman was a close observer of women’s oratory and became a poetic celebrant of women’s new public role.”

In addition to learning from political orators, Whitman closely studied the rhetorical flourishes of the preachers of his day. He “ran a regular column in the Eagle on the pulpit style of local preachers,” and, according to Reynolds, “Whitman’s casual fusion of earthly and divine images in his poetry owed much to the pulpit stylists he observed so closely.”
In *Classical Rhetoric in English Poetry*, Brian Vickers includes Ovid, Shakespeare, John Dryden, and several great prose writers in a list of writers who “believed that rhetoric was the important discipline for a writer.”[19] How many potential Whitmans, Shakespeares, Drydens, and Ovids may have been among those writers who have floundered in workshop-based poetry writing classes because they were not temperamentally-suited to this particular pedagogical model? How many of the writers who have flourished in workshops would have become even better writers, rising to the next level, if we had a rhetoric of poetry writing instruction in place similar to ones that produced Ovid, Shakespeare, and Dryden, or even something resembling Whitman’s intuitive method of rhetoric-based self-education?

**Rhetoric as Parent Discipline to Composition Studies**

The field of composition studies has drawn extensively from the well of rhetorical theory. As a result, the discipline has grown more
theoretically sophisticated, individual teachers have become more effective and more efficient, and the discipline as a whole has earned greater respect. It seems, in fact, that compositionists have been taken seriously, or not taken seriously, in direct proportion to the amount of influence that they have allowed rhetorical theory to have over their discipline. In Composition-Rhetoric: Backgrounds, Theory, and Pedagogy, Robert J. Connors discusses the clout that professors of rhetoric had circa 1800:

The discipline of rhetoric at the college level entered the nineteenth century as one of the most esteemed fields in higher education. The professor of rhetoric in 1800—in touch with an intellectual and rhetorical tradition more than two millennia old, yet revised and revitalized by recent theoretical advances—was a respected figure on his campus.”[20]

Contrast this with the status of grammar-based composition teachers, who comprise an academic proletariat, even an underclass, at many colleges that regard composition as a service course. Also contrast it with the role of the poet in the academy, who is often regarded by colleagues as a kind of modern day court jester, good for occasional entertainment in the form of public readings, but not someone to serve on a committee with and certainly not someone to take seriously as a scholar.

The return to rhetoric as a basis for composition studies has led to greater esteem for composition studies as an academic discipline, and it can do the same for creative writing. Current-traditional rhetoric, with its emphasis on the modes of discourse (compare/contrast, classification, cause and effect, etc.) is rooted in rhetorical treatises by George Campbell, Hugh Blair, Richard Whately, and others.[21]

Expressionism, another 20th century approach to composition studies, has its basis in what Berlin calls “subjective theories of rhetoric” put forth by Plato, Richard Weaver, and others.[22] In the 1950s and 60s, compositionists leapt headlong into the search for ways to draw on classical rhetoric. Berlin refers to this period as a “renaissance.”[23] I would like to see a similar renaissance in the field of creative writing pedagogy. Connors states “Rhetorically oriented scholarship . . . led composition studies out of the backwater area where it had been glumly encamped for so long.”[24] Creative writing pedagogy is still in a backwater area, relying on untested, unproven methods that have remained relatively stagnant for seventy-five years.

Composition studies, as a discipline, is unusual in that “rather than emerging from a body of knowledge, it was a field decreed necessary
and continued by social fiat."[25] Poetry as literature is a traditional knowledge-based discipline, but creative writing is market-driven, and it is similar to composition studies in that respect. This is one reason why something that has been good for composition studies could also be good for creative writing. The other reason is that writing is writing, and, as I will demonstrate, rhetoric has provided the theoretical basis for all kinds of writing instruction for millennia.

Ralph Berry points out that creative writing, as an academic discipline, originated as an offshoot of composition studies. “According to D.G. Myers . . . the origins of creative writing are found in the early composition pedagogy . . . of the progressive education movement.”[26] Yet the two disciplines have drifted far apart. Those of us who specialize in creative writing instruction can learn a good deal from compositionists. In addition to adopting rhetorical theory as a basis for our instruction, we can start discipline-specific scholarly journals devoted to exchanging exercises and ideas about teaching.

The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) started English Journal in 1912 and College English in 1938. The Conference on College Composition and Communication was founded in 1949, and its journal, College Composition and Communication, has been around since 1990. As far as I know, the first journal dedicated entirely to creative writing pedagogy was the UK-based New Writing: The International Journal for the Practice and Theory of Creative Writing, established in 2003, and there still isn’t a refereed journal
devoted to creative writing pedagogy in the United States. This shows how far we have lagged behind as a serious academic discipline.

Compositionist and poet Wendy Bishop has pointed out that the divide between approaches to teaching creative writing composition confuses students, making them believe that creative writing is all fun and no work while composition is all work and no fun. Bishop puts it this way: “When students arrive in creative writing classes with dichotomous attitudes—composition is no fun, creative writing therefore must be fun—creative writing classes can appear surprisingly restrictive to students first discovering that, say, poetry is a difficult art.”[27] We are not telling our students the whole truth about the poet’s craft if we don’t introduce poetry writing to students as a difficult discipline, requiring them to read poetry, write responses to published poems, write essays, and complete multiple revisions of individual poems.

Sometimes, the serious teacher in the advanced course has to undo misconceptions that students have picked up in beginning classes taught by instructors who employ the traditional workshop model and fail to introduce students to the rigors of the craft. For example, in one of my undergraduate poetry writing courses, on the first reading response of the semester, a student wrote “I know what poetry is to me and what works for me, so to read about it just seems pointless. Poetry is healing, venting, etc., for me not a way of life.” I would like to say that I was shocked. I mean, why would someone take a class if she believed that she already knew all she needed to know about the subject? But I wasn’t shocked, because poetry writing does not have the reputation, among students, of being a difficult subject like physics or Latin or even composition. I would like to see this change. We sell our art short if we allow students to think of it as healing, venting, or anything less than a way of life.

A Short History of Rhetoric’s Impact on Poetry and Poetry’s Resistance to Rhetoric

When I first learned about the five canons of rhetoric—invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery—in Wendy Bishop’s graduate-level Rhetorical Theory and Practice class at Florida State University, all I could think about was how easily each of these canons could be adapted to poetry writing instruction. No creative writing teacher I knew had ever mentioned these canons, which seemed to provide such a logical taxonomy for creative writing assignments. I was not the first to make this observation. Peter Mack points out that “officially, rhetoric is concerned with the production of orations, the most prestigious form of prose composition in the ancient world; in practice, its observations transfer to other forms of prose and to
poetry. “[28] Contemporary compositionists have shown how the insights of rhetoric transfer to their discipline, and I would like to see poetry writing instructors investigate Mack’s claim that rhetoric has something to teach poets, too.

What I am proposing is a return to insights that creative writing teachers lost after the workshop model took hold. Take the Greeks, for example. According to Mack, most Greek poets “received their training in the advanced use of language from the study of rhetoric, and therefore found it natural to think about writing in the terms which rhetoric provides.”[29] My sense is that most of today’s poetry writing instructors view the creative impulse as something more like Plato’s “inspired madness.”[30] Their position is definitely not ahistorical. Poets have long spoken of inspiration as something mysterious, something delivered by the muses. Mack addresses that position, too: “From the time of Homer and Hesiod, poets have claimed to write under divine instruction.”[31] But we can’t defensibly charge tuition and then tell our students to simply burn incense to try to invoke the gods and muses, can we?

Rhetoric’s shaping influence on poets didn’t end with the Greeks. According to Brian Vickers, a literature professor, “it continued to dominate education and literature in the Middle Ages, in the Renaissance, and indeed exerted its shaping force into the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.”[32] Some poets and scholars continued to be
uneasy about this, though. For example, in 1833, John Stuart Mill highlighted the differences between the two arts, stating “Eloquence is written to be heard, poetry to be overheard.”[33] Since the Romantic period, many poets have strived to transcend rhetoric.[34] In Essays on Epitaphs, Wordsworth expressed his fear “that rhetoric’s facility in providing words for the poet might lead to a dangerous detachment from thought and feeling, the necessary foundation for poetry.”[35]

Romantic attitudes toward poetry provide a poor framework for teachers because they focus on the elements of poetry writing that we can’t teach while taking a defeatist attitude toward those elements of poetic craft that we can teach. We can’t teach genius. We can’t find talent in students who don’t have it. I think this is what people mean when they say that writing can’t be taught. But we can teach technique, and we can teach a healthy respect for the art. The five canons of rhetoric provide the best model I know of for teaching students as much as we can in the limited time we have with them, whether it’s a quarter, a semester, or a couple of years.

**Why I Recommend that Poetry Writing Instructors Base Their Pedagogy on Rhetoric Rather Than on Poetics**

Why should poetry writing instructors turn to treatises on rhetoric, rather than poetics manuals, for pedagogical models? Because rhetoric has traditionally been concerned with “the production of spoken and written texts” whereas poetics is limited to “the interpretation of texts.”[36] Even Aristotle’s *Poetics* is, according to the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, “after all not a handbook of composition but a theory of poetry, of its nature and elements, developed in part by comparison with drama.”[37] The poetics manuals might provide a foundation for literature classes, but rhetoric is better suited to serve as the underpinnings for courses in poetry writing.
Throughout the middle ages and the Renaissance, manuals on poetry writing treated poetry as a mode of rhetoric. “Most medieval manuals of poetry were rhetorics and only the sections on versification made any significant distinction between poetry and oratory.”[38] Geoffrey of Vinsauf’s Poetria nova, the most popular treatise on poetry writing composed in the middle ages, stressed rhetoric’s third and fifth canons (style and delivery).[39] Several Renaissance-era poetics manuals, most prominently George Puttenham’s 1589 Arte of English Poesie, used rhetoric’s first three canons (invention, arrangement, and style) as an organizing principle.[40]

**What Our Field Stands to Gain from the Development of a Rhetoric of Poetry Writing Instruction**

The main benefit I see of using the five canons of rhetoric in poetry writing classrooms is that this method can make instruction more systematic, less haphazard. In the workshop model, instructors tend to provide most of their instruction in context of issues that come up during discussions of drafts of student poems, citing principles that occur to the instructor at the time. One class might get introduced to an entirely different set of principles than the next, depending on what happens to pop into the instructor’s head during workshop sessions. In a five-canon-based class, the instructor is sure not to leave out any of the basics because the model ensures that students get a certain
amount of instruction in each of the five key areas.

Another benefit of rhetoric-based poetry instruction is that it provides student poets with a greater arsenal of figures and tropes, which are bread and butter to poets. Mack points out that recurrence is an important principle in poetry and suggests that young poets could benefit from the study that rhetoricians have done into figures of repetition: “Many rhetorical figures are based on repetition (of sounds, words, and structures, in different positions within the sentence), which is one of the fundamental properties of poetry. Conversely, both rhythm and rhyme, the constitutive features of many forms of poetry, are among the figures of rhetoric.”[41]

For poetry writing instructors who are interested in introducing their students to various uses of figurative language, I recommend chapter four of Classical Rhetoric in English Poetry, by Brian Vickers, which illustrates various figures and tropes, using examples culled from canonized English poetry. For example, in this chapter we learn that “gradatio” is the name of the use of the last word (or words) of one clause as the first word (or words) of the next, and that this figure appears in works by Homer, Sidney, Herbert, and Milton.[42] Another excellent source is Poetic Designs: An Introduction to Meters, Verse Forms, and Figures of Speech by Stephen J. Adams. Adams goes into more detail than Vickers about tropes and figures, devoting forty-three pages to the subject and offering a wealth of examples and definitions.

The development of a rhetoric of poetry writing instruction can also help teach poets the ins and outs of constructing a speaking persona for a given poem. Mack points out that Aristotle’s Rhetoric contains some constructive advice on this matter, which, he contends, is particularly helpful for writers of lyric poetry. “[W]riters of lyric poetry ...must give attention to the presentation of the speaker of a given poem. Rhetorical textbooks (particularly Aristotle’s Rhetoric) consider the methods of constructing a favorable persona (ethos).”[43]
Finally, audience awareness and analysis is a central concern of rhetoric. One of the key points in Aristotle's *Rhetoric* is that “the orator composes by giving priority not to form but to audience.”[44] Peter Mack writes “The awareness of audience, which is one of the defining characteristics of rhetoric, also encourages poets to think about issues of voice and address.”[45] An ancillary benefit of basing poetry writing instruction on rhetorical principles is that giving serious consideration to audience is bound to broaden poetry’s audience, drawing back many of the readers who have been put off by the hermeticism of much modernist and postmodern poetry.

Over the past fifteen years, a host of essayists have blamed creative writing programs for poetry’s marginal role in contemporary culture. The most famous of these articles are “Who Killed Poetry?” by Joseph Epstein and “Can Poetry Matter?” by Dana Gioia. I’m always a little puzzled when these writers suggest that the proliferation of creative writing programs has decreased the size of poetry’s audience. At the very least, the thousands of students studying poetry writing at any given time, many of whom wouldn’t have been studying poetry writing during an earlier era, comprise a small army of poetry readers who might not otherwise be readers of poetry. If poetry writing instructors take their jobs seriously, I think we as a group are in a unique position to help train generations of highly-skilled poets who will take on an increasingly greater role in shaping the larger culture.
One of the most recent widely-read screeds blaming creative writing programs for marginalizing poetry is David Alpaugh’s essay “The Professionalization of Poetry,” which appeared in two parts in the January/February 2003 and March/April 2003 issues of Poets and Writers. The title of Alpaugh’s essay is even more misguided than his argument (a rehashing of ideas previously put forth by Epstein, Gioia, Robert McDowell, and others). The problem is not that poetry is being professionalized due to the increasing number of poets teaching at the university level.

Quite the reverse. The problem is that too many poets who enter the teaching profession do not see themselves as professionals, and there are no professional journals, no carefully-theorized teaching methodologies, no support mechanisms in place for poetry writing instructors who wish to take their creative writing pedagogy seriously. The development of a rhetoric of poetry writing instruction will be an important step toward remedying this problem.

Notes


[27] Wendy Bishop, “Crossing the Lines: On Creative Composition and


[34] Encyclopedia of Rhetoric, 2001, s.v. “poetry.”


**References**


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