3 THE RHETORIC OF

LITERARY CRITICISM

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In the ongoing debate about the nature of literature and literary theory, there has also been an emerging interest in the nature of literary argument itself. Cary Nelson's 1976 article "Reading Criticism" was a controversial first step toward self-consciousness about the critical medium. Nelson argues that criticism is "more personally motivated than we usually assume" by analyzing the ethos of critics like Bloom, Brown, and Kenner (802ff.). Wayne Booth's *Critical Understanding* (1979) raises questions about the "accuracy, validity, and adequacy of interpretive approaches" (32–33), questions that can easily be turned on literary argument itself. And in the same year, Richard Levin published a critique of trends in the interpretation of Renaissance drama that uncovers some of the basic but rarely articulated assumptions about what constitutes a "reading," a piece of interpretive literary criticism (see esp. pp. 2–5, where he lists ten conceptions "frequently employed and seldom discussed"). The final chapters of Stanley Fish's *Is There a Text in This Class?* ("What Makes an Interpretation Acceptable?" and "Demonstration vs. Persuasion: What Makes an Interpretation Persuasive?") point toward a rhetoric of literary argument. Jonathan Culler's pursuit of the conventions of literary competence can be seen as a search for the conventions of literary argument; the convention of thematic coherence, for example, might also be described as the need for a coherently argued thesis. More recently (and more cynically), Terry Eagleton has defined literary theorists, critics and teachers as "not so much purveyors of doctrine as custodians of a discourse" (201).

> Literary criticism selects, processes, corrects and rewrites texts in accordance with certain institutional norms of the "literary" — norms which are at any given time arguable, and always histori-

cally variable. For though I have said that critical discourse has no determinate signified, there are certainly a great many ways of talking about literature which it excludes, and a great many discursive moves and strategies which it disqualifies as invalid, illicit, noncritical, nonsense. Its apparent generosity at the level of the signified is matched only by its sectarian intolerance at the level of the signifier. (203)

A study of these "institutionalized norms," these field-dependent constraints on the published interpretation of literature falls naturally under the domain of rhetoric. And such a rhetoric of literary criticism would have the same aim that all rhetorical criticism has: understanding the available means of persuasion. The means of persuasion available to a literary scholar, however, will not be definable without some methodology, some even more prior set of assumptions about what we are looking for and how we might know when we find it – not an easy program and one not likely to be achieved in the opening gambit of a single essay. Nevertheless we would like to open the search.

We have begun our search for the rhetoric of literary argument by examining a set of articles published in a selection of journals of established reputation, not limited to the work of one author or circle; most of the journals were not even limited to one period, although we confess a bias of interest toward the nineteenth century and toward fiction. We aimed for a variety of subjects, but avoided articles on literatures other than English and American and textual studies that depend on physical evidence. Beyond that we followed no conscious principle other than synchrony: the articles we read were all published between 1978 and 1982. A larger selection might produce some differences in emphasis, but even though the scale of our study is small, we think the articles we read show enough similarity in assumptions, manner, and argumentative methodology to warrant some tentative observations about the nature of literary argument. At least, we would like this essay to be construed as an invitation to further study, refinement, and correction. We who are so quick to identify the conventions employed by the literary figures we study should also be aware of the rhetorical constraints under which our own discourse operates.

One caveat is in order. Our study is not empirical, despite the fact that we draw conclusions after examining a group of essays. It is, rather, deductive, since we will begin with some assumptions about argument, as widely held as possible, which we then test against a body of evidence, as representative as we could make it, on the way to some conclusions, as tentative as they must be.

We can probably begin with the assumption that most of the critical articles published in literary journals are intended as arguments whose

authors have aimed to win intellectual conviction from their readers. That is, they consist of discursive techniques that aim "to induce or to increase the mind's adherence to the theses presented for its assent" (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, 4). Though it appears that the gesture in many literary studies is that of informing rather than persuading, the distinction between the informative and the arguable is often more of degree than of kind, residing as much in the perception of the reader as in the material. As Stanley Fish has pointed out, presenting content as informative rather than challenging (by using phrases such as "there can be no doubt") is a natural rhetorical gesture to this end (339). Still literary criticism, whatever its strategy, remains argumentative in its purposeful support of claims and in its attempt to gain its audience's adherence.

Once we acknowledge the status of literary criticism and interpretation as argument, our next procedural step must be to adopt a method to facilitate the rhetorical analysis of literary articles. Our method of analyzing literary arguments is drawn from Aristotle, Cicero, Toulmin, and Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca. It would be immodest to call it a synthesis; it is more a mélange of the analytical points on which they are compatible.

1

We can reasonably begin by looking at the kind of issue or question that is at stake in an argument, that is, its stasis. According to Cicero (21–35), the first two stases deal with issues of fact and definition. Arguments in the first stasis establish the existence of a subject and arguments in the second characterize it. An answer to a question about existence or definition will take the form of a categorical proposition, and all such arguments will hinge on definition.

We identified four argumentative issues or stases in our selection, each one requiring its own structure of support. An article by Blanche Gelfant supplies us with an example of a first-stasis argument in "Sister to Faust: "The City's Hungry Woman as Heroine" (1981); Gelfant calls our attention to the existence of a Faustian heroine who hungers for knowledge and experience, a heroine previously overlooked in American fiction. To put her thesis in terms of a crude paraphrase, "This is what a Faustian heroine is, and we find her in x, y, and z." Robert Merrill supplies us with a second-stasis argument in "Another Look at the American Romance" (1981). He argues that *The Scarlet Letter* should be redefined as a novel rather than as a romance. Such first- and second-stasis arguments require definition of the predicated term – in Merrill's argument, "novel" and

"romance," and in Gelfant's, "hungry heroine" — and evidence linking the subject terms, the works under scrutiny, with the carefully defined predicate. For example, once definitions of "novel" and "romance" are in place, definitions which must both work in the argument and strike scholarly readers as plausible, Merrill must present evidence from *The Scarlet Letter* itself to earn for the text its classification as novel. Similarly, Gelfant's task, once she has constructed a convincing definition of "hungry heroine," is to gather examples under the term, distorting their individuality as little as possible, to show that such a character does indeed exist.

Arguments about existence or definition can take the form of comparisons. These are nothing more than arguments for two categorical propositions brought into juxtaposition, since to say that two works or characters or theses are similar is to argue that both can be characterized in the same way. Or, one step up in complexity, a comparison argument can show that one subject has more and one less of a certain quality. If, to take an example from Thomas J. Embry's allusion-sleuthing article, "Sensuality and Chastity in *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*," "Il Penseroso" is comparable to "Comus," it is because each individually shows Milton's preoccupation with chastity.

We would distinguish another stasis not separately identified by classical rhetoricians, one questioning cause (Fahnestock and Secor, 1985). Answering causal questions has, for the most part, attracted literary historians rather than critics. To establish persuasively how the preoccupations of an age or a life inform a work, how manuscript history or publishing habits affect an individual text or genre, or how one work influences another directly or indirectly, requires causal argument. An example in the set we examined is Anne Falke's " 'The Work Well Done that Pleaseth All': Emanuel Forde and the Seventeenth-Century Chivalric Romance," which argues, among other things, that Forde's prose fictions derive from medieval verse romances. To argue causality convincingly requires more than pointing out a similarity between two things succeeding one another in time; the agency of connection, the links uniting cause and effect, must be forged as well. Agency in Falke's argument would be the availability of a medieval verse model for the seventeenth-century writer.

Arguments in the next stasis attempt to answer questions about the quality or value of the subject under discussion. Such evaluation arguments use the structures of both categorical and causal arguments to establish a credible judgment about the value of a literary work, about whether it deserves labels such as "great," "classic," "important," "impoverished," "failed," or "incoherent." Such an evaluation argument shows how the work under consideration either meets or fails to meet a standard that a par-

Jeanne Fahnestock and Marie Secor

ticular scholarly audience would accept. This standard can be constructed from the effects the work has brought about (e.g., *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was an important novel because of its historical impact), but it is more often a set of formal criteria. Thus it is a commonplace to claim that *Middlemarch* is a "great novel" because of its moral seriousness, its verisimilitude, its thematic resonance, its complex but balanced structure. Among the articles we examined, Paul Sherwin's "*Frankenstein*: Creation as Catastrophe" evaluates Mary Shelley's novel negatively for not living up to its opening, for descending to domestic melodrama, and for failing to provide a "liberating verbal space."

2

We found that categorical propositions (i.e., existence and characterization arguments) appeared most frequently in literary criticism. Indeed much of what we call interpretation amounts to support for categorical propositions classifying, characterizing, describing, or defining an author, an individual text, or a group of texts. Thus to do a Freudian or new historicist or Marxist or feminist reading of a text is to claim categorically that "x work has y qualities" or that "x can be described as y" or that "x is really a y." As we pointed out, to make such an argument requires a careful adjustment of definition and evidence.

We can best illustrate what we mean by looking at several examples in detail. Robert Merrill's attempt to reclassify *The Scarlet Letter* is admirable for its clarity of purpose; no one can read it and fail to grasp what it is trying to do. Merrill amply demonstrates that critical consensus has labeled *The Scarlet Letter* a romance.

> For the moment, let me say that the word [romance] must signify, besides the more obvious qualities of the picturesque and the heroic, an assumed freedom from the ordinary novelistic requirements of verisimilitude, development, and continuity; a tendency towards melodrama and idyl; a more or less formal abstractness and, on the other hand, a tendency to plunge into the underside of consciousness; a willingness to abandon moral questions or to ignore the spectacle of man in society, or to consider these things only indirectly or abstractly. (383)

To remove *The Scarlet Letter* from this category and place it in the category of the novel, as Merrill intends, could be done in either of two ways. First, the arguer could set up disjunctive definitions of novel and romance as the only possible classifications for prose fiction. Then to take *The Scarlet Letter* out of the category of romance would automatically place it in

the category of novel; if it is not one, it must be the other. Or the arguer could avoid the problem of defending a perfect disjunction (virtually impossible anyway) by positing a definition of novel that rivals in fullness and precision Chase's definition of romance. This definition must obviously be made to fit *The Scarlet Letter* yet still be acceptable as a general definition of the novel. That is, it cannot be so narrow that it would fit only *The Scarlet Letter*.

In pursuing his argument, Merrill seems to mix these alternative techniques. He spends most of his time showing why *The Scarlet Letter* does not necessarily fit Chase's definition of romance (e.g., because it is tragic, because it contains only one minor supernatural occurrence). But he does not establish the novel/romance pair as a disjunction, though he seems to come close to assuming a disjunction, nor does he set forth a full and authoritative definition of "novel." The closest he comes is to say that realism, and by implied extension, the novel, explores "the impact of experience on individuals," but this simple attribute (which could apply equally to 'Tis' Pity She's a Whore" or "Michael") cannot balance the weight of Chase's definition of romance. Merrill's argument, then, may not rigorously support its thesis, though it does call into question for its intended audience the usefulness of the presumption that *The Scarlet Letter* should automatically be labeled a romance.

Arguments for categorical propositions can also founder when the definition of a crucial term, or the term itself, shifts in mid-argument. Something of this sort happens in Susan Wolfson's article, "The Speaker as Questioner in *Lyrical Ballads*." Wolfson wishes to demonstrate that a pattern of question and response pervades Wordsworth's ballads, a pattern which culminates in the unexpressed questions submerged and ultimately controlled in "Tintern Abbey." The questions in Wordsworth's earlier ballads ("The Thorn," "We Are Seven," "Anecdote for Fathers") are present for everyone who can see a question mark, but there are none of this obvious sort in "Tintern Abbey," and to find unexpressed questions requires a redefinition of what a question is.

In order to carry on her argument and to include evidence from "Tintern Abbey," Wolfson must extend the definition of "question" so that the word becomes interchangeable with some more or less tangentially associated terms — "qualifications," "hesitations," "perplexity," "doubt," "uncertainty," and "restraint." She wants to associate words that describe what is being said with a mode of expression — the question (in terms borrowed from speech act theory, which Wolfson does not use, to associate an underlying speech act with a certain surface form). Wolfson's argument depends on her readers first accepting this extension of the semantic field of the word "question" and then on their accepting linguistic evidence for the existence of such doubts, hesitations, and thus unexpressed questions

Jeanne Fahnestock and Marie Secor

in the poem. But there is an unheralded enlargement of the territory in-
cluded under the term "question." It spreads to cover evidence such as
lacunae, the repetition of "this" and "these" as "unvoiced questions about
possible differences," and the phrase "I would believe" as an indication
of a "tentative tone," "a conditional utterance expressing more a wish than
an actual conviction." Why "more a wish" rather than equally or less than
a wish? "I would believe" could just as easily express determination as
tentativeness. But Wolfson's stretched definition of what constitutes a ques-
tion presumably did not trouble her intended audience.

The evidence offered in a categorical proposition argument should
usually be typical in both number and kind of the subject term. Thus,
to take a deliberately simple example, someone who argues that "most
mid-Victorian novels are polemical" must offer representative examples
of novels that fit both the categories "mid-Victorian" and "polemical." One
or two would presumably not do, and historians might expect the evi-
dence to include both famous and little-known novels. Or, in an argu-
ment characterizing one work, the evidence must be typical in the sense
that it represents a reasonable portion of the text, or at least does not
exclude any significant proportion of it. An argument, for instance, that
economic motives predominate in *Emma* could not be sustained by exam-
ples of monetary metaphors and word choices taken from a single chapter.
Indeed we often judge the validity of an interpretation by how much of
the text it can account for.

Among the articles we read, the quantity and typicality of the evidence
were rarely defended. We might take as an example Arnold Weinstein's
"The Fiction of Relationship," whose thesis is that the novel has gradually
learned to depict, realize, express, and give form to loving relationships.
Weinstein's definition of the abstraction "relationship" is as encompassing
and open-ended as his selection of six illustrative examples to represent
all of Western fiction for the last three hundred years is minuscule. Al-
though his examples were carefully chosen to represent three cultures and
three centuries, they can in no way bear the weight of the generalization.
Nor does Weinstein pretend that his selection is anything but arbitrary:
"To be sure my deck is stacked and small," he writes (5). But even after
this disarming concession, Weinstein goes on to deal from his stacked deck
anyway. If his essay persuades — and we do find it eloquently persua-
sive — it is not because of the representativeness of his evidence.

If it is difficult to defend generalizations characterizing texts or groups
of texts, it is even more difficult to defend value judgments as arguably
intersubjective rather than as matters of personal preference. To convince
another reader that a work is a "classic," or simply worth the time it takes
to read it, requires appealing to shared criteria of what has value in litera-

ture. These criteria certainly change over time, and writers are promoted or demoted from the canon of major works (definable operationally as works included in undergraduate or graduate literature curricula). To complicate the matter, the criteria that are explicitly identified may not be the ones that are actually operating as the basis of the value judgment. When we say, for instance, that a work is admirable for its richness, for its complexity, for its truthfulness to experience, we may simply mean that it lends itself to discussion in familiar terms.

No one who finishes Paul Sherwin's pyrotechnical essay on Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* can doubt that it is the negative evaluation of the novel that its title, "Creation as Catastrophe," suggests. However, the criteria by which Sherwin reached this judgment are by no means explicit in the article which consists of two carefully elaborated and then refuted readings of *Frankenstein*'s opening chapters — one classically Freudian and one personally psychoanalytic. Given the article's conclusion, Sherwin apparently assumes that the novel fails because these rococo readings cannot be sustained much beyond the scene of the creature's creation; thus he complains late in the essay: "Frankenstein has become just another Gothic hero-villain, a tiresome neurotic whose presence impoverishes the larger portion of the work that bears his name" (898). Such a judgment presupposes that a work is valuable to the extent that it sustains a particular reading or a consistent interpretation; that is certainly a defensible assumption, or has been until recently.

A problem arises, however, when we try to make a work sustain an individual reading and evaluate it negatively when it cannot. *Frankenstein* obviously breaks under the weight of Sherwin's interpretive strategies. But why judge the work by those particular standards? The arguer who wants to show the failure of a work because it cannot sustain a particular reading ought first to establish that the attempted reading is the justifiable standard of judgment. Such justification is easier for a positive evaluation than for a negative one, since the successful application of a criterion justifies using it. Most readers will accept such pragmatic support for a standard, even though the resulting argument is essentially circular: if a particular reading yields a positive evaluation, it must be the right one — because it yields a positive evaluation. But if a standard is going to produce a negative evaluation, it may need to be defended against charges of irrelevancy. We would not, for example, judge a Shakespearean sonnet defective because it lacks a tragic sense of history or More's *Utopia* deficient because it never sensitively portrays an individual psychological crisis. Similarly, Sherwin's argument becomes problematic because he never defends his criteria of judgment. The considerable persuasive impact of the article derives from other sources.

Jeanne Fahnestock and Marie Secor

3

So far we have been pointing out that literary arguments often do not make explicit certain structurally predictable elements – the definitions, causal linkages, comparisons which derive from the stases and common topoi of classical rhetoric. Arguers in all circumstances and in all disciplines draw upon these common topoi, but they are not self-consciously exploited in the arguments in our selection. Yet while purists might find these arguments deficient, literary scholars probably would not find them unconvincing; certainly editorial readers for the journals they appeared in did not. In other words, though literary arguments may seem flawed when viewed from a distance and by a field-independent standard, they can still be compelling to the audiences for whom they were intended. To identify the sources of their appeal, we must remember that these arguments exist in a particular field, a unique rhetorical situation; they are acts of communication directed at a special audience in a particular kind of forum, and as such they have their own characteristic procedures. Just as political oratory, pulpit homilies, and even advertising copy exploit a limited set of rhetorical possibilities, so also does literary criticism employ a definable repertoire of persuasive tactics to achieve communication in its well-defined environment.

Classical rhetorical theory can account for the persuasiveness of arguments in unique rhetorical situations by invoking the special topoi. The special topoi are warrants that Aristotle and later rhetoricians identified, to supplement the common topoi, as most useful in particular persuasive situations (see Toulmin).

We would like to extend this notion of the special topoi to contemporary literary argument and suggest that literary scholars have their own distinctive sources of argument, their own special topoi which they employ when constructing arguments and applaud when reading them. Like the Aristotelian special topoi that appeal to shared values and shared perceptions, these special literary topoi invoke the shared assumptions of the community of literary scholars, and at the same time create that community. We maintain in fact that appeals to these special topoi make literary arguments convincing to their intended audience. The writers in our sample all draw on them in one form or another, whether consciously or unconsciously; they are assumptions underpinning other arguments, sometimes formally invoked, sometimes glancingly referred to, rarely explored. Yet once they are identified, we recognize in them the nature and value of the critical endeavor.

The most prevalent special topos of literary argument appears in many forms, but we can nevertheless group its manifestations under the general heading "appearance/reality" (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, 415–

19). This dissociation can stand for all those occasions when the literary article is structured by a dualism, the perception of two entities: one more immediate, the other latent; one on the surface, the other deep; one obvious, the other the object of search. We might even claim that the appearance/reality topos is the fundamental assumption of criticism, since without it there would be no impetus to analyze or interpret literature.

Thomas Embry provides the first and perhaps simplest allotrope of the appearance/reality topos when he argues that "L'Allegro" and "Il Penseroso" (and beyond them Milton's attitude to sensuality and chastity) cannot be adequately assessed until a reader recognizes their allusive density. The poems have been taken at face value as pro and con presentations of two ways of life, but Embry argues that the sensuality "L'Allegro" presumably advocates is seriously undercut when the original context of one of the poem's allusions is identified. For example, the "checkered shade" that is so alluring in "L'Allegro" acquires a sinister meaning when the reader acknowledges its source in *Titus Andronicus,* where the phrase "checkered shadow" occurs in a seductive speech. Thus the apparently innocent is really corrupt, the poem's surface meaning altered when the reader brings to it a new dimension of awareness. Whether any reader but Embry has ever noticed these allusions (and he does not argue that Milton was aware of them), and whether these allusions from negative contexts are the only ones recoverable, is less important than the topos represented by the allusion-seeking endeavor: that of turning the two-dimensional, flat linguistic surface of a poem into a three-dimensional house of allusions.

We seldom see the appearance/reality dichotomy as clearly articulated as it is by Michael Steig, who frankly acknowledges his preoccupation "as a critic and a person" to be "the search for hidden meanings," which are the "meanings that really matter to us" (323). When Steig searches for hidden meanings in Kenneth Grahame's apparently innocent tale for children, *The Wind in the Willows,* he probes with the tools of psychoanalytic, biographical, and reader-response criticism. Not surprisingly, he finds erotic depths underlying two passages in a fantasy which, its author claimed, was "clean of the clash of sex" (321). Thus what appears to be a childhood idyl is in reality tinged with the author's sexual preoccupations. Although Steig makes a case for the sexual connotations he uncovers, he does not distinguish between finding and constructing a reality, or worry over the possible difference. Obviously, what appeals to the intended audience is less the magnitude and nature of the discovery than the familiarity of the pursuit, the search for a reality behind appearance — and a sexual reality at that.

The prevalence of the appearance/reality topos further suggests that we cannot discuss texts without using spatial metaphors. The very notion of appearance versus reality translates immediately into images of a surface

Jeanne Fahnestock and Marie Secor

with something underneath, of solids that can be probed, of layers that can be peeled away to reveal deeper layers. These metaphors, and the word choices they inspire, probably reveal as much about how the mind works as they do about literary discourse; psychologists have pointed out that our ability to abstract is informed by our experience of a three-dimensional world. Thus it is not surprising that most of the authors in our sample rely on spatial metaphors.

We find another highly sophisticated allotrope of the appearance/reality topos in Carr and Knapp's "Seeing through *Macbeth*," which invites us to pass "through" the text of the play, "through" performances of the play, "through" pictorial representations of these performances by Zoffany and Fuseli, and even "through" centuries and layers of criticism to some underlying psychological and social truthfulness that the text as a classic embodies. To take just one manifestation of this "seeing through," Carr and Knapp claim that Zoffany's portrait of Macbeth emphasizes his "inner conflict" in a way that readers of literary criticism will find familiar.

Speaking of characters as having depth is a commonplace of the rhetoric of literary criticism, but the appearance/reality topos pervades more than the discussion of character in this article. Carr and Knapp carry spatial metaphor to a baroque height when they interpret *Macbeth* by interpreting a painting which interprets a performance which comes full circle to interpret the play. Zoffany's print suggests to them an emblematic arrangement of Macbeth, Lady Macbeth, and the eighteenth-century audience as a paradox of the Apprentice (Macbeth) torn between Industry (Lady Macbeth) and Idleness (the audience, not depicted in the print). Thus the two-dimensional print stands for a three-dimensional tableau whose third dimension is supplied by the interpreter; this whole gazebo is then set into the play to represent its inner meaning. Such an interpretive methodology is unimaginable without spatial metaphor to create a locus for a reality behind appearance.

When critics use a literary text as a document of intellectual or social history, they invoke the appearance/reality topos by using spatial metaphors to suggest reaching through or behind the textual façade to a hidden reality. Thus a text can function as a scrim between the stage of real history and the audience/reader on the other side. This scrim may be opaque to a contemporary audience who can observe only its surface features, but it becomes transparent to a reader with historical perspective who sees the social reality through it. Thus Frank Whigham, in "The Rhetoric of Elizabethan Suitors' Letters," looks through the "conspicuous expenditure of words" (868) in sixteenth-century business letters to find their "real message," their place in the network of fawning and patronage that defined the Elizabethan power structure.

If the appearance/reality topos is everywhere, "everywhereness" is its own topos as well. One of the most persuasive endeavors that a literary scholar can engage in is to find something (a device, an image, a linguistic feature, a pattern) that no one else has seen — and to find it everywhere. Thus the perception of one set of doubles in a novel is interesting, but the perception of fourteen pairs of doubles is impressive. Ubiquity reinforces the initial perception, and as readers of literary arguments and partakers of the literary topoi, we are convinced and delighted by the ingenuity which points out a repeated form. And the less obvious the repetition, the more convincing.

The ubiquity topos comes in two forms: either the critic finds many examples of the same thing, or he finds one thing in many forms, up and down a scale of grandeur and abstraction. George Wright uses both forms of the ubiquity topos in his "Hendiadys and *Hamlet*." First, with a scrupulous attention to detail, Wright finds the same rhetorical figure, hendiadys, everywhere in *Hamlet* (66 times to be exact) as well as precisely counted appearances of it in other plays. But in *Hamlet* the double figure of hendiadys is doubly ubiquitous: this verbal linking of uncoordinated words in a coordinate structure (e.g., "the perfume and suppliance of a minute") resonates in doublings of characters, of plots, of themes, of images, and of "all relationships, familial, political, cosmic, and even artistic" (179). And more than a simple duplication, the doubleness of *Hamlet* represents not joining but disjunction, an appearance of harmony which masks disunion. Thus Wright places the ubiquity topos at the service of the appearance/reality topos, and we might even say that the more than normally powerful appeal of Wright's article (it was judged the year's best in *PMLA*) results from its "hendiadytical" union of two powerful topoi.

We find ubiquity everywhere, but another topos is the more elusive object of the critic's search: the prized unification of apparently irreconcilable opposites in a single startling dualism — the paradox. Critics seize upon paradoxical joinings with special delight. In the articles we examined, we found paradoxes at every level, from passing oxymorons (e.g., "formless form," Sherwin, 896) to the very thesis of the article. Thus Carr and Knapp notice that Zoffany's portrayal of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth depicts them as they "both advance toward and recoil from each other, their mutual attraction and antipathy held at equilibrium," and they combine their methodology and its result in their last paragraph: "So, paradoxically, because of the layers of mediation we have used, Macbeth seems to confront us directly . . ." (846). Similarly, Michael Steig begins his discussion of *The Wind in the Willows* with a paradoxical observation, derived from Freud, that "heimlich" became long ago a virtual synonym for "unheimlich": "Thus that which is of the household is familiar and pri-

Jeanne Fahnestock and Marie Secor

vate, even secret, and paradoxically, strange and forbidden" (305).

What is the appeal of the paradox? Why does this violation of Aristotle's first law of thought surprise and delight us with the impression of discovery and insight that accompanies its formulation? One answer may be that the precise verbal form is itself the attraction, making it seem possible to impose an apparent unity on disparate elements and thus provoke wonder. So the production of paradox may both serve the intellectual content of the argument and be an aesthetic end in itself, demonstrating the cleverness of the critic. Appropriately, the paradox is the only topos that is also a rhetorical figure, one particularly attractive to the language-conscious literary scholar.

Another special topos, one which particularly reveals shared values between critic and audience, is an assumption of despair over the condition and course of modern society which we shall call the *contemptus mundi* topos. "Modern" may be defined as any time from the Renaissance to the present, depending on the article. Critics seem to expect a woeful nod of tacit agreement whenever they mention the alienation, seediness, anxiety, decay, declining values, and difficulty of living and loving in modern times. Consequently, works which directly express such despair are highly valued. But even more indicative of the appeal of this topos is the search for unresolvable tensions and shadows in literature that at face value seems optimistic. Thus critics find sinister meanings in the fantasies of Lewis Carroll, darkness in the poems of W. S. Gilbert, cynicism in the novels of Jane Austen, and cruelty in the comedies of Oscar Wilde, while at the same time they do not write about literature which is sunny.

Among the articles we examined, the *contemptus mundi* topos functions as a touchstone of shared value. It is especially strong in Arnold Weinstein's "The Fiction of Relationship," which identifies forces of darkness and despair closing in on the warm and loving partners he has searched out in twentieth-century fiction. As his article advances through the centuries, he complains that the world outside becomes more and more hostile to human relationships. Similarly, according to Blanche Gelfant, hungry heroines, whose search for knowledge has positive value, all fail, all succumb to a prevailing social mediocrity that thwarts their quest for fulfillment. Still another manifestation of this topos appears in Susan Wolfson's darkening of "Tintern Abbey," in her reluctance to credit the poem's positive assertions as anything other than "pious platitudes." The unspoken assumption in her article is that doubt and uncertainty somehow make the poem more profound and more valuable to contemporary readers. Finally, Max Byrd's elegantly argued "Johnson's Spiritual Anxiety" applies one of our century's most famous definitions of "angst," Tillich's "spiritual anxiety," to Samuel Johnson's eighteenth-century occasional prose. In none of the articles we examined did we find any work praised

for optimism. Literary scholars may be quick to rebut that "it is not us, but the world that casts shadows"; such a perception may show the strength of this topos.

The *contemptus mundi* topos is thematic. A more formal topos is the paradigm, an elucidation of a structure in a literary text that is often imitated in the structure of the literary argument as well. As we use the term, a paradigm is an arrangement of verbal concepts in opposition or congruence; it is, in other words, a kind of template fitted over the details of a literary text to endow them with order. Literary scholars seem to create paradigms in two ways: microstructurally and macrostructurally. In the first method, they find a microparadigm, a small structural unit in the text, which becomes the center of ever-larger concentric applications. Thus in his article on *The Tempest*, Stephen Miko identifies the limits of Prospero's magic in the play and extends them into a "metaphor for the powers and limits of Shakespeare's own imaginative world and, by not too forced an extension, art in general" (9). This particular extension, from work to author to art itself, is a critical commonplace, perhaps even a topos in its own right. To claim that any work of art is really about art itself confers dignity reciprocally on both artist and critic.

In the second method, scholars find a macroparadigm, a recognizable set of relationships drawn from the world outside the literary text, and then detect its avatars in a particular genre or work. This method often enables a scholar to bring together many apparently diverse works under a single definition. Martha Vicinus, for example, borrows a paradigm of class struggle to create a generic definition of melodrama as a portrayal of the victory of the powerless over their oppressors without disturbing the social structures that make them powerless to begin with (note that this paradigm is also a paradox). She finds this macroparadigm worked out in many Victorian novels and plays, thus supporting, somewhat circularly, her original thesis. Similarly, William Greenslade in his essay on *The Ambassadors* sees the late nineteenth-century boom in advertising and journalism congruent with forces at work in the novel, the large social reality writ small in the individual text. All articles that find an Oedipal complex in a particular short story, or a Jungian archetype in a drama, or Lacanian "others" everywhere, apply macroparadigms. And, as we might expect, deconstructionists are continually surprised and disappointed by their inability to make a paradigm stick.

Ultimately all the topoi we have discussed reduce to one fundamental assumption behind critical inquiry: that literature is complex and that to understand it requires patient unraveling, translating, decoding, interpreting, and analyzing. Meaning is never obvious or simple for, if it were, the texts under scrutiny would not be literature and therefore would not

Jeanne Fahnestock and Marie Secor

be worthy of unraveling, interpreting, decoding, etc. Obviously, here we stumble on an endless circularity in literary criticism, the characteristic which creates the complexity which justifies it. We are led to ask, "Do we have literary criticism because literature is complex, or is literature complex because we have literary criticism?" We cannot resolve this circularity; we can only point to its existence.

This assumption about the complexity of literature informs every aspect of the articles in our sample. We found no articles praising the simplicity of a work, or its transparency, or its uncomplicated optimism, or the ease with which meaning is plucked from its surface. Instead, the critics we looked at justify their endeavor by finding complexity in the ways represented by the special topoi. Thus reality is always more complex than appearance, surfaces by definition have underlying depths, the multiplying vision of ubiquity complicates perspective on a text, paradoxes turn unities into nodes of tension, the *contemptus mundi* topos creates discomfort with a decaying world, and paradigms, which ought to simplify by creating structure, actually complicate by disclosing previously unsuspected relations.

All these versions of complexity seem to originate in the critical reader's perception of contrast or similarity in a text. Often the associations aroused in a reader by a single word will vary either among its separate uses in a text or between its use in the text and in the reader's understanding. Thus within the same text, a single word like "persuasion" may seem to be used in different senses; so the critic sets out to find a more complex order of meaning that will unify all those senses (see Swanson). Or the reader will find similarities between apparently unlike elements and so postulate another order of meaning, not self-evident, to account for surface differences, thus creating levels of meaning and hence complexity. The job of the critic is to turn this perception into an arguable claim, and to do that the special topoi are invoked.

Literary argument also seems to demand that the critic make one more choice: where to locate complexity. One obvious residence for complexity is the author's psyche where complexities of various kinds, conscious or unconscious, can be said to exert pressure on a text. Thus the unresolved tensions in an author's life (discovered by biographical scholarship) account for unsatisfactory resolutions in his work. Or complexity may be located in the times in which the author wrote, all ages being ages of transition filled with dialectic tension. Or the locus of complexity may be in the form of the work, prior to or irrespective of the author's intentions. Thus authors must to some extent intend the conventions of a chosen genre, no matter how much they may wish to undermine or defeat them. More recently the locus of complexity has moved either to an interaction between the

reader and the text or to the reader alone, particularly the educated, critical reader.

The special topoi identified above are by no means a definitive or complete listing of all the possible loci for literary argument. They are a rough sketch, a first outline of uncharted territory. Our formulation of them is meant to be suggestive rather than final: further reading will undoubtedly suggest refinements, variations, additions, overlappings. Such flexibility in the special topoi is to be expected since the set of discipline-specific assumptions to which arguments appeal and from which they are generated are bound to evolve over time.

4

From one point of view the special topoi are the logos of literary arguments and are thus the very constructs which enable scholars to operate on literature. But from a rhetorical point of view the locus of all the topoi is the interaction between arguer and audience, between logos and ethos. In other words, to invoke the topoi of paradox, appearance/reality, ubiquity, paradigm, *contemptus mundi*, and complexity serves to announce one's membership in the community of literary scholars who in turn will listen most attentively to the speaker with such credentials. Thus the special topoi inform the logos and constitute one manifestation of the ethos projected in a literary argument.

Other manifestations of the literary arguer's ethos are somewhat obvious but worth mentioning briefly. Certainly the critic must demonstrate familiarity with the subject matter and the work of other critics in a particular field. To do so is patently part of the logos, but it serves ethos as well. An early paragraph or footnote in a literary argument will often survey the scholarship behind a particular essay. But ethos may be conveyed more subtly in the allusive density of an article, in glancing references to this critic or that work. In fact, we seem to prize the very casualness that reaches out to a wide range of knowledge and pulls it into significance, creating the ethos of an alert and well-stocked mind.

A literary arguer's ethos also depends not just on what is said but on the vehicle of its saying. It is only appropriate that literary scholars convey their ethos through the artistry of their language, demonstrating virtuosity with the very medium they analyze. And if we take elaborateness as a sign of mastery, we can see how the complexity topos affects language as well as content. Thus a significant number of the articles we examined are very hard reading; simply parsing the predication out of

a sentence often requires an analytic attack little short of diagramming.

Such complexity of language, which enhances our perception of an author's subtlety and hence ethos, frequently appears as metaphor. Such metaphors are not merely ornamental; they are in fact the very vehicle by which the argument is framed in language. We would even suggest that without the juxtaposing of semantic fields achieved by metaphor, literary argument could hardly be carried on.

For at the level of language, interpretation may be seen as paraphrase. That is, any interpretation selectively recapitulates a text using terms from another semantic field. Turning to metaphor ourselves, we can call this linguistic activity "reading in another register." Here is an example of how it is done. Stephen D. Cox quotes the entire Blake poem "A Little Boy Lost" and then follows with a condensed paraphrase: "A child pointedly asserts his right to a mild form of egoism, and he is murdered for doing so" (302). Cox has here translated a twenty-four line poem into one sentence, using words like "egoism" from the register of psychoanalysis, "mild" from the register of reader evaluation, and "murdered" representing an ethical categorization. Thus what looks like bald restatement is actually an interpretation of the poem. Later on in his article, Cox describes and refutes other interpretations, each of which defines its own register: "Some of his commentators regard the Little Boy as a rationalist, and some as a visionary; some believe that he is conversing with a human father, and some that he is praying to a divine one" (308). Presumably reading in the rationalist register would paraphrase the poem using words associated with rationalism, the visionary reading with words from the semantic field of mysticism. The third version would select words characterizing human dialogue, the fourth divine colloquy, and so on.

At the level of word choice then, an interpretation is a metaphorical paraphrase juxtaposing a text with the lexicon from a chosen semantic field. The challenge in such an undertaking is to use words from the two domains without straining their meanings beyond the audience's recognition while at the same time accounting for a representative proportion of the work under scrutiny. To succeed at such a delicate balancing act is to project an ethos of elegant linguistic mastery. Occasionally the difficulty of the process shows up in mixed metaphors, odd predications, and tortured phrasings. Take the following three examples as representative of linguistic strain:

> Down by the river the previous afternoon the real relations
> between Chad and Madame de Vionnet have floated into Strether's
> pastoral frame.

> The magic lore that creeps into the play is capable of causing
> embarrassment both to those who prefer the notion that they all

just dreamt the tempest and the transportations and those who say magic is magic, usually invoking John Dee and insisting that at least it's white.

One resource of interpretation, then, would be to unpack what is implied in the illustration, scrutinizing each implication to understand its latent content in the image and in the submerged layers of Shakespeare's text.

All three of these sentences bring together words from semantic fields that refuse to converge. In the first example, we are asked to imagine "real relations" floating into a frame — and a pastoral frame at that. Thus an abstraction concretely moves into what we assume is a perceptual frame, but the modifier "pastoral" makes it generic as well. The second example personifies magic lore as creeping and causing embarrassment, and it ends with the allusiveness of private responses. And the last tries to make its point by combining in one sentence three metaphors for the hidden: we can unpack what is packed, actualize what is latent, and retrieve what is submerged, but it is hard to comprehend how all three can be done at once. All these metaphoric usages invoke confused images rather than clarifying ones, so the language breaks down, at least briefly, and the critic's ethos may suffer too, depending on the audience's degree of tolerance.

Most of the time, however, scholars of the word use words with precision and even flair, thus contributing positively to their ethos. Often, indeed, the language of the article mirrors the language of the literary text it discusses. Notice, for instance, the Johnsonian ring of Max Byrd's prose in the following sentence: "This author and Pope, perhaps, never saw the miseries which they imagine thus easy to be borne" (370). And surely Paul Sherwin can command as much élan as any Romantic stylist: "To Walton, however, belongs the burden of the mystery as he watches this self-destroying artifact vanish into darkness and distance and contemplates a catastrophe at the Pole" (883). Such stylistic virtuosity contributes powerfully to persuasiveness in the rhetorical situation of the literary argument.

5

So far in the rhetorical analysis of literary argument we have found that appeals to the special topoi and to a certain metaphorical paraphrasing and artistic use of language are dominating features. The predominance of these features suggests the unique rhetorical function of such arguments. Aristotelian rhetorical theory offers three basic forums or purposes for rhetorical discourse: forensic, deliberative, and epideictic. At first these categories of civic discourse seem to have little connection

Jeanne Fahnestock and Marie Secor

with the world of scholarly argument. Literary arguments are not obviously concerned with legislative or judicial decisions, and they seem far from platform speeches praising victorious athletes. But in a broader sense Aristotle's categories are relevant. Literary arguments do judge past performances, they do imply future policies (which works to teach), and, most important, they do the work of epideictic discourse: they create and reinforce communities of scholars sharing the same values.

When we place literary argument in the epideictic or ceremonial mode, our understanding comes into focus. Ceremonial rhetoric affirms the shared values of a community and harmonizes new insights with what is already believed. It is a subtly ritualized form of communication, and as ceremonial rhetoric literary argument has much in common with religious discourse. Reading a literary argument, especially a good one on a familiar text, may be like hearing a sermon on a familiar theme. What is preached may not be really new, but it is brought home to us with an appropriate elegance, a liturgy of citations, special topoi, and carefully constructed ethos.

This comparison with religious discourse may be more than a passing metaphor. Literary criticism also keeps alive a traditional set of texts by subjecting them to continual exegesis, and literary scholars constitute a body of believers who welcome new members into their sect. There are, however, many doctrinal controversies among believers, many disputes about the canon, even to the point of reform movements and recusancy.

Finally, like any system of religious belief, literary criticism addresses the great metaphysical questions about the nature of reality, of humanity, of life, of society, of God. The articles we read raised large questions about matters of philosophic interest to their authors and intended readers: to what extent can faith encompass doubt? (Wolfson); how can literature express the desires of the weak? (Vicinus); how can art portray the complexity of creation? (Sherwin); how can human love be sustained? (Weinstein); and how can the intellectual hungers of women be satisfied? (Gelfant). Criticism may locate such questions in the literature it selects for discussion, but they are not therefore of less significance for the scholars who identify them and the audiences they address.

None of this emphasis on high seriousness or didactic content seems to take any account of pleasure as the end of literature; at least none of the articles we read ever mentioned the beauty or pleasing effects of the works under scrutiny, even of admired works. Yet the pleasure principle is not absent in criticism, just as it is not absent in religion. We might say it is simply transferred from the literature to the criticism, from the dogma to the ritual. For surely no activity could consume so much time, attention, and energy were it not in itself a pleasure.

Thus in the absence of other compelling systems of belief, literature and literary criticism can be a religion that we go to for the reaffirmation of

values, for a sense of community, for intellectual stimulation — for all that religion can supply. The fulfillment of such human needs gives pleasure. Here then may be the best explanation for the ceremony of literary criticism. The process of discovering paradigms, paradoxes, ubiquitous elements, complexities, realities behind appearance, and our disdain for this world must be in itself a pleasure.

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