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The Philosophy of Composition, by E.D. Hirsch, Jr.

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E.D. Hirsch, Jr., *The Philosophy of Composition*. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1977. 191 pp. \$9.00.

Review by Michelle Loris

Positions on the teaching of composition are often parcelled into one of two camps: one side views the teaching of composition as the instruction of literacy or correct language skills; the other sees it as the teaching of thinking and believes in writing as a mode of learning. If pressed, each side could summon an impressive assembly of authorities to support its position.

What separates these two positions is often a matter of emphasis. One side emphasizes the importance of the finished product — *what has been written and its effect on the reader*; the other emphasizes the nature of the process — *how a piece of writing is written and why*. For many of us who teach writing, common sense and experience dictate the need to balance process with product.

E.D. Hirsch, Jr., an eminent literary critic, focuses his attention in *The Philosophy of Composition* on the finished product, and on what “might be called the ‘linguistics of literacy’ ” (p. 2). Hirsch’s emphasis is less on the effective teaching of composition than on the effect of writing upon the reader. The major contribution of the book is Hirsch’s principle of “relative readability,” which he sets as “our common stylistic goal in teaching composition” (p. 9). “Readability,” according to Hirsch, “refers to the easiness with which a reader understands the text, while ‘relative’ explicitly concedes the fact that easiness must vary with different semantic intentions.” He reduces his theory to this single principle: “One prose style is better than another when it communicates the same meanings as the other does but requires less effort from the reader.” His concern with composition is limited to the “external” part of writing — the finished product; his failure to advise about the “internal” part — the process of invention, creativity, the relationship of language and thought — remains a major omission in a book “addressed mainly to teachers of composition and other professional students of prose” (p. 2).

Hirsch cites linguistic history to show how the simplification of form and structure in the language creates “communicative efficiency” (p. 53) and he uses the works of Jespersen, Zipf, and Martinet, as well as recent research in the psychology of language processing to explain that “It is a human universal to minimize time and effort in order to produce the same effect” (p. 54). The psychological bases of his principle of “relative readability,” however, do not take into full account all that is known — and not known — about the processes of reading. As Hirsch would have it, reading is no more than the mind processing and connecting clauses with one another in a piece of writing. He also relies on research that ignores the relationship between reading and writing.

The linguistic bases for his principle of “relative readability” build from his view of standard language as “placed in the context of linguistic change” (p. 7), and it is this view that shapes his philosophy of composition. According to his philosophical perspective, composition is a subject with “an authentic ideology of literacy” that “argues for certain privileged goals in the teaching of literacy” (p.

xiii). He asserts that “this privileged ideology is the common ground on which we can all stand in our common enterprise” (p. xiii). In short, his philosophy emerges from his belief in a standard language. His book provides “a detailed defense of standard English as the proper language for composition teaching . . .” (p. 34).

As a corollary to this, Hirsch argues for the normalization of written speech. The sociolinguistic term for a native written language is a grapholect. He explains that the grapholect is so different from the oral dialect that correct writing can and should become codified and immutable. The need for a standard grapholect, as he sees it, is far from a denial of democratic ideals, and is, in fact, the mandate of “mass literacy” which will be accomplished through “mass education” and “mass publication” (p. 36).

He cites substantial research to support his view that “Standard English is unlikely ever again to change significantly in grammar or phonology, as long as universal schooling persists” (p. 7). It is Hirsch’s belief that this research establishes a philosophical basis for composition teaching, and more particularly, for teaching a standard form of the language.

Hirsch advances an elaborate argument for standard language in “the debate over standard versus non-standard language” (p. 7), and it would be nice for teachers of composition if the issue were settled once and for all, but that is not the case. Though I believe most teachers of writing are convinced of the need to teach the standard we should not disregard such works as Labov’s *The Study of Non Standard English*, McDavid’s “Variations in Standard American English,” Shuy’s *Discovering American Dialects*, and Dillard’s *Black English*, nor can we lightly dismiss other documents which affirm “the students’ right to their own language pattern and varieties of language.” It remains for the composition teacher to wrestle with the serious political and pedagogical questions raised but not resolved by such works: What conventions of the standard must be mastered? How is that mastery to be achieved, and at what cost to the individual, if any? Is failure to teach the standard ultimately elitist and irresponsible; or is insistence to teach it tyrannical and discriminatory?

40 SACRED HEART UNIVERSITY REVIEW

Hirsch recognizes “that psychological harm may be done in teaching a grapholect . . . especially if the student’s oral dialect is denounced as ‘incorrect’ or ‘substandard’ ” (p. 45). He says that “what is called for is personal tact and linguistic sophistication” (p. 45), but he concludes that “while such intervention can be harmful, its potential for good includes the benefit of instruction in a classless, transdialectal instrument for communication between social and regional groups” (p. 45). As Hirsch sees it: “Without a normative grapholect, a classless society could not be plausibly imagined” (p. 46).

Hirsch’s argument for the standardization of written speech provides him with a premise for teaching composition as an independent discipline. “Everyone accepts literacy as a goal of schooling” he asserts, but we need to determine exactly “where the skill of writing should be taught” (p. 140). Hirsch’s answer to the question is this:

Composition is a craft which cannot properly be subsumed under any conventional subject matter. It is not a branch of literary study, or logic, or even rhetoric. . . . The desire to mix composition with . . . these subjects . . . is the ignorance that besets us all about effective ways to teach composition. (pp. 140-41)

First, he explains:

There is . . . a strong reason for separating the teaching of writing from the teaching of literature. While both subjects make students aware of style . . . the study of style in literature is a study of the *fusion* of form with content. . . . Learning how to write implies . . . the *separation* of linguistic form and content. (p. 141)

Next he tells us that:

MICHELLE LORIS

41

The vogue of introducing formal logic into the composition classroom has now passed, but chapters on logical fallacies still appear in the composition handbooks — a concession to the inextinguishable belief that “clear” writing and “clear” thinking reflect one another. The belief is venerable. But everyone will surely want to keep the belief from impairing effective instruction in composition. . . . There is, in fact, a logical flaw in equating clear thinking and clear writing. . . . *Clear thinking means drawing correct inferences from the given premises. Clear writing means an unambiguous and readable expression of one’s meaning. . . . [M]uddy writing can express clear thinking and clear writing can express muddy thinking.* (pp. 141-42)

Third, he argues that although “rhetoric is the subject closest to composition . . . because they are both practical arts” (p. 143), composition is not to be subsumed under rhetoric because the concerns of rhetoric, like those of literature and logic “are irrelevant to composition” (p. 142). Hirsch concludes that:

The place of composition . . . is its own place. It is not part of another subject matter but a branch of practical knowledge . . . that has an importance equal to any other subject in the curriculum.
(p. 143)

That composition holds an important and essential place in the curriculum is no longer doubted — even if for some its ascent has come by necessity rather than by choice. The bases of Hirsch’s arguments, however, indicate a limited, utilitarian, and surface-feature-only approach to composition. Learning to write well, it seems to me, involves more than learning to produce the correct surface features of the language. Writing involves understanding, knowing, judging, interpreting, perceiving, analyzing, relating,

ordering, selecting, imagining, inventing, and more. Because writing includes all these modes of learning and thinking, learning to write well cannot be separated from learning to think clearly and to read properly. Teaching students to read, think, and write is the integrative task of the composition teacher.

When we carry out this task we are teaching rhetoric as it is generally understood for most composition classes today. Rhetoric is the study of how the language works and how to work the language: the teaching of writing is the teaching of how to make meaning with words, how to do things with language; the teaching of reading is the teaching of how to understand words, how to interpret their meaning. Both reading and writing require sharp, critical, and analytical thinking ability.

Hirsch's book, finally, is not so much about writing as it is about editing and rewriting. He encourages teachers of composition to instruct their students in what he considers the four major maxims of good writing: "1) Omit needless words, 2) Keep related words together, 3) Make the paragraph the unit of composition, 4) Use integrative devices between clauses and sentences" (pp. 154-55) — a concise summary of the usual advice given in the handbooks, but about as useful as most of it, unless it is accompanied by diligent instruction.

The last two chapters of *The Philosophy of Composition*, though, provide if not new, then at least some practical and useful suggestions for improving the pedagogy of composition. First, Hirsch explains that "well-conceived statements on paper" may be "the most efficient methods" (p. 159) for teaching composition. He says that "To make comments on a student's paper is to build upon productive schemata which the student already has, and to encourage . . . expansion and development" (p. 159). He encourages teachers to be selective about their comments on each paper — the opposite of the "red-ink-it-to-death-syndrome"; to write comments only after a brief, holistic reading of the paper; to state comments in a positive and objective tone; and to keep a record of the comments made on each student's paper.

Next, he suggests that "the most important device for teaching effective writing is . . . directed revision" (p. 161). He states that "the goal of teaching — the goal of the teacher's comments" is to

bring students into the process of revision: "To learn writing is to learn principles of revision" (p. 161). He reasons correctly that if students are "to revise their prose to make it readable . . . a large portion of the teaching time should be directly concerned with revising" (p. 162).

Third, he recommends that we "isolate the teaching of composition from the giving of final grades. The pedagogical advantage of the method is the obvious one that the teacher and student become colleagues in a joint enterprise" (p. 163). This last suggestion is not easily implemented in the classroom but it does deserve some thoughtful consideration by teachers of writing. In any case, Hirsch is correct to this extent: not every piece of writing in a composition class need be graded or formally evaluated; and although teachers and students are not colleagues, they can become allies working together.

Various modern studies generally support the teaching methods Hirsch suggests, but on the whole *The Philosophy of Composition* may very well disappoint teachers of composition and professional students of prose because of its author's failure to consider the whole nature and process of writing. No philosophy of composition is complete unless it identifies philosophical bases for both the "relative readability" and the "relative creativity" of a composition. Both principles are integral not only to the effective teaching of writing but also to the liberal and humanistic values which are the foundation of all language instruction. We should not, therefore, rest easy with a theory of composition that sacrifices one of these principles to the other.