Review of Timothy Crusius, Discourse: A Critique and Synthesis of Major Theories

Barbara Johnstone

Crusius's book consists of critical summaries of the ideas of four important composition theorists whose work appeared between 1968 and 1980, and a "dialogical synthesis" in which Crusius borrows ideas from each of the four, and supplements these ideas with others, to compile his own model of how writing should be studied. The four composition theorists whose work he surveys are Kinneavy, Moffett, Britton, and D'Angelo. All are interested in describing what people are learning to do as they develop into mature writers, though each model focuses on different aspects of the topic. The overall area of concern might be described this way:

As people learn to write, they must
(a) develop the cognitive ability to dissociate themselves from their audience and topic;
(b) learn to use the traditional offices of rhetoric (invention, arrangement, and style);
(c) learn to employ these steps to produce written texts which will serve a variety of purposes; and
(d) learn to use forms of thought and discourse organization conventionally recognized in their cultural milieu as corresponding to these purposes.

Moffett's primary concern is with (a), the development of mature writing skills from immature, egocentric, expressive discourse. D'Angelo focuses on the writing process, or (b). Both Kinneavy and Britton highlight (c), the aims or functions of writing, and Kinneavy in addition discusses (d), the rhetorical modes evidenced by the final written product.

With Kinneavy and Britton, Crusius himself is most interested in the notion of rhetorical aim, though he recognizes that it is important for composition teachers to know which aim is most basic or developmentally prior, and why. As have other composition theo-
larger-than individual consciousness and will. Second, in her response Campbell writes: “The attack must also be directed toward my work on the earlier and contemporary women’s-movements and on the rhetoric of individual women, and here the charge begins to collapse. I have written of Maria Miller Stewart, Sojourner Truth, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucretia Coffin Mott, Carrie Lane Chapman Catt, and many others. These women wanted to ‘maintain things as they [were]’? (154). Here again Campbell misses my point. I was not arguing that these women rhetors were supporting the status quo, but, rather, that the way in which they have been narrativized in our histories renders the historian complicit with the dominant structure.

rists, linguists, and students of spoken rhetoric, Crusius uses a model of the essential elements of communication as a basis for taxonomizing the possible aims of writing. Writing focused on the encoder (the writer) is expressive in aim, for example; writing focused on the world is referential; writing focused on the code is literary; and so on. One could quibble with details of Crusius’s model. As Roman Jakobson pointed out, for example, literary discourse is really better understood as discourse that forces readers to focus on its form rather than on the code in which it is composed, and discourse focused on the code (definitions of terms, for example) might better be labeled “metalingual.” Also, Crusius does not appear to have a place in his model for what Malinowski called “phatic” communication, communication meant primarily to check whether sender and receiver are in touch. Some kinds of written discourse, though admittedly not those taught in composition classes, have this aim, such as notes passed by adolescent schoolgirls, or postcards from vacation spots.

The question that poses itself about all such taxonomies is whether one identifies the aim of a given text by identifying elements in the text that can be said to mark its function, by identifying what the writer intended the text to do, or by identifying what readers perceive to be the text’s purpose. Crusius objects to Kinneavy’s notion that aim is inherent in texts, pointing out that a writer’s purpose is a matter for the readers’ interpretation, and to Britton’s term “function,” because a text can turn out to function in ways its author did not intend. For Crusius, aim is “either an inductive leap to motive based on conventions a text observes and knowledge of the circumstances of composition, or it is a writer’s statement of intent, self-interpretation” (118). Crusius appears to be sidestepping some big issues here. How, exactly, does a writer’s use of conventional forms (for it is the writer, not the text, that “observes conventions”) key a reader’s interpretation about motives? Is the writer who “states intent” really the primary authority about what a text means? Is Crusius talking about meaning by someone, or meaning to someone, or both? As he points out, though, the guiding aim of composition theory is practical. Since composition theorists are ultimately interested in how people can be taught to write effectively, their descriptions of the process of writing and the resulting products tend naturally to focus on meaning from the writer’s perspective.
Crusius's theory, presented in the second half of the book, consists of a "discussion of the variables that, acting together, make discourse processes and products what they are" (114). There are nine variables, grouped into three sets: act variables (aim and genre, subject matter and mode, media, context), agent variables (writer, editor, and reader), and process variables (precomposing and composing). Crusius claims that a thorough understanding of the functions and interactions of these nine variables is all that is needed to account for any discourse. Again, quibbles suggest themselves: Genre, for example, might be better understood in speech act terms, as the category a text counts as belonging to, rather than in linguistic terms, as a set of recurrent features in the text. But Crusius's discussions of the nine variables are thorough and thoughtful, and the set of variables constitutes a useful heuristic device for thinking about writing and the teaching of writing.

On the whole, Crusius does what he sets out to do admirably, and the book should be helpful to people who want a clear overview of major—if no longer quite contemporary—thinking in the field of composition theory. The disappointment is that he did not set out to do more. Crusius defends his decision to define discourse as writing, and to exclude, "except occasionally in passing, the much larger domain of discourse study and rhetorical theory" (3) with reference to his intended audience: English-department rhetoricians who need to "come to terms with our own theories" (3) before trying to come to terms with the work of students of discourse in linguistics, literary theory, philosophy, anthropology, and speech. It would be a shame if composition theorists were not yet ready to learn from people outside their field, but I suspect that Crusius is wrong about this. By broadening his reach, a person with Crusius's acuity as an analyst and writer could make a really new contribution to discourse theory, and in the process help end rather than perpetuate the arbitrary academic factionalism that keeps people who study oral rhetoric from talking to people who study written rhetoric and that makes people who teach reading think they have nothing to learn from people who teach writing.

Barbara Johnstone

Department of English
Texas A&M University