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Jim Corder's Radical, Feminist Rhetoric

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Between 1961, the year his first scholarly essay appeared in *College English*, and his death in 1998, Jim Corder published literally dozens of essays in national scholarly journals; numerous essays in national scholarly collections; and dozens of other essays and poems in regional and local journals, magazines, and books. He also authored, coauthored, and edited five well-received textbooks, including a handbook issued in six editions; a book aimed at college English teachers and university administrators; and five other volumes.¹ At least three additional Corder books await posthumous publication.²

Over four decades Corder wrote at least as much—if not more—than anyone else in the entire field of rhetoric and composition.³ But a paradox is at work, for other scholars do not cite Corder very much. In fact, an estimable figure in composition studies can write a history of composition teaching during the period of Corder's career without mentioning him at all. Joseph Harris did just that.⁴ Sometimes Corder definitely appears to be a “vacancy,” a word he used to describe himself (“Notes” 104).

Of course, quantity of publication does not necessarily equal quality. But consider that Corder won the first Richard Braddock Award offered by *College Composition and Communication*. And consider that virtually all the best editors in Rhetoric and Composition—Edward Corbett, Gary Tate, Richard Larson, Lee Odell, Theresa Enos, George Yoos, Victor Vitanza, Wendy Bishop, and others—published his work in such journals as *College English*, *Publication of the Modern Language Association*, *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, *PRE/TEXT*, *Rhetoric Review*, and *Freshman English News/Composition Studies*, and in collections. Why did Corder both appeal to editors and then tend, as he wrote, to “disappear”?⁵ I suggest that this paradox stems from his reliance on a form of academic argumentation that was highly unorthodox, especially before the 1990s.

While Corder doesn't call himself a radical, a pioneer, a subversive, or a feminist, his rhetoric is radical, pioneering, subversive, and feminist. He interrogates, overturns, and supplants the agonistic rhetoric of

display that dominates scholarly writing (and much of Western culture), replacing it with a feminist rhetoric. (Of course, he generates one of many feminist rhetorics, not *the* feminist rhetoric, which does not exist.)

Through a variety of strategies, Corder enacts six large principles of argument.⁶ These principles and strategies dominate his scholarly discourse, especially his academic publications between 1971 and 1993, and together form a definable system of argument that defamiliarizes and subverts standard academic discourse by creating a sense of puzzling over a problem with a reader instead of handing her solutions. By highlighting his own uncertainties, Corder invites a reader to wrestle with issues, aware that her conclusions may differ from his. Paradoxically, he also asserts four unqualified claims—rhetoric is an architectonic discipline, ethos is the most important element in persuasion, truth is contingent (or “jacklegged”), and good rhetoric usually requires gentleness.

Focusing chiefly on essays that Corder wrote for prominent national journals of rhetoric and composition, I attempt to explain the main principles and strategies of his rhetoric. I hope this account will help elucidate his contribution to the theory and practice of argumentation—an elucidation necessitated in part by his own refusal to theorize, explicate, clarify, or even acknowledge much of his own system of argument. This refusal itself constitutes part of his argument. Following this analysis I elaborate my contention that his rhetoric is radical, pioneering, subversive, and feminist.

Here are the six principles and their strategies:

I. ARGUMENT AS INDIRECTION

Instead of presenting scholarly argument as an overwhelming, watertight display of knowledge, Corder argues indirectly through the following strategies:

Circling

Although Corder never mentions modern Spanish philosophy, Jose Ortega y Gasset's statement of philosophical strategy also articulates one of Corder's rhetorical tactics:

[W]e will move steadily ahead toward a goal which I will not now spell out because it would not yet be understood. We will go moving toward it in concentric circles. . . . The great philosophical problems demand a tactic like that which the Hebrews used for the taking of Jericho and its innermost rose gardens: making no direct attack, circling slowly around them. (17-18)

Near the end of *Uses of Rhetoric*, Corder announces that he "backed off" crucial issues (208), perhaps because his strategy meant "taking the long way around, expecting it to be the shortest way home" (118). Four pages into "I'll Trade," he declares, "I'll start again" (33).

In "A New Introduction to Psychoanalysis, Taken as a Version of Modern Rhetoric," Corder circles repeatedly. He begins by referring warmly to Abraham Lincoln, the lunar landing, and a bevy of canonical literary figures who seem quite unrelated except for their irrelevance to both psychoanalysis and rhetoric. Three pages into the essay, he circles, "I have not yet begun, but I want to stop and come at things in another way so that I can sneak up on what may be my subject from another direction" (140). Then he begins to observe that mental illnesses embody blocked or misdirected Invention, Structure, or Style (which I am tempted to call the Holy Trinity of Corder's rhetoric, but won't). Nineteen pages into the essay, he circles again, "I expect I've talked long enough about originating thoughts. I should get to what I came for" (156). Two pages later he circles once more, "Now I can go on with what I have wanted to propose from the start" (159). Then, having finally returned to the proposition announced in his title, he elaborates it.

Building Clotheslines

In "Learning the Text: Little Notes on Interpretation," Corder mentions a phone call to his mother in which she emerged a larger, more complete person than he realized. Then he examines the meaning of *oratio* and its parts, each of which, he declares, transcends its standard textbook definition. After developing and illustrating this point, he finally proposes an unlikely analogy: Just as his mother exceeded the "parent text" that he "created" for her, so do *narratio* and *exordium* "blossom" when they escape their "confinement in textbooks" (244, 248). Here the apparently divergent discussions (of his mother and *oratio*) meet at the end, when he offers his surprising argument by analogy.

"Learning the Text" follows what nonfiction writer John McPhee calls a "clothesline" structure (qtd. in Roundy 73-74). Starting from two far-away points—his mother and *oratio*—Corder develops a clothesline for each, hanging different comments on each line. At the end, when he presents his analogy, the two clotheslines meet to form a "V."

In another essay Corder highlights his family's hardships during the Great Depression, mentioning incidents of boys throwing rocks at occupied outhouses. Then he notes the public demand that English teachers go "back to the basics." Developing a clothesline for each topic, he pulls the lines together when he argues by analogy that returning to the "basics" of English teaching would resemble returning to the poverty of the 1930s ("Outhouses"). Clothesline arguments are indirect because the two topics initially appear unrelated.

Bouncing

In "Learning the Text," when Corder completes his comments on his mother, he bounces to the seemingly unrelated subject of *oratio*. When he ends the essay with his analogy, he completes the "V" of his clothesline and validates bouncing from his mother to *oratio*.

Corder builds another clothesline in "Studying Rhetoric and Teaching School." Early in the essay, he recounts mowing his yard and then bounces to the history of black-eyed peas, sweet potatoes, turnips, and radishes—all of which "once were weeds" (9). He next bounces to English textbooks, some of which he finds authoritarian. Then he compares the process of weeds-to-potatoes to "the cyclical, naturally-replenishing nature of Invention, Structure, and Style" (29). By proposing the unexpected analogy between weeds-to-potatoes and the composing process, he completes his clothesline. Uniting what seemed two radically disparate subjects makes his bounce from potatoes to rhetoric seem highly purposeful.

But whereas "Learning the Text" features one bounce (from his mother to *oratio*) and the "V" of a simple clothesline, "Studying Rhetoric" includes not only weeds-to-potatoes and composing but also memories of lawn-mowing, rage at dictatorial textbooks, and a reflection on Sears catalogs and their role in rural West Texas. Veering back to English studies, he bemoans "reductionist, monistic [teaching] practices" that manifest "arrogance or ignorance or dogma" (17). Only then does he bounce back to complete his clothesline by proposing his surprising analogy between weeds-to-potatoes and composing. Complexity arises because his lawnmower and the Sears catalog assuredly do not hang from either clothesline. Careening yet again, he offers a six-page account of ethos before alluding to Lincoln and making a final series of bounces to the Hebrew Bible; the Christian Bible; and works by Oliver Goldsmith, Alexander Pope, Samuel Johnson, James Kinneavy, and Walter Ong. None of these texts hangs from a clothesline either. Despite its clothesline, "Studying Rhetoric" features enough bouncing to defy any notion of conventional organization. So do many of Corder's other works. By abandoning prefabricated structures in favor of bouncing, Corder generates momentum by creating the impression of thinking aloud.

Reveling in Self-Contradiction

Aristotle founded his logic on the principle of consistency. Corder, however, disorients readers by contradicting himself. In "Hunting for *Ethos*," Corder dismisses an earlier essay, calling it "frequently uninformed" (299). In "Hunting Lieutenant Chadbourne" he apologizes for misrepresenting Chadbourne in his earlier *Lost in West Texas*.

Corder sometimes contradicts himself within a specific work. For example, in many ruminations about rural West Texas, he portrays a weather-beaten childhood during the painful 1930s when a profound yearning for a boy's innocence wars against hardscrabble memories. He

presents an unresolvable tension between nostalgia and antinostalgia toward a childhood wondrous and woebegone. Deprivation constantly jostles wistfulness.⁷

The title of one essay telegraphs self-contradiction: "On the Way, Perhaps, to a New Rhetoric, but Not There Yet, and If We Do Get There, There Won't Be There Anymore." Other examples abound. In "A New Introduction to Psychoanalysis," he declares, "In my earlier efforts to think, which I have tried to record in previous pages, there was some presumption of normality. Now I believe that . . . there is no normality" (157). In "Hoping for Essays," he first mentions "personal essays (and other kinds, if there are other kinds)" (311). Next he presumes that there are other kinds: "I don't know what a personal essay is or how it differs from other forms of writing" (313). Soon he reverses himself: "Every piece of [nonfiction prose] writing is a personal essay" (313). In "Notes on a Rhetoric of Regret," "Asking," and "At Last Report," he explains the need to pour one's self into one's writing but yokes that need to the realization that every text is a construction, not the author's selfhood. "Hunting Lieutenant Chadbourne" and the book of that title assert that Chadbourne, a soldier who died in the Mexican War, is and isn't in his letters, just as Corder is and isn't in his texts about Chadbourne. The tensions never ease.

In a radical move, Corder installs the anti-Aristotelian topos of self-contradiction as the linchpin of another essay. On the first page, he asks, "When may I privilege my way of seeing and thinking? Answer: Never. Answer: Always" ("When" 49). Elaborating, he explains the necessity of criticizing others and the violence of doing so: "I *always* count myself, *always* render judgments, *always* sanctify my judgments, *always* privilege my own way of seeing and thinking." But, he quickly counters, "I must learn *never* to count myself, *never* to deny another, *never* to render a judgment against another, *never* to sanctify my judgments, *never* to privilege my own way of seeing and thinking" (50). This profound contradiction structures the entire essay.

Exploding Taxonomical Boxes

Corder once told me: "All taxonomies leak." But instead of constructing a better ship with tighter compartments, he places dynamite into the leaking holes of every available taxonomy and genre category. Exploding cargo-holds disorients readers by disrupting their expectations, which hinge on the stability of well-defined genres.

Corder hints at this deconstructive project in a 1967 essay, one of the extremely few formal, non-Corder-like scholarly pieces that he ever produced. In a model interpretation of a poem by John Dryden (which he explicates as a species of classical rhetoric), he lets slip the comment that an unspecified "we" are "aware of the marriage of poetic and rhetoric" ("Religion" 248). Of course, many failed to recognize and bless such a marriage, but he did.

The first chapter of *Uses of Rhetoric* weds rhetoric to poetic as Corder analyzes a magazine ad, a TV show, an essay by Paul Roberts, and Tennyson's "Ulysses." In subsequent chapters he extends the marriage by examining Aristotle on ethos, a poem by Robert Browning, a poem by Oliver Goldsmith, an essay by Samuel Johnson, and current composition textbooks—among many other topics. In "Varieties of Ethical Argument," he anatomizes *Gulliver's Travels*, Aristotle's account of ethos, Otis Walter, Michael Halloran, Cicero, Jack Schaefer's *Shane*, the Gettysburg Address, a poem by Alexander Pope, the biblical Book of Amos, and the biblical Book of First Corinthians—among other topics. One form of ethos or another, he maintains, imbues all the literary works (and the speech) that he discusses. Here the varieties of ethos are distinguishable, rhetoric and poetic are not. In "Rhetoric and Literary Study" he assails literary critics as "a few priests" who worship "holy tablets" and proposes that rhetoric serve as an umbrella for literary studies (13, 19).

Corder constantly torpedoes genre distinctions between personal essays and scholarship, occasionally bemoaning others' failure to blend the expressive with the intellectual ("Academic Jargon"). While such demolition might satisfy others, it serves as a mere preamble for Corder, the radical, who blasts walls that separate entire fields. Then he merges those disciplines. In "Hunting Lieutenant Chadbourne" and the book by the same title, he fuses autobiography, postmodern rhetoric, and nineteenth-century American historiography. Elsewhere, dismantling a seemingly insuperable barrier between rhetoric and brain science, he defines psychoanalysis as a rhetoric, outlines a rhetoric of cognition, and yearns for a "biorhetoric" to explain mental illness ("A New Introduction," "On the Way"). Transgressing another, well-policed disciplinary border, he explicates cancer as extremely destructive, cellular crossovers of Invention, Structure, and Style ("On Cancer"). To raid different genres and disciplines is to argue indirectly by prodding readers to ask: "What is going on?"

Refusing to Theorize or Explicate

Corder seldom admits that he is arguing indirectly. He never explains why. For example, in "A New Introduction to Psychoanalysis," he repeatedly reports that he is circling but never supplies a reason. In none of his essays, textbooks, or other books does he directly theorize or advocate Argument by Indirection and the virtues of circling, building clotheslines, bouncing, contradicting one's self, or exploding taxonomical boxes. Ironically, his textbooks recommend formal, conventional types of argument, types that he constantly defies. His refusal to theorize, propagandize, clarify, and elaborate his Argument by Indirection—this refusal itself helps constitute his Argument by Indirection.

All Corder's strategies of Argument by Indirection invite a reader to share his process of contemplating and weighing. Just as he patiently explores a problem, he implicitly argues, so should a reader. A cardinal advantage of Argument by Indirection is that unlike the codified textbook

formalism that he rebelled against, his strategies enshrine the rich waywardness of words and thought while, paradoxically, propelling thought through disciplinary fences.

II. ARGUMENT AS MYSTERY

As if the strategies of his Argument as Indirection were insufficiently confounding, Corder adds Argument as Mystery, spicing his mix of personal and academic writing with enigma, elegy, oracle, incantation, vision, and prophecy.

Even though the Double Mountains are so tiny that they do not appear on most maps of Texas, Corder repeatedly proclaims: "God lives on the Double Mountains." He never explains this "theology."⁸ Does God reside elsewhere, too? Does God ever travel? If the Double Mountains loom magnificently in the internalized landscape of his childhood, do others internalize similar landscapes? Or is the statement merely whimsical? Because Corder never says, his comment remains enigmatic. Inasmuch as many of his writings about West Texas are, in part, elegiac, his declaration of "theology" may be elegiac as well; for he writes in Fort Worth, at a distance from the Double Mountains and his early childhood, when he lived near them.

Corder supplies arguments for his claim that the usual academic disciplines are rhetorics. But he also defines "painting"—an art of lines and colors, not words—as "a rhetoric" ("On the Way" 164). Because he fails to explicate this declaration, it never becomes a formal or an informal argument. It is oracular.

Corder ends *Uses of Rhetoric*, a decidedly academic book, by evoking a Whitman-like, mystical union with nature: "When I waded in a tributary of Duck Creek," he states, "I became Duck Creek." When "my bent-feather scout friend" departed the Brazos River, "he became, all those years ago, the shape of the rock I threw" (209). This passage is incantatory.

In 1971 Corder advocated not writing across the curriculum (WAC), but rhetoric across the curriculum—the entire curriculum (*Uses*). He contended that each course in each discipline should be organized according to Invention, Structure, or Style. This visionary proposal anticipated the writing-across-the-curriculum movement that emerged the following decade, but was far more revolutionary than WAC. It remains an unfulfilled vision.

In "For Sale, Rent or Lease," a 1975 essay in *College Composition and Communication*, George Tate, Gary Tate, and Corder describe the undergraduate rhetoric major that they proposed at their university only to be rebuffed. Their essay outlines their plan and offers it to others. A wonderful possibility that might be adopted somewhere, sometime, this vision generally has yet to arrive.

In 1985 Corder predicted an electronic revolution in which small machines would house thousands of widely available texts: "To make a new rhetoric we will have to face the implications of miniaturization and electronic communication and to decide whether new technologies may indeed bring a new kind of literacy and with it a new kind of rhetoric" ("On the Way" 165). High-reduction photography, he continues, allows one

to put 3200 pages on a single ultramicrofiche film card. When that miniaturizing capacity is hooked to networks made possible by the computer, a significant library can be held in small space at reduced cost, and almost anyone almost anywhere can easily gain access to almost anything printed. ("On the Way" 166)

Of course, this prophecy proved accurate.

In the same essay, Corder calls for the analysis of visual images welded to texts. Rhetoricians, Corder insists, "will have to learn to understand the interplay of visual image and verbal message that makes a meaning of arguments as display in such places as television and magazine advertisements and on billboards" ("On the Way" 164). This prophetic statement anticipates the most recent thought of Gunther Kress and John Trimbur.

III. ARGUMENT AS CHARM

Rather than the common scholarly practice of besieging readers with claims and proof, Corder beguiles them by presenting a simple persona and by salting his writing with humor. Developing a folksy persona enables Corder to mitigate the disorientation that readers experience when encountering his Argument as Indirection. Even when examining or inventing a postmodern puzzle, he generally eschews jargon, explaining that he would rather plug away than operationalize ("You"). After *Uses of Rhetoric* appeared in 1971, he discarded the frequent practice of incorporating innumerable quotations, boxcarlike, into academic prose. Instead of supplying Argument as Boxcar, he cites judiciously, sometimes sparsely. Further, his "ah-shucks" persona seems to reflect the rural boyhood that he frequently ponders in his scholarship and his later identity as a professor with one-third of a red bandana poking out of his hip pocket.

In "Some of What I Learned at a Rhetoric Conference," the simple persona reigns as Corder refuses the role of eager listener who absorbs priceless knowledge from "Big Name" presenters at deadly earnest sessions. Instead, he confesses to skipping conference panels in order to observe his bartender's skills. In "Lamentations" he and coauthor James Baumlín declare: "Truth is always jacklegged, though it seems static and permanent" (23). Elsewhere Baumlín and Corder elaborate: In West

Texas, jackleg carpentry occurs when "upon completion of a job, the carpenter backs off, surveys the work, and says 'Well, there it is, by God—it ain't much, but it'll hold until we can think of something better'" ("Jackleg" 18). Then Corder and Baumlin reject the demand for definitive answers.

Corder also charms readers by making them laugh. During the 1980s, especially, he laces essays with self-effacing humor, thereby violating the self-important solemnity of academic discourse. One particularly droll essay, "The Rock-Kicking Championship of the Whole World Now and Forevermore," lampoons Americans' obsession with football and, by incorporating biblical references to rock-kicking, burlesques scholars' insistence on citing authorities in their attempts to validate their ethos and justify their claims. Although Corder's easygoing persona and humor create the appearance of accessibility, they mask highly sophisticated argumentation.

IV. ARGUMENT AS INCOMPLETENESS AND FALLIBILITY

Instead of striking an all-knowing scholarly pose, Corder characteristically insists on his own ignorance. He also constantly hedges. At times (for example, in *Uses of Rhetoric*), he qualifies statements so often that a reader must work a bit to grasp the assertions amid the qualifiers. Furthermore, he repeatedly deprecates himself.

Alluding to the final chapter of Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas*, Corder finishes *Uses of Rhetoric* with a self-effacing chapter titled "Certain Maxims and Questions with No Conclusion to be Found." Similarly, "A New Introduction to Psychoanalysis" features what he terms "a diminished ending" (168). Both conclusions satirize scholars' tendency to march readers through a formidable series of arguments to a seemingly inevitable, forceful crescendo.

Similarly, an essay titled "Notes on a Rhetoric of Regret" underwhelms readers accustomed to the usual Argument as Grand Claim. Another title also mocks its author: "From Rhetoric to Grace: Propositions 55-81. . . ." The essay contains no references to Propositions 1-54—an absence that renders its propositional numbering absurd and its author as self-deprecating. "What I Learned at School," Corder's Braddock Award-winning essay, propounds the Ninth Law, Eleventh Law, Eighteenth Law, Twenty-Fifth Law, Twenty-Sixth Law, Twenty-Seventh Law, and Thirty-Second Law of Composition—not any other ones, such as the First Law through the Eighth Law (47-49). He asks readers to provide the missing Laws of Composition. But if the laws are laws, why does he not know all of them already? Obviously, the readers' laws aren't laws, and his laws aren't either. His numbering ridicules both himself and textbooks that purvey writing as enslavement to rules.

"Learning the Text" records Corder's failure to understand his own mother. "Hunting for *Ethos*" designates an earlier essay as "mostly naive" (299). "Lonesomeness" presents an innocent person from West Texas attempting to wrestle the mighty giant of European postmodernism. Misremembering his childhood constitutes the central theme of his *Chronicle of a Small Town*. In "The Heroes Have Gone from the Grocery Store," he misrecalls an image on a box of cereal. Portions of "Heroes" and two other essays detail writing produced about Cheerios for his first-year students ("Occasion"; "Hoping"). Another essay discusses a similar effort for his students on the subject of fountain pens ("Fountain Pens"). One wonders: Why would anyone tackle such unprepossessing subjects at all? He satirizes his own attempt to squeeze meaning from triviality.

During the 1980s and 1990s, Corder deepens and extends his Argument as Incompleteness and Fallibility by questioning any speaker's or writer's claim to authority.

V. ARGUMENT AS BOLD ASSERTION

Corder's persuasive principles—Argument as Indirection, Argument as Charm, Argument as Mystery, and Argument as Incompleteness—would prove worthless if he had nothing to say. But he propounds four cardinal, unqualified claims:

Rhetoric Is an Architectonic Discipline

Like Kenneth Burke, Corder repeatedly and insistently argues that rhetoric is an extremely capacious enterprise that in his words encompasses "all forms of discourse" ("On the Way" 164; "From Rhetoric to Grace" 17). He maintains that "*all* analysis of writing is rhetorical" ("Rhetorical Analysis" 223); for that reason, "rhetoric belongs at the center of *every* class" (*Uses* 125). He contends that rhetoric can serve as "the model for a new way of being, a paradigm . . . of the examined life" (126). He argues that rhetoric encompasses the study of literature, including largely neglected nonfiction prose.⁹ He promotes Invention, Structure, and Style as the best framework for all university curricula (*Uses*). He explains historiography as a rhetoric ("Hunting Lieutenant Chadbourne," *Hunting*). He dismisses psychoanalysis as a science or a religion, insisting that it constitutes another rhetoric ("A New Introduction"). In an abstract he summarizes his argument that "rhetoric might organize literary study, curriculum design, course design, geography, cultural history, and psychoanalytic study" ("From Rhetoric into Other Studies" 95). He further posits a biorhetoric of schizophrenia and other forms of mental illness. Realizing that a biorhetoric would necessitate a rhetoric of cognition, he advocates that, too. He also enumerates biology, physics, and painting as rhetorics ("A New Introduction," "On the Way"). And he explicates cancer as diseased, biorhetorical crossovers of Invention, Structure, and Style ("On Cancer").

Corder embraces fundamental ideas of Aristotle and Cicero (that were repopularized by Edward Corbett, Frank D'Angelo, and Winifred Horner) but stretches them far beyond what Aristotle, Cicero, and other ancients conceived. For Corder the problem is that as definitions of (for example) Invention, Structure, Style, and *oratio* were taught over many centuries, those definitions fossilized in textbooks. Corder reinvigorates Invention, Structure, Style, and *oratio* by stretching them. But stretching also defamiliarizes rhetorical concepts. Corder's reanimating-through-defamiliarizing loosely resembles the project of Kenneth Burke, Hayden White, and Frank D'Angelo to revive four classical tropes from their subsequent petrification and vastly expand their meaning into huge conceptual frameworks that explain, among other things, childhood development.

For Corder, *oratio*, when stretched, becomes, in his words, "drama," "sermon," and "dance" ("Learning the Text" 248) while all discourse (plus painting, the human brain, and the human body) embody Invention, Structure, and Style. In *Chronicle of a Small Town*, Corder resuscitates and problematizes Memory, the fourth canon of classical rhetoric. By claiming that bartending is a rhetoric, Corder mocks his own argument that rhetoric is architectonic ("Some of What").

Ethos Is the Most Important Element in Persuasion

Rhetoricians often prefer to examine logocentric argument, partly because ethos is notoriously difficult to pinpoint (Enos). But throughout his career, Corder explores the complexities of ethos. He contributes an early essay, "Ethical Argument in Amos," and adds "Efficient Ethos in *Shane*." His more extensive "Varieties of Ethical Argument" differentiates five forms of ethos: dramatic, gratifying, functional, efficient, and generative. "Hunting for *Ethos*" and "Hunting Lieutenant Chadbourne" posit and examine postmodern ethos, as (in unusual ways) do the four books he published during his final decade: *Lost in West Texas*, *Chronicle of a Small Town*, *Hunting Lieutenant Chadbourne*, and *Yonder*. Despite distinguishing five forms of ethos, Corder probes ethos much more than he expounds it; like much of his writing, his expansive exploration of ethos forcefully resists summary.

Truth Is Jacklegged

In an early essay, Corder analyzes *Gulliver's Travels* as an investigation of multiple perspectives ("Gulliver"). He argues elsewhere examining a multitude of perspectives is invaluable, for "creation is too rich and varied and copious to be comprehended by a single vision" ("Against" 17).

Corder later proclaims "All our answers are provisional" because "no frame of reference . . . is self-guaranteeing" (*More* 48; "Time" 314). He and Baumlin urge readers to "rejoice" at becoming "provisional self-makers" ("Lamentations" 26). "Truly authoritative discourse," they remark, "should always be in process" ("Jackleg" 20).¹⁰ And "research,"

the coauthors continue, "is, at every stage, *interpretation*." Failing to acknowledge uncertainty, they add, means promulgating a "naive epistemology" ("Opinion" 465, 469).

Because truth is contingent, Corder insists, dogma destroys. Because rhetoric eludes classifications imposed by English textbooks, composition formulas hobble students. For those reasons, wise teachers will refuse to pummel students with rules.¹¹

For Tade, Tate, and Corder, presumed certainties hamper the reform of the undergraduate English major ("For Sale") and, for Corder, the entire undergraduate curricula and schedule as well (*Uses*, "Proposal"). While professors usually recognize that grading is "arbitrary" because it "has no ultimate reality" ("Stalking"), many compulsively and dogmatically overvalue their specializations—a tendency that propels insidious infighting, which besieged administrators are doomed to referee.¹² But some administrators and other experts yearn for "a saving authority" in university education, an authority that does not exist ("Time").

VI. ARGUMENT REQUIRES GENTLENESS AND LOVE

Gargantuan impediments frequently block communication. Corder defines these obstacles as dogmatic certitude, excessive pride, and pervasive self-centeredness. In his words, "Each of us lives in a province, and we measure the world's dimensions by our own" ("Late Word" 27). Our provincialism frequently prevents us from understanding others and enables us to offend them with great ease, an ease he details in "When." To counter self-centeredness, rhetoricians need to spawn and popularize something resembling Rogerian argument. As he suggests in "From Rhetoric to Grace" and elaborates in "Argument as Emergence," this rhetoric should include gentleness, love, and patience, as speakers and writers learn how, in his words, to "pile time into argumentative discourse" ("Argument" 31). Corder promotes gentle persuasion through his principles of Argument as Indirection, Argument as Charm, Argument as Mystery, and Argument as Incompleteness and Fallibility.

Corder's persuasion profoundly violates the norms of scholarly writing and defamiliarizes rhetoric. He seems to whisper to readers: You think that academic writing is neutral and impersonal, but I'll show that it's deeply personal. You assume that scholars love to display knowledge, but I'll openly confess ignorance. You believe that academics prize consistency, but I'll directly and repeatedly contradict myself. You presume that scholars never narrate, but I relish telling stories. You know that scholars brandish jargon, but I avoid it. You assume that English professors worship textbook prescriptions, but I'll dissolve those strictures. You're sure that you comprehend rhetoric, but I'll vastly expand *Invention*, *Structure*, *Style*, *Memory*, *ethos*, and *oratio*. You

define oxymoron as a mere trope, but I'll demonstrate that it results from electroshock therapy on a depressed patient. You view persuasion as hard-headed logos, but I'll affirm that indirection, gentleness, humor, mystery, and even love are fundamental to persuasion. Why is Corder's system of rhetoric radical, pioneering, subversive, and feminist? Consider the rhetoric that Cynthia Caywood and Gillian Overing decry in their groundbreaking 1987 collection, *Teaching Writing: Pedagogy, Gender, and Equity*. In the dominant, masculinist rhetoric, they explain that

certain forms of discourse and language are privileged: the expository essay is valued over the exploratory; the argumentative essay set above the autobiographical; the clear evocation of a thesis preferred to a more organic exploration of a topic; the impersonal, rational voice ranked more highly than the intimate, subjective one. The valuing of one form over another requires that the teacher be a judge, imposing a hierarchy of learned aesthetic values, gathered from ideal texts, upon a student text. (xii)

Corder's rhetoric is radically feminist because it generally avoids certainties. Because it affirms multiple perspectives. Because it assails rigidities. Because it undermines hierarchy. Because it invites dialogue. Because it valorizes puzzles. Because it prompts laughter. Because it proposes that rhetorical studies encompass poetry and narration. Because its strategies of indirection—circling, bouncing, building clotheslines, and contradicting one's self—are decidedly rare and important. Because it probes ethos at length, refusing to oversimplify. Because its nonlinearity parallels the nonlinearity of diaries, journals, and letters—forms of writing still devalued in English curricula but often favored by women. Because—like many authors of diaries, journals, and letters—Corder develops a homemade persona to mitigate the complexities of his nonlinearity. Because that persona becomes intimate and confessional in *Yonder*.

While Corder never claims that his rhetoric is feminist, he directly renounces models of masculinity that he encountered as a boy and adolescent. He explains a childhood fascination with the movies of Hopalong Cassidy and other manifestations of a pop culture that promulgate the "Code of the West," which demands that males exhibit "physical strength" while remaining "stoical in the face of pain" and "unweeping in the face of grief" ("World War II" 25-27).¹³ According to the Code, the "second best place" to "prove yourself [a man]" was "in athletic competition," and "the best place to prove yourself a man was in war" ("World War II" 26-27). He recalls: "*Life* and *Look* and *Time* and the movies and comic books" failed to mention the slaughter caused by American bombs—an omission that helped socialize boys to obey the Code ("World War II" 25; "Lessons").

Only later, Corder notes, did he "learn that the gallant lads of the RAF were from at least 1942 onward deliberately bombing enemy civilian

populations," specifically those in Hamburg, Germany ("From Rhetoric into Other Studies" 103; "Lessons" 19-20). "I regret," he remarks, "that I was ever attracted by war stories, and I regret that I ever thought war to be the appropriate test for manhood" ("World War II" 26). He concludes, "I'm not going to study war anymore. Or competition. Or manhood defined in those old terms" (28).

Unfortunately, not everyone learned. Corder and Baumlín observe: "Sometimes we applaud Dirty Harry and Rambo. Sometimes we erect statues to John Wayne and elect his impersonators to the White House" ("Lamentations" 12). Corder laments that during the Gulf War, "The television news and the speeches and the magazines were just about as evasive as the movie and comic book and magazine versions of World War II" ("World War II" 28.)

In "A New Introduction," Corder interprets gang rape as an extreme expression of a generally violent American culture that stupidly prizes machismo (164-67). His *Contemporary Writing*, a textbook for undergraduates, features a brief, but unmitigated denunciation of the Pentagon's absurdly mechanistic and "chilling" description of war. He sandwiches his anti-Pentagon protest inside two passages that decry "brutal and violent words suggesting total male domination" of women (194-97). Whereas "A New Introduction" explicitly links the Code to horrific violence against women, *Contemporary Writing* implicitly—but powerfully—establishes a similar link as it juxtaposes the reductive, inhuman language of sexism and the reductive, inhuman language of war. The terrifying rhetoric of American violence can reach into the English classroom: "Arrogance, ignorance, and dogma . . . pull the trigger, drop the bomb, and teach the student/scholar to be silent" ("Time" 318).

Through these denunciations Corder obviously calls for an alternative to the Code of Hopalong Cassidy and *Life* magazine. Corder asks: "[H]ow do I revise that rhetoric that was and make a new rhetoric that lets me live without my heroes?" ("From Rhetoric into Other Studies" 103). By the time Corder posed that question in 1993, he might have answered it by citing practically everything he ever wrote, for he had already spent virtually his entire career developing a rhetoric that eschews arrogance. Without exactly saying so, in over five dozen essays and books issued over several decades, Corder undermines the argument of domination and enacts an extraordinarily valuable, radical, feminist rhetoric.

NOTES

¹Corder wrote the third, fourth, fifth, and sixth editions of *Handbook of Current English* and, together with John Ruskiewicz, coauthored its seventh and eighth editions.

²These manuscripts are "Places in the Mind," "Scrapbook," and "Rhetoric, Remnants, and Regrets."

³I am including *Lost in West Texas*, *Chronicle of a Small Town*, *Yonder*, and *Hunting Lieutenant Chadbourne*.

⁴Although Harris's book is brief, one might think that his extensive discussion of the pedagogy and politics of personal "voice" would include Corder. But it doesn't. Harris only mentions Corder in an endnote in which he mistakenly includes Corder's *Finding a Voice* in a list of ten composition textbooks. *Finding a Voice* is a literary anthology, not a composition textbook.

⁵For the tendency to disappear, see "Losing Out" 99, "Turnings" 111, and *Yonder*.

⁶I don't claim that Corder originated his argumentative principles and strategies, merely that his principles and strategies were highly unusual in scholarly writing during the period of his career. A fair amount of his argumentation overlaps that found, for example, in eighteenth-century British essays and/or twentieth-century American nonfiction—both of which he enjoyed reading and occasionally wrote about.

⁷See, for example, "Against a Mournful Wind," "Some Things," "Going Home," "Episodes," "I Can't Get Away from Hoppy," "Late Word from the Provinces," and *Lost in West Texas*.

⁸See "Late Word" 25, "Humanism" 191, "Going Home" 33, and "From Rhetoric into Other Studies" 105. Corder renders one of these "theological" statements about the Double Mountains even more cryptic by adding a self-contradictory comment: "Refraction turns them blue, though they're not" ("From Rhetoric into Other Studies" 105).

⁹See "Asking," "Rhetoric and Literary Study," and *Uses*.

¹⁰See also "Humanism."

¹¹See "Outhouses," "What," "Studying," and "Academic Jargon."

¹²See "Stalking," "Caught," "From an Undisclosed," and "Tribal."

¹³See also "I Can't Get Away from Hoppy" and "Rhetoric, Remnants, and Regrets."

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