

Garrett-Petts, W. F. *A Rhetoric of Reading Contemporary Canadian Narratives: George Bowering, Margaret Atwood, and Robert Kroetsch*. Thesis (PhD [English]), University of Alberta. Ann Arbor: ProQuest/UMI, 1992. (Publication No. NN73092)

Abstract

This thesis argues for a rhetoric of reading to complement the rapid developments in text-oriented poetics that, despite a renewed interest in audience and process, continue to dominate contemporary critical discourse. A rhetoric of reading shifts the focus of critical attention from texts as aesthetic objects to texts as interactive elements in the “contextualized production and reception of meaning.” This particular variation on a celebrated critical theme (that of discourse as enunciation) belongs to Linda Hutcheon, and this thesis constitutes both an elaboration and a critique of Hutcheon’s critical stance.

If Hutcheon is right in her assertion that postmodernist narratives and theory teach us the rhetorical commonplace that discourse is language as enunciation, then the reading of such narratives inevitably provokes questions of rhetorical response. Contemporary authors, especially Canadian writers such as George Bowering, Margaret Atwood, and Robert Kroetsch, seem to demand such a response as a way of overthrowing the reading conventions of realism. The “new” reading conventions promise a collaborative, dialogic experience; and, perhaps more importantly, they promise to shift critical attention from a focus on form to a focus on process--from the domain of poetics to the domain of rhetoric.

A poetics of postmodernism tethered to a realist episteme raises the question of the reading process only to ignore it, ruling exploration of the reader’s mind ultra vires. A rhetoric of reading, on the other hand, must offer both an analysis of reading processes and a way of conceptualizing the rhetorical situations within which such processes occur. Toward that end, this thesis begins with an historical review of rhetoric’s relation to poetics. Chapters One and Two explore the relation of rhetoric to contemporary reading theory, with special attention to the notion of reading as both trope and argument. Chapter Three extends the discussion through a consideration of the history of realism and realist reading practices in Canada; and Chapters Four, Five, and Six focus on the importance of reading as argument and trope in George Bowering’s *Burning Water* and *Caprice*, in Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, and in Robert Kroetsch’s *What the Crow Said*. The thesis concludes that poetics alone cannot account for the notion of reading as a dialogue between writer and reader, only a rhetoric of reading, which, by definition, focuses on both the suasive power of discourse and the interrelationship among ethos, pathos, and logos can speak directly to the issue of reading postmodern narratives.

The “new rhetoricians” (Bowering, Atwood, and Kroetsch) ask us to reconsider our traditional epistemological assumptions about story, character, and the process of interpretive reading. Each of these authors writes novels that dramatize the notion of literature as both transaction and event: they help us understand and resolve

questions regarding the nature of, and possibilities for, collaboration; the political responsibilities of defining oneself in the process of reading and writing, and the new consciousness of oral discourse and of reading as a kind of ongoing conversation.