Methods in Rhetorical Criticism


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At the risk of sounding repetitive, Sonja K. Foss's recent book on the methods of rhetorical criticism is very methodical. Although Foss refers to rhetorical criticism as an art, much of her book approaches the act of rhetorical criticism as a science. This is not necessarily bad, for the author's helpful step procedure to eight different methods, and the great attention to detail, make for a clear and concise lesson in rhetorical criticism. While this approach tends to cater to beginning critics, it can also prove helpful to experienced critics as well.

Foss begins to lay out the perspective for the book in the preface, where she asserts her belief in rhetorical criticism as a way of life, not just an academic practice. This belief guides her early discussions of the definition of rhetoric and of rhetorical criticism, but seems to get lost in the later, more practical discussions on how to "do" criticism. However, by laying out her perspective early in the book, Foss does provide readers with an insight into the author herself. Regardless whether one agrees or disagrees with Foss's approach, one cannot deny that it is straightforward and honest.

Once Foss moves into the more "practical" approach to the process of rhetorical criticism, the book's value for beginning critics becomes apparent. Delineating four steps in the process of criticism, Foss expands upon those steps to include answers to basic yet often unarticu-
lated problems in the formulation of research questions. Research questions can be difficult to generate for experienced critics, and can be even more difficult for beginners. Foss offers techniques from the literature on creativity to help stimulate beginning and experienced critics alike. Six techniques, such as "reversal," "asking Why?" and "alterative perspectives," are introduced briefly as a means of conceptualizing a research question from a rhetorical artifact itself. These techniques may prove especially helpful to the beginning critic, who often becomes interested in a specific artifact but then has difficulty formulating a productive research question from that interest.

Foss's methodical approach is also applied to the task of writing the criticism. Foss includes a section devoted to what a critic should cover in the actual essay. Although this may seem obvious to experienced critics, and in fact might seem incomplete to some, the benefit to beginners is great. Foss does not stop at listing and explaining the sections that should be included in the essay; she goes on to discuss the not-so-basic idea of the stance of the essay. And, true to her early presentation of her own perspective, she discusses not only argumentation and coherence as standards for critical essays, but also acknowledgment of subjectivity and presentation of choice.

The eight methods that Foss treats (Neo-Aristotelian, Generic, Feminist, Metaphoric, Narrative, Fantasy-Theme, Pentadic, and Cluster) are organized around those that feature context, those that feature message, and those that feature rhetor. Each method is given a through procedural section, in which the author lays out a series of steps to accomplish in this method of criticism. Again, these steps, although at times elementary, are of great value to the true beginner. Foss also offers a short discussion of the theoretical basis for each method, and shows how these methods have been applied by other critics. She includes a helpful bibliography of additional samples for each type of criticism at the end of the chapter.

Although the strength of this book lies in its methodical approach to teaching beginners the art of rhetorical criticism, it does hold some value for experienced critics as well. As mentioned before, the discussion of formulating research questions offers a rather novel approach to an old problem. Also, Foss's inclusion of the feminist critical method is a welcome addition to any textbook on rhetorical criticism, and her attempt to lay out the steps in the process gives clarity to a method often misunderstood and difficult to teach. While experienced critics, including Foss herself, will acknowledge rhetorical criticism is rarely as simple as a step-by-step process, this book certainly provides us all with a place to begin.