REFLECTIONS ON AN ARGUMENT THAT WON'T GO AWAY: OR, A TURN OF THE IDEOLOGICAL SCREW

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In 1983, the Central States Speech Journal published Philip Wander's essay on the "ideological turn" in modern criticism. Because Wander's claims were "large" and because his essay commented on the work of several rhetorical critics, CSSJ's editor invited responses from "scholars to one degree or another associated with the issues Wander raised and attempted to settle" (Gronbeck 114). This invitation generated responses from Allan Megill, Lawrence W. Rosenfield, and Forbes I. Hill. Karlyn Kohrs Campbell wrote a response to Hill's piece; and a series of subsequent reactions, written by Michael Calvin McGee, Robert Francesconi, and Farrel Corcoran, appeared in a later issue of the journal. Wander's meditation on the entire episode appeared in CSSJ in 1984.

Wander took serious swipes at academic rhetoricians in his original essay. Critics who read a "holy text" in order to "pierce through to deeper truths," he implied, cannot be on very sure ground when they confront "official documents" which inevitably confound the formalist desire to stay "within the text" (1983, 10). He condemned "white, patriotic, academic males" who "confuse being with Being" and who assume that "commitment to other than what is constitutes an ominous flight from Truth or Objectivity" (17). Wander's critics entered the fray with equal gusto. In general, they argued that Wander's choice of critical practice rendered him unable to read in any useful way, since ideological critics approach texts with predetermined assumptions about what they will find there.

In his meditation on the skirmish, McGee noticed something odd about the initial responses to Wander's essay. As he put it, "not once do Professor Wander's critics entertain the possibility that . . . there may be a grain of truth and wisdom in his comparison of the relative moral worth of social-rhetorical criticism held over and against that rhetorical criticism which postulates the theoretical free agency of the critic" (1984, 49). That Wander's critics failed to explore the comparative potential of ideological criticism is interesting enough. But what interests me even more is that the critics who responded to Wander were clearly on the defensive, as though his advocacy of the ideological turn were actually an attack on something else. Indeed, McGee and Corcoran suspected that Wander's critics held an unexamined bias against ideological criticism, a bias that Corcoran characterized as "a petulant and not very well informed defense of an academic wicket" (55).

One salient difference between ideological and traditional criticisms is that ideological critics avowedly ground their critical investigations with motivational warrants while traditional critics begin from a set of substantive warrants grounded in Enlightenment assumptions about the nature of inquiry. But their different starting points are not the only issues in dispute among partisans of either criticism. Clearly, Wander wanted to use ideological criticism not just to do a different sort of criticism
of rhetorical texts, but to criticize standard professional practices: “an ideological criticism would be in, at some point, on the connection between what scholars in a given field call ‘knowledge,’ even scientific knowledge, and professional interest” (1983, 2). The threat entailed in ideological criticism was that it could be used to demonstrate the ideological implications of even the most seemingly objective critical practices. Since it begins from the premise that all criticisms are motivated, ideological criticism constitutes an implicit critique of any criticism that does not foreground its ethics or politics. Another point at issue between proponents of traditional and ideological criticisms, then, is whether traditional criticism is as innocent of politics and ethics as its proponents assume it to be.

In this essay, I analyze the responses to “The Ideological Turn” in order to demonstrate that their authors worked within an academic ideology that is fully as interested as the criticism they condemn. I begin by laying some definitional groundwork, and I end by offering yet another brief for the ethical and intellectual superiority of ideological criticism.

What Is Ideological Criticism, Anyway?

Early in “The Ideological Turn,” Wander characterized ideological criticism as a critical attitude, as “little more than robust common sense—scepticism not as a way of life, but as a leavening making its way among high sounding ideals, innocence, and hype” (1). In another place, he wrote that ideological criticism “carries us to the point of recognizing good reasons and engaging in right action. What an ideological view does is to situate ‘good’ and ‘right’ in an historical context, the efforts of real people to create a better world” (18). This emphasis on values does not take us very far from traditional moral philosophy or from rhetorical criticism as it was understood and practiced by Cicero. In his final paragraph, Wander essayed yet another definition: “criticism takes an ideological turn when it recognizes the existence of powerful vested interests benefitting from and consistently urging policies and technology that threaten life on this planet, when it realizes that we search for alternatives” (18). While the phrase “powerful vested interests” evokes the spectre of a criticism imbued with historical determinism, Wander did not consistently recommend Marxist approaches to criticism.

Despite the broad brush with which Wander painted, his critics were not confused about the import of ideological criticism, and they were united in their resistance to it. Rosenfield and Hill treated the ideological turn as any critical approach that locates texts within the historical, political, or biographical circumstances surrounding their production. Both critics also realized that ideological criticism aims, in Rosenfield’s words, to “demonstrate that unacknowledged political preconceptions lurk in all rhetorical criticism and metacriticism” (1983, 119). Rosenfield further declared himself “unmoved” by these issues, since “limiting criticism to Wander’s ‘ideological turn’ would reduce it to a dreary enterprise indeed.” Megill associated ideological criticism exclusively with Marxist critical traditions; he supplied several definitions of ideology, drawn from the work of Marx, Althusser, and Gouldner. Indeed, he identified ideology with materialism, which he defined as “the assumption that ideas find their real meaning in the social order, and ultimately in the productive relations ‘underlying’ that order” (117).

But Megill’s equations are too simple. While the terms “ideology” and
"materialism" have long been associated with Marxist thought, both are used in other, non-Marxist, critical traditions. For example, the notion of ideology is being put to use in communications theory in ways that should interest rhetoricians. In his commentary on the exchange between Wander and his critics, Corcoran associated contemporary thinking about ideology with cultural studies, which examine "the role of public discourse in manufacturing hegemonic consensus" (55). Nor must a materialist point of view be associated exclusively with Marxism, since it may only denote a critical approach that begins from social or historical conditions rather than from postulated ideals (this opposition describes the difference between, say, Cicero's and Plato's rhetorical theories). In another twist on the material/ideal opposition, McGee associated his self-professed status as a materialist and *marxissant* with his reading in "the mainstream of post-modern thought" (1984, 43). Using the terms in this critical context, one could characterize the resistance put up by Wander's critics as an instance of a more general defense of modernist (Kantian) idealism against a more materialist, but not necessarily Marxian, postmodern critique. However, none of these diverse formulations captures the ethical dimension of the argument nor do they highlight its gendered character.

Here I will employ "ideological criticism" as an umbrella term for any criticism that is primarily motivated by ethical or political concerns. To my mind, this definition equates ideological criticism with rhetorical criticism, and, at the same time, frees it from necessary implication with Marxism. Ideological criticism, broadly defined as criticism that begins from motivational warrants, has been enriched by feminist and ethnic scholarship as well as a variety of neo- or post-Marxisms and poststructuralisms during the last decade. As a result, one must now speak of ideological criticisms. However, their diversity should not disguise the fact that all of these critical approaches attack or undermine the ideology that motivates traditional academic scholarship. I now turn to a critique of that ideology as it was manifested in the responses to Wander's essay.

The Essence of Rhetoric

In his response to Wander, Forbes Hill argued that ideological criticism is "methodologically faulty" since it "leads us . . . away from the art of rhetoric" (1983, 122). Hill posited that there is an "essence of an art rhetoric" and that this essence is to be found in Aristotle's text on the subject. A thoroughgoing essentialism presumes that rhetoric operates independently of anyone who practices or theorizes about it and that it has so operated since human consciousness appeared in the world. For neo-Aristotelians like Hill, Aristotle's description of rhetoric, derived empirically from his study of rhetorical practice in fourth-century Athens, still provides well-defined categories that describe its contemporary operation.

Contemplating Hill's model of criticism, I think of medieval scholars endlessly commenting on ancient texts, trying to get the old Greek and Roman writers to make sense within a Christian European world view. Ancient texts still make sense, of course, just as they did in the Middle Ages when the scholiasts got through glossing them. But essentialists must insist that the sense resides, to some degree, in texts and not in their readers. Like fundamental religionists, essentialist rhetoricians must posit that the message conveyed by their sacred text remains just as Aristotle wrote it, if indeed Aristotle "wrote" the *Rhetoric*. Essentialists must maintain that this
message survived relatively intact through multiple translations out of Greek into Latin and Arabic, back into Latin, and thence into Romance and Germanic vernaculars. Essentialist rhetoricians must assume further that the persuasive strategies employed by orators who worked in fourth-century Athens still affect audiences in the same way, which implies in turn that there are universal or quasi-universal qualities of human mind, values, and language to which Aristotelian rhetorical strategies still appeal.

But universalizing uses of the *Rhetoric* ignore the fact that it avowedly did not describe the rhetorics of all of the persons living in Athens during Aristotle’s lifetime, since he exempted the rhetorics of women and slaves from his analysis. What the *Rhetoric* gives us, rather, is a skillfully generalized account of the rhetoric employed by a small group of citizens inhabiting a small city in Greece during the fourth-century BCE—a set of limiting conditions whose existence Hill readily acknowledged elsewhere (1972, 455).

Hill even acknowledges that Aristotle’s values were not our own. He quotes Rosenfield’s remark that Aristotle “does not know about the Protestant ethic” (1972, 460). But Hill does not construe this recognition as evidence against his essentializing use of Aristotle’s text. Remarkably, he finds an argument for the superiority of “objective” criticism in the fact that Aristotle’s values differed from our own. Objective criticism describes “what we think are the value commitments of the target group—the decision-makers in this case.” Hill is arguing, I think, that if one moves far enough back from the historical scene of the *Rhetoric*’s composition, one can generalize from its analysis of Athenian values at a sufficiently broad level so that the analysis can be objectively applied to contemporary rhetorical practices. If Hill is arguing that the decision-makers of any culture will hold similar values, he is working from an undemonstrated and untenable analogy, in light of the differences between, say, the size of the Athenian political community and our own or the level of its communications technology and our own. Perhaps Hill assumed that our access to Aristotle’s method somehow insures the accuracy of our analyses of contemporary values. In that case, the argument again rests on an undemonstrated analogy between Athenian methods of inquiry and our own. Finally, no matter whether Hill is making a case for the general transportability of Aristotelian ethics or methodology, the argument guarantees us no better perspective on contemporary values than Aristotle had on his own. A critic can objectively describe the values held by contemporary decision makers only if s/he can somehow get outside of them in order to see them whole and without distortion. I find no little irony in this: that a student of Aristotle can claim himself to be exempt from influence by the governing *topoi* of his culture.

Equally troubling is the fact that Hill’s neo-Aristotelianism reduces criticism to technique. Campbell and Wander both noticed that Hill’s approach forces critics to repeat the text they are examining, to create a doubling commentary that simply rereads the original text (1972, 453; 8). Since neo-Aristotelian critics must accept a rhetor’s premises at face value, their critical strategy prevents them from commenting adversely on a text. Wander wrote that the stance of objectivity allows critics to “avoid socio-political controversy by working within a professional context” (1983, 9). But his comment misses the larger point that the professional pretension to objectivity is itself a deeply ideological practice that is committed, among other
things, to maintaining its practitioners, their preferred texts, and their preferred methods in a dominant position within the academy.

Technique is valued within the academy precisely because it is perceived to be value-neutral. Since the late nineteenth-century, for example, English composition instruction has primarily relied on a technical rhetoric so that teachers could concentrate their commentary on the formal qualities of student papers (thesis statements, topic sentences, and the like) and avoid responding to more qualitative features such as students’ values, beliefs, or arguments.\(^5\) Surely the effect is no different if rhetorical critics limit themselves to considering speakers’ choice of *topoi* or deployment of *pathos* in the service of producing an “objective” reading of their texts (Hill 1983, 122). When technical or formalist critics evaluate a text according to how well it subscribes to the formal features valued within the technical rhetoric they prefer, they prescribe evaluative standards before the fact, in effect composing the rhetor’s text for her. That is, technical criticism arrogates the responsibility for excellence or effectiveness to itself rather than to rhetors, whose work they must read either as a fine or a flawed example of rhetoric, depending on how well it fits their always-already-written standards.

On occasion, no doubt, neo-Aristotelian critics evaluate the work of rhetors who are not familiar with Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*. (Richard Nixon may be an example, although Hill claimed that Nixon’s speechwriter was “a superior technician” [1972, 384].) If neo-Aristotelian critics have some compelling reason for “saving” a rhetor’s text from condemnation, they can always apply Aristotelian standards in a relatively loose or imaginative fashion. They can then account for the reclamative reading by adopting a more thoroughgoing essentialism than that to which Hill claims to subscribe. That is, they can insist that the ability to adhere to Aristotle’s rhetorical categories is somehow innate in every human being. Without such a clause and when a critic has no interest in saving a given text, prescriptivism can be used in exclusionary ways: texts which do not follow the rules are not acceptable, perhaps not even readable.

When its prescriptivism is combined with a limited essentialism, the exclusionary tendency of technical rhetoric is also elitist: texts which do not meet the standards imposed by Aristotelian rhetoric demonstrate that their authors somehow missed out on something that everybody really ought to know. When combined with a thoroughgoing essentialism, the implication is that the author of a faulty text somehow has no access to the supposedly universal qualities of mind from which Aristotle drew his rules. Hill expressed such an elitism: “if one understands the full context of Aristotle’s remarks about the best citizens he will judge that sound ethical principles are discovered by finding they are held by such citizens” (1972, 149). In Hill’s rhetorical world, the *hoi polloi* have no access to important ethical standards. Hill’s elitism accounts for his patronizing remarks about the rhetoric of Eldridge Cleaver, which he judged as “childishly ineffective” by Aristotelian standards, even though he acknowledged that it elicited positive reactions from audiences who did not apply those standards.\(^6\)

The circular reasoning that is necessary to legitimate and maintain the practice of an essentialist neo-Aristotelian criticism may be apparent by now, but let me iterate it. By fiat, the rhetorical descriptions given in Aristotle’s text set the standards by which all rhetorical performances are to be measured. Hence, any rhetorical
performance that does not measure up to these standards is either flawed or is not rhetoric at all. To define rhetoric (or anything else) in terms of the values or standards held by one group is to universalize a partial definition that excludes the values and standards held by other groups. To gauge the work of other groups in terms of that partial definition—as though the definition were universally applicable—is to mistake the part for the whole and to engage in circular reasoning as well. Elizabeth Minnich warns that both moves function to exclude persons who were not included in the originating definition of the standards that are to be universally applied:

we must beware of taking inherited standards of what is good, significant, meaningful, to be more than they are. They work quite well when applied to the works from which they were derived or to others that are akin to them. They do not work at all well when applied to that which was excluded in the first place, in part because they were formulated to explain and justify some of those very exclusions, and/or carry with them the results of those exclusions (85).

When Neo-Aristotelians do not see the partiality of their critical stance, they risk excluding from their analysis any rhetoric that was not generated in consonance with Aristotle’s principles. Worse, they risk establishing a hierarchy that predicates which rhetorics can be declared successful.

Neo-Aristotelian criticism forgets that its initial decision—to value Aristotle’s Rhetoric as a master text—implies it in an ideology. To defend Aristotelian rhetoric as an essential category is to mount an argument about what is central to rhetorical criticism and what is not. If Aristotelian rhetoric sets the standard for rhetorical criticism, it occupies the center of the field of available rhetorical criticisms; it defines the proximate relations to itself that obtain among various other criticisms as well. Thus, the further a given criticism or text departs from Aristotelian standards the less “rhetorical” it is and thus more marginal to the real, central, work that real rhetorical critics undertake.

Because Hill identified Aristotle’s Rhetoric as such a governing center, he felt entitled to identify those critical positions which more or less fell away from the center. For example, he distinguished between “scholars” and “mere rhetorical partisans” (1983, 122). The trouble with partisans was that they fell into history away from rhetoric; they “depart further from rhetorical considerations as the historical data overwhelm their treatment of the data in the text.” Partisans fell away even further when they eschewed history for sloganeering and if they mistakenly treated slogans as a priori truths. Hill excused himself from engaging what he took to be Campbell’s claim, that “America supports totalitarian governments all over the world,” because he did not want to argue his version of truth “against competing versions” (1972, 457). Obviously Hill was not resisting history; what he resisted was rhetoric.

I do not see how rhetoricians can denounce partisanship and remain rhetoricians. The tendency of an essentialist criticism is always away from rhetorical diversity and toward identity—the same standards applied in the same way to the same texts. Hill dreamed of a critical world where all rhetorical critics agreed with one another, and, more important, where all accepted his evaluative standards. But identity and agreement are inimical to rhetoric. As Kenneth Burke remarked in the Rhetoric of Motives, “we need never deny the presence of strife, enmity, faction” as characteris-
tics of rhetorical expression (20). Rhetoric is only necessary where people differ from one another, where they disagree. The drive toward an essentialist rhetorical criticism, then, is an attempt to end disagreement and diversity, to kill rhetoric.

Hill's appropriating move finally depends on an unhappy relation with rhetoric. To define Aristotelian rhetoric as an essence is to turn it into metaphysics. And, as Jacques Derrida has demonstrated, metaphysical essences require validation by paired terms which are opposed but unequal to one another (41). Hierarchical dichotomies operate throughout the responses to Wander, invoking unequal relations between rhetoric and history, rhetoric and politics, impartiality and passion, criticism and polemic, life and work, form and content, myth and ideology. Rhetoric is on the positive side of the first two dichotomies because it is abstracted from the particulars studied by history or politics, and on the negative side when it is opposed to a more authentic, phenomenological, criticism that rejects passion, polemic, and real-life arguments (Rosenfield, 1983, 120). This discursive sleight of hand transforms essentialist rhetorical critics into philosophers at the same time as it characterizes ideological critics as "mere" rhetoricians.

Why Ideological Critics Can't Read

In his response to Wander, Rosenfield remarked that "Wander's Grand Guignol reading of the 'ideological' ground of my text points up the danger of overly fervid analysis" which "needlessly distorts the critical object or event that it confronts in order to meet the commentator's ideological preconceptions" (1983, 120). Hill wrote: "critics who take an ideological turn habitually fail to apprehend the nature of the message they are criticizing" (1983, 123). Megill complained that ideological analysis can obscure "what is actually being said in a given rhetorical, literary, or philosophical work" (118). According to Megill, this happened in Wander's reading of Heidegger because "Wander comes to Heidegger already convinced that the meaning of Heidegger's texts lies in their supposed obfuscation of the material social order. This conviction relieves him of the need actually to listen to Heidegger, to attend to what he is saying" (115).

In these passages Hill, Megill, and Rosenfield voiced a common complaint about ideological critics, whose preconceived expectations are thought to dictate what they will find in any text. In terms of this complaint, Marxist critics claim that all authors labor under false consciousness and feminist critics find patriarchal discourse on every page. Of course such charges may be accurate enough when levied at some critics. In the hands of Wander's respondents, however, the claim of misreading harbored two important warrants that underwrite the case for traditional criticism. The first warrant was that correct readings are possible; the second was that some critics cannot give correct readings of some texts.

To claim that misreadings can occur, traditional critics must assume that texts can be read correctly or at least that a range of correct readings exists. Rosenfield and Megill justified their subscription to this warrant by arguing that critics can read in some pure way, that they can attend to what an author says without interference from ideological presuppositions. In other words, the possibility of innocent reading allows access to right readings of texts.

With the claim of innocent reading, we arrive at a point in the argument where a primary claim made within traditional scholarship directly confronts a primary
claim made in support of ideological criticism. We cannot have it both ways: either it is possible to read innocently or it is not. Wander’s respondents assumed that it is possible and thus they could not accept, with Campbell, the “self-evident” premise that “all criticism is subjective” (1983, 126). If Campbell meant by this that all criticism is interested, that it inevitably reflects a critic’s institutional and ethical investments, I agree with her. However, her use of the subject/object dualism posed the argument in terms congenial to her opponents, since that dualism was invented to sustain the very ideology to which they subscribe and which they sallied out to defend in this exchange.

So far I have avoided giving this ideology a name, aside from referring to it as “traditional.” It currently goes under several cognomems: Kantian idealism, Enlightenment epistemology, liberal humanism, modernism. Within this hierarchical and dualistic ideology, “objective” readings are superior to “subjective” readings because the former are disinterested, while the latter are less valid because their authors admit to the necessity of reading through whatever terministic screens they bring to the critical act. Within the terms of the dominant ideology, to admit the inevitability of reading through screens is tantamount to saying that one cannot do respectable criticism at all. Ideological critics cannot convince traditional critics of the validity of their stance by using terms that were invented to maintain the tradition.

Kenneth Burke took a different tack in his brilliant analysis of the invention of Kantian idealism. In the Grammar of Motives, Burke established that the notion of the “thing-in-itself,” upon which the notion of innocent reading depends, is a fiction invented by Kant to legitimate the possibility of transcendental understanding. In other words, the notion of the thing-in-itself is a rhetorical invention. Kant needed such an invention because it is impossible to locate things-in-themselves unless this is done by referring them to the location of other things. And once contextualizing begins, no limits can be found for its movement (this is what Hill feared: a fall into the multiplicity of history). In other words, objects exist or are perceptible only because they are related to other things. Kant tried to get around this problem by positing the existence of objects-in-general, from which the existence of everyday objects could be inferred. Nevertheless, as Burke noted in his cheerful way, “the surprising thing about an object in general is that you can’t distinguish it from no object at all” (Grammar 188).

The notion of innocent reading hangs on the notion of the pure thing-in-itself for two reasons. First of all, for a totally innocent reading to take place, the text-as-object must be assumed to be free of bias or distortion resulting from information that exists outside its boundaries. Second, as Burke demonstrated, Kantian epistemology silently shifted the burden of knowledge from what is known to knowers (Grammar 189). Thus, if knowers are to undertake pure readings, they must be free of contextual relations, just as objects must be in order to be known in their purity. That is, knowers must bracket off any local intellectual or ethical conditions that might contaminate their readings of texts. While such limiting conditions may include being inclined toward conservatism or liberalism (conditions mentioned by Campbell in her debate with Hill), they also include the critic’s gender, race, and class constructions.

His anxiety to preserve the critical text as pure thing-in-itself explains why
Rosenfield raised, and dismissed, the issue of the relevance of philosophers' biographies to their texts. In his response to Wander, Rosenfield asked, rhetorically: "Does, for instance, the fact that Aristotle was not an Athenian but a Stagirite shed light on his formulation of the syllogism? And does Spinoza's forfeiture of membership in any organized religion during an age of religious orthodoxy reflect itself in his monadology?" (1983, 121). While the question about Aristotle's nativity was designed to make Wander's point appear silly, the question about Spinoza's rejection of organized religion may be quite relevant to his philosophy, as Burke suggested (Grammar, 138). More important for my purposes, these questions can deflect reflection about the similarity between Aristotle's and Spinoza's and Rosenfield's class and gender constructions within their disparate cultures.

In the piece that was the object of Wander's critique in "The Ideological Turn," Rosenfield argued for a rhetorical criticism based on the possibility of innocent reading. This criticism would be neither objective nor ideological but "appreciative": "assuming the critic's openness to reality's disclosure," he could "release himself, letting the phenomena 'speak to him' through their luminosity" (1974, 494). In a footnote to this passage, Rosenfield stated that ideological criticism was inimical to this program of innocent reading, since "commitment to an ideology... implies a kind of immunity to those experiences of the world which in any way contradict the ideology." To practice appreciative criticism, in other words, critics must be able to suspend any value systems or terministic screens which might block or distort their relation to the critical object.

Other critics suggest, however, that innocent reading is impossible. Frederic Jameson makes a persuasive case against it when he notes that critics:

never really confront a text immediately, in all its freshness as a thing-in-itself. Rather, texts come before us as the always-already-read: we apprehend them through the sedimented layers of previous interpretations, or—if the text is brand-new—through the sedimented reading habits and categories developed by those inherited interpretive traditions (9–10).

Traditional academic critics must defend against Jameson's assumption that they are as embedded as anyone else in any number of interpretive histories. Megill, for example, resolutely masked the fact that he brought a set of value judgments to Heidegger's texts which led him to read them in very special ways. He argued that "we are surely justified in seeing [Being and Time] as one of the two or three most significant works of philosophy published in our century" (115). He could not imagine why the canonical status of this text did not impress Wander more, as though canonical texts must be given special respect, as though their canonical status exempts them from readings that link them to their historical settings.

Megill's obeisance to the philosophical canon glossed the reality that canons themselves have histories, that they do not simply grow, like trees. Rather, they are constructed by persons who have some investment in preserving the works enshrined within them. It is precisely the canonical status of Heidegger's texts that causes them to be treated differently than non-canonical texts. For one thing, they are trusted over with all sorts of previous readings—the scholarship—that critics are required to know and through which they are required to approach such texts. If my reading of Wander's and Megill's discussions of Heidegger should move me to reread Being and Time, for example, I cannot bracket my knowledge that critics
disagree about how it should be interpreted. For another, if canonical texts are to stay in the canon over time, critics must keep rereading them in order to adapt them to changing historical and epistemological circumstances. Megill provided a fine example of how this is done with an ingenious reading that excused Heidegger's philosophy from contamination by his politics (117).

A second warrant in the traditionalist argument assumes that since there are correct readings, misreading must occur through some fault in the reader who produces it. If two readers disagree, one of them has failed somehow. Perhaps this reader has not bothered to read the text carefully enough or has not paid sufficient attention to the relevant scholarship. Megill and Rosenfield both accused Wander of inept scholarship, and Megill could not believe that Wander had even read Being and Time (115).

Subscription to this warrant has important ideological consequences. It means that, beyond a certain latitude, a reading is no longer simply different; it is wrong. In effect, traditional criticism presumes that all texts are open to a range of more or less correct readings by all critics. Since traditional critics do not readily question the worth of their preferred texts, they must perforce denigrate the work of critics whose readings of such texts do not fall within the range of approved readings. More seriously, they must denigrate the work of critics who for some reason cannot become the readers they need to be in order to read the texts "properly." Whether this effect is intended or not, the tactic is potentially exclusionary. For example, if I were to claim that I fail to see the importance of Being and Time, that I am unconvinced of its relevance either to my scholarly or my private life, the traditional critic need not take my criticism seriously, since my making it at all constitutes a self-evident demonstration of my inability to read Heidegger properly.

This analysis also exposes the ideological interestedness of the notion of critical pluralism. The dream of pluralism is that an all-inclusive method or methods can be found that will dissolve partiality. As Wander put it in "The Third Persona," the "lure of methodological pluralism" is "its promise that somewhere, sometime, some method or combination of methods will achieve certainty (i.e., will produce knowledge and, presumably, generate understanding or wisdom)" (204). In other words, the promise of critical pluralism is that a properly pluralist criticism can make all texts available to all readers, or, conversely, can make all readers eligible to read all texts. If certainty of interpretation were ever achieved, of course, everyone who was able to master the method that attained it would be able to read any text properly; there would be general agreement among these persons about the meanings of texts; and critics would promptly put themselves out of business.

Like the urge to essentialize, the urge to pluralize masks a desire to elide difference, to constitute every potential reader as open to the persuasive potential of every text. This desire overlooks the contradictions, partiality, and interestedness that inhere among the persons and groups who constitute any society. Furthermore, it elides the possibility that some readers simply cannot become docile readers of some texts. Such failures happen regularly in the case of texts that are deemed worthless by certain communities of readers; for example, academic critics often remark on their inability to read popular writing. Such failures also occur when texts are thought to be misleading and therefore dangerous, as when, for example,
historians refuse to become sympathetic readers of revisionist histories that claim the Holocaust never happened.

In the case of canonical texts, however, the pluralist impulse legislates out of court the possibility that a principled reader might, for good reasons, fail to become a proper reader. As Ellen Rooney has argued, "the pluralist's invitation to critics and theorists of all kinds to join him in 'dialogue' is a seductive gesture that constitutes every interpreter—no matter what her conscious critical affiliation—as an effect of the desire to persuade" (1). In other words, pluralists constitute all potential readers as persons who can learn to read just as they read. Pluralism does not know how to account for readers who refuse this constitution of themselves, except by excluding them from the pluralist conversation because they do not speak the language.

The Sanctity of (Some) Texts

In his response to Wander, Megill made an interesting series of moves that were opened to him by his opposition of "symbolic" to "materialist" criticisms.8 According to Megill, symbolists "see in the creations of the human mind the possibility of transcending the material determinations of the social order" (116). This passage conflated symbolic criticism with the idealist desire to forsake the realm of conditions for a transcendental realm where the freedom of thought is not compromised by human embodiment. By means of definition, then, Megill managed to oppose materialism to idealism, rather than to symbolism. He further defined materialists as critics who emphasize humanity's lack of freedom, who view "the creations of the human mind as existing in a state of dependence on the material environment." In keeping with this line of argument, Megill forwarded a rigorously determinist reading of materialist criticism ("materially-inclined rhetorical critics maintain that political myths are really lies intended to perpetuate the domination of the ruling group within society") and noted further that materialists have attempted to appropriate symbolism for their own purposes by inventing the notion of ideology, by which "they mean an idea-system that seeks to advance material interests within society." In other words, Megill managed to characterize ideological criticism as a necessarily repressive method, intent on ferreting out lies and reminding humans of their embodiment in less-than-savory social and natural circumstances. This elaborate schema was apparently intended to salvage Heidegger's text from the ravages of a criticism intent on "showing how ideas are the distorted reflection of an underlying material-social base" (117).

Megill's reading of Heidegger's work, showing it to be operating in "the domain of symbol or myth," provides another example of the circular reasoning I discussed earlier (118). Apparently, it was supposed to illustrate that one can criticize Heidegger only if one can "understand what he is saying," and one can understand Heidegger only if one is willing to read his work as symbol or myth (119). By fiat, then, Wander's materialist reading of Heidegger could not be correct. By default, Megill's reading was correct, or at least more correct than Wander's.

Put more broadly, Megill's argument was that certain kinds of texts require certain modes of criticism: hence, we best read Heidegger's texts by means of "symbolic analysis," while we best read other sorts of texts by means of materialist analysis. Whatever goes in the category of "other" texts—those deemed suitable for materialist analysis—this is an astoundingly appropriative move. Megill designated selected texts as off limits to critics who investigate the material contexts surround-
ing their production and consumption. This limitation was necessary because such readings cannot do justice to texts which are "mythical" or "symbolic"; these more spiritual, fragile, texts must be protected from worldly readings. Oddly, this program is inimical to the survival of the very texts Megill would protect. As Francesconi remarked in his response to Megill, "putting philosophy and philosophers above the world will not help us understand philosophy or society any better"; indeed such a move trivializes both philosophy and rhetoric (52).

Of course the only way to avoid trivializing purely symbolic texts, while keeping them pure, is to surround them with a critical apparatus that aggressively maintains their supposed centrality to everyone's intellectual life. Megill tried to preserve Heidegger's texts in just this way. He insisted that Wander was "under an obligation to justify applying the 'ideological turn' " in Heidegger's case (117). An ideological critic might protest that Megill was obligated, first of all, to justify his preference for a purely symbolic reading of Heidegger, and second, to show why a body of thought that is uninterested in material circumstances should make any claim at all on scholars' time and energies. Of course, had Megill responded to a protest of that kind, he would have been forced to bring his own ideology into the open—an ideology that apparently assumes, among other things, that some texts deserve privileged readings, that some readers have more privileged access to the meanings of texts than others do, and so on. If he had articulated his own ideological premises, Megill might have opened the door to debate about important issues in rhetorical criticism. Since he did not, however, he may have assumed that his premises were widely shared by his readers. Or perhaps he could not admit that he was working from ideological premises, since to do so would expose his investment in maintaining the dominant critical tradition.

In any case, Wander did justify his application of the ideological turn to Heidegger's work, although he used motivational arguments rather than the ontological or epistemological ones that Megill would have preferred. Throughout "The Ideological Turn" Wander appealed to rhetorical critics to engage the life-threatening issues that face us still: proliferation of war, rape of the environment, deployment of destructive and inhumane technologies. In keeping with his emphasis on human motivation, Wander's reading of Heidegger was finally a humane one: it suggested that Heidegger was unable to deal with the material reality that confronted him in pre-Nazi Germany, and that he fantasized a romantic never-land of Being to inhabit instead.

If I accept Wander's reading, I am prepared to read Heidegger's texts as illustrations of human resilience in the face of human brutality. Frankly, I find this reading more attractive than that offered by Megill, whose best arguments for reading Heidegger are that (1) his "concerns seem radically personal, in a way that takes us beyond . . . social theory," (2) that even those critics who draw "quietistic" social conclusions from Heidegger's work are "dogmatically ignoring Heidegger's project," or (3) that Heidegger looked "not for what is ordinary but for what is extraordinary" (118). Ideologue that I am, I am suspicious of any unwarranted claim that "radically personal" philosophical investigations produce "extraordinary" results. I want to ask: extraordinary in whose opinion? and for whose purposes is such a claim being made?

In other words, I doubt that purely symbolic texts exist. The scholarly beliefs that they do and that they can be studied as though they are innocent of their authors'
locatedness in place and time—these beliefs were precisely the objects of Wander's attack. McGee put his finger on the inadequacy of the responses to Wander when he noticed that "the moral question Professor Wander poses remains after we grant Megill all of his points: Is asceticism itself justifiable in the face of the Holocaust, particularly when its rhetorical tendency reinforces the thought-system which resulted in the Holocaust?" (1984, 50, n20). If Heidegger's work must be justified on grounds that ignore his possible implication in an immoral and destructive politics, can we afford to read him innocently? More to the point: whose interests are being served when we do so? Obviously, these are moral questions, not intellectual ones, and they deserve a criticism that engages them on ethical grounds.

I hope it is clear that I am not engaging in Heidegger-bashing. Rather, I am attacking an academic ideology that fiercely protects its well-established critical turf, so fiercely that it no longer bothers to ask if the texts it protects can be put to rhetorical or cultural use. Much less is it willing to ask whether those texts promulgate values that are inimical to the interests of certain groups within the culture.

Let me give a relatively innocent example of this failure to question our master texts. The current rhetorical canon includes the work of several writers who were avowedly or secretly hostile to rhetoric, such as Plato and Augustine and George Campbell and Richard Weaver. These theorists would have much preferred that rhetoric were philosophy or theology, rather than the differentiated, messy, and materialist enterprise it is. I cannot think of a canonical list of authors in any other discipline that contains so many works by so many authors who disapproved of the whole enterprise. So why are their texts in the canon? I think they are there for ideological reasons, rather than intellectual or aesthetic ones. Aside from historians and theorists of rhetoric and a few teachers of speech and composition, most people today define rhetoric as "empty verbiage," or worse, as lying. To compensate for its negative public image and to keep our discipline alive in an intellectual climate that is hostile to it, historians of rhetoric have claimed Plato and other classical figures for their canon. This tactic burnishes today's tarnished image of rhetoric with the imagined glory of its past. In order to accomplish this, however, historians and rhetorical critics must do reading after reading of the dialogues where Plato says that rhetoric is worthless and immoral, trying to make him say something else. Professed modern rhetoricians are so rare that we canonize even those, like George Campbell, whose work was primarily philosophical, or those, like Weaver or Perelman, who modernized the work of classical philosophers.

A less innocent ideological reading of the rhetorical canon would also notice that most of the figures enshrined in it were idealists. An even less innocent reading would point out that the canon contains no works by women, none by working people, and, with the possible exception of Augustine, none by people of color. If the unfairness of this does not move rhetoricians to re-examine our canon, surely its patent historical inaccuracy must do so.

So What?

This essay will not end the argument that won't go away. I do hope to reinvigorate it, however. To my mind, ideological criticisms make superior claims on our
attention because they acknowledge that all criticism is embedded in its practitioners' values and that any criticism must necessarily be contextualized by consideration of its practitioners' positions in the world. I am not arguing that ideological criticisms are superior by virtue of their greater consciousness of their embeddedness in ideology. I am saying that critics who are aware of the partiality of their approaches can make no logical claims for their universality or for the conclusions that result from their application.

I think I have demonstrated that traditional criticism does make unwarranted claims to universality and that one effect of its doing so is its partisans' continuing domination of critical conversations. And if the Enlightenment ethic supports the partial and exclusionary critical practices that moved Wander to write "The Ideological Turn," it supports the unequal gender, race, and class constructions that concern me, as well. Even though the current critical conversation may seem to be expansive and pluralist, it is actually exclusionary: it excludes certain kinds of criticism and it excludes certain sorts of critics.

In "The Third Persona," Wander eloquently addressed the exclusionary potential of language. Every affirmative discourse, he wrote, carries with it an implicit negation: "The potentiality of language to commend being carries with it the potential to spell out being unacceptable, undesirable, insignificant" (209). He continued:

The objectification of certain individuals and groups discloses itself through what is and is not said about them and through actual conditions affecting their ability to speak for themselves. Operating through existing social, political, and economic arrangements, negation extends beyond the "text" to include the ability to produce texts, to engage in discourse, to be heard in the public space (210).

Wander wanted rhetorical critics to pay attention to the audience who was not constituted within current critical discourse, those whose absence from consideration, for whatever reason, made possible the construction of the audience who was present.

All criticisms are exclusive of someone, somewhere. This means that ideological criticisms are inevitably exclusionary as well. Ideological critics must remember that their acknowledgment of partiality does not guarantee that their criticism will be inclusive. Feminist women of color have persuasively demonstrated that white feminist politics regularly overlooks or forgets the needs of third-world women; critics of Marxist politics have shown that Marxist definitions of "the working-class" do not describe many persons who labor for their subsistence—home-makers and child care workers, for example. At the same time, ideological critics should be wary of making arbitrary exclusions. That ideological critics like me fail to grasp the political point of symbolic criticism must not keep it from being written. Nor more should feminist critics exclude men from their ranks or Marxists claim that class analyses produce the only useful social criticism.

One last point. To claim, as I do, that intellectual arguments are always underwritten by ethical and/or politically motivated warrants is finally to claim that intellectual arguments are always rhetorical. Aristotle noted in the Rhetoric that keeping rhetorical claims separate from ethical and political ones was always difficult (1, 2, 6-7; see also Nic. E. 1, 2). Because of this entanglement, it seems to me that academic
rhetoricians should be the last persons to disavow concern with ethical and political issues.

I worry about our continuing refusal to accept our professional responsibility to the communities in which we live, just as Wander worried about this same refusal some years ago. I worry in part that our refusal to immerse our work in the ideological currents of our time simply eliminates the point of our doing rhetorical criticism. But this professional worry is overshadowed by a much more profound concern about the exclusive ways in which rhetoric is practiced in our culture. To the extent that ordinary citizens are unable to articulate or criticize the discursive conditions that cause and maintain unfair and destructive practices, we academic rhetoricians must bear some responsibility for their silence. Our retreat into philosophical idealism and our concern with technique have reduced us to bickering among ourselves when what we ought to be doing, rather, is showing people how rhetoric is practiced, how language is deployed as a means of coercion, and how they can resist that coercion.

NOTES

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1A few contemporary critics have recommended that rhetorical criticism return to frankly moral evaluative grounds. See, for example, Scott and Smith (1969) and Klumpp and Hollihan (1989).

2(Megill 116–17). Strictly speaking, Althusser is a structuralist Marxist, while Gouldner characterizes himself as a “Marxist outlaw” (xii). Neo-Marxist critics reject Megill’s reading of Marx’s notion of ideology as “false consciousness.” Indeed, Marx’s own use of the term is contested. For a summary of the issues, see McKerrow (1983). For a discussion charting the descent of Western Marxism into various neo-Marxisms, written by a classical historical determinist, see Anderson. Persuasive critiques of the limitations of Marxism as a relevant social theory have convinced all but the most fervent classical Marxists that the work of Marx and Engels must be rewritten or abandoned. See, for example, Aronowitz, Gouldner, Nelson and Grossberg.

3See Hall and Makos’ discussion of the relevance of Hall’s work to rhetorical criticism. And see McKerrow’s comprehensive review of recent work on ideology, where he argues for a reconception of ideology as rhetorical (2015).

4In recent essays, McKerrow (1989) and McGee (1990) have employed postmodernism and neo-Marxism as means of advancing rhetorical criticism beyond its current miring in modernist ideology.

5See Crowley. In my opinion, critics (or teachers) who concentrate on a rhetoric’s technique simply evade the central responsibility of rhetorical criticism: evaluating the worth or effectiveness of a message considered in relation to audience or occasion.

6Here, interestingly enough, Hill perhaps betrayed his subscription to a contemporary Eurocentric top that treats people of color or formerly colonized/enslaved peoples as less than fully human. This top functions to rob such peoples of their subjectivity and thereby excuses their exploitation by colonizers.

7Burke’s reading of Enlightenment thinkers might fairly be described as “proto-feminist” insofar as it anticipated the feminist claim that philosophy written by privileged white males is an attempt to escape the limitations of their physical bodies, along with their social responsibility to women and children. Throughout his reading, Burke referred to various Enlightenment thinkers as “placid bachelors,” and he noted that Fichte “evolved his system while contemplating a career alternative to marriage” (1999). For the Eurocentricism of this tradition, see Asante.

8(116). Megill cited McGee (1980) as the source of this distinction. In that essay, McGee discussed several sets of opposed terms: myth/ideology, symbol/symbolism, true/false consciousness, myth as philosophy/myth as lie, symbolism/materialism, poetry/science. He made this analysis in order to demonstrate how the meanings of these terms differ when they are contextualized within differing intellectual systems. Despite this caveat, Megill’s reading suggests that McGee assigned a set of essentializing meanings to the terms “symbolic” and “mythical” as opposed to “materialist” and “ideological.” For another reading of Megill’s definitional moves, see Wander (1984), pp. 201ff.

LIST OF WORKS CITED

