RHETORICAL CRITICISM AS MORAL ACTION

James F. Klumpp and Thomas A. Hollihan

In 1969, Robert L. Scott and Donald K. Smith posed a quandary that has nagged rhetorical critics for nearly two decades: “A rhetorical theory suitable for our age must take into account the charge that civility and decorum serve as masks for the preservation of injustice, that they condemn the dispossessed to non-being, and that as transmitted in a technological society they become the instrumentalities of power for those who ‘have.’” If Scott and Smith and the voices that they heard in the 1960s were correct, rhetorical theorists who celebrated “civility and decorum” in discourse acquired the inevitable mark of the dominant social order and the critics’ utilitarian ideal of critical objectivity served merely as an ideological ruse for complicity in maintaining the existing social order. On the other hand, rhetorical critics who recognized the power inherent in the symbiotic relationship of social order and rhetoric became central to any meaningful call for social change. The time since their landmark essay has witnessed the diminished hegemony of the distrusted theory in a flurry of alternative rhetorical perspectives; yet the changes implied in their far more central charge—that rhetorical critics would be oppressors or liberators as they ignored or engaged the linkage between social order and language—are far less evident. Critics have adopted new theories of rhetoric, but the charge remains that they are captive to a perspective on the critical act that leaves them naive to the very force of rhetoric which they purport to study.

Recent essays on rhetorical criticism have reinvigorated the debate over the critic’s role in social stability and change. Philip Wander argued that rhetorical critics have a social obligation to be more than mere observers of social interaction and to involve themselves in these public controversies in order that they might directly confront the “material conditions” in society. Wander’s essay provoked heated responses from Allan Megill, Lawrence W. Rosenfield, Forbes Hill, Robert Francesconi, Farrel Corcoran, and finally a “Philippic” by Michael McGee extending Wander’s position. Wander’s 1983 essay was not the first time that he had ruffled the feathers of fellow critics by challenging them to involve themselves in social issues. In 1972 Wander and Steven Jenkins delivered a “diatribe” on the tendency for rhetorical critics to content themselves with sterile academic studies that took no overt stand on social issues but had the effect of placing critics on the side of the “establishment.”

Despite the intellectual power arrayed against their views, we find much with which we can agree in these writings by Wander, Jenkins, and McGee. We would, however, state their argument differently, and hopefully in the process strengthen their position. We often hear in their arguments a call for increased integration of the European tradition of structuralists and post-structuralists, including the materialists, into our theoretical thinking. Many of the ideas of the Continental philosophers and critics have penetrated American thought on the role of rhetoric, but at the expense of muting an important perspective within the American tradition. We ground our case for socially and morally involved criticism in the genealogy of American rhetorical and critical thought.
The critic has a role to play in our society that is integral to his/her activity as critic. We wish to explore the nature of the critic's role, the reasons we believe that it emerges in the current era, and the implications it imposes on criticism. Toward this end, we begin with an examination of a piece of popular discourse by civil libertarian Alan Dershowitz. With the criticism then before us, we address the more abstract questions that define the moral obligations we view as inherent in rhetorical criticism.

**Social Class and Hierarchical Admittance: Rhetorical Strategies of the Ruling Class**

In the early morning of 13 January 1985, Los Angeles police arrested Olympic hurdler Edwin Moses during a sweep for johns. Based on the testimony of a female police officer disguised as a prostitute, they charged him with soliciting prostitution. This event, remarkable only because of Moses' fame, inevitably attracted nationwide attention. Alan Dershowitz, a Harvard University Law Professor and syndicated newspaper columnist, attacked Moses' arrest as symptomatic of a concerted police response to feminist charges that society harassed female prostitutes but not the men who perpetuated the business of prostitution. This rich mix of characters influencing each other's actions in the framework of legal conflict composed a natural social drama.

Two dichotomies shape Dershowitz's drama. He develops the first—the contrast of feminism with rationality—through an unflattering description of those with whom he disagrees. The column opens with a description of feminists taking pleasure in Moses' problems—they are said to be "cheering loudly." The column ends with his characterization of the feminist's "vindictive argument" and "thoughtlessness." In between, Dershowitz charges that the feminists are "strange" and "uncritical." The mix of emotion and irrationality he attributes to the "feminist position" projects a tone of meanness and vindictiveness, which contrasts with his own tone of rational discussion of the issues. Thus, Dershowitz establishes a rhetorical contrast: the feminists on the side of "foolishness," unreality, and "even . . . immorality," while he upholds rationality.

Dershowitz's second dichotomy distinguishes the prostitutes and their johns. To Dershowitz the prostitute is an economic unit—a purveyor of consumer goods—and her actions are described in what amounts to an economic metaphor. Prostitutes are described as "professional" and their encounter with the legal system is defined as an "expected occupational hazard" and "a cost of doing business." The prostitute is even considered to have "advertised" with her "uniform." His descriptions of the prostitute provide a classic example of the alienation of labor from personality. The prostitutes are given no sense of life or meaning beyond their trade.

By contrast, the john is a person with a fullness of life beyond his encounter with the prostitute. He is characterized as an "unhappily married accountant who takes a bimonthly trip to his local Fantasy Street to get his jollies," as "an otherwise law-abiding citizen who occasionally seeks the forbidden fruit of sex for hire." Dershowitz posits an image of the customer as victim by detailing the effects of the arrest: "For the customer, the public arrest can be a catastrophic event. It can ruin a marriage, destroy a reputation, scar his children, terminate a career. For a man like Moses, it can undo years of positive achievements."
The contrast in character between the one-dimensional prostitute and the multidimensional john is inescapable. The act of prostitution becomes an essential expression of the character of the prostitute, but a mere aberration for her john. The characterization is conveyed in the metaphors of description. The Biblical term “forbidden fruit” identifies the act with man’s natural inherent weakness—responsible for the fall but forgiven through grace. Dershowitz describes a prostitute difficult for his readers to identify with—she has after all chosen this unacceptable profession—and a john more easily accepted—for all men have yielded to mortal weakness and lusted in their hearts.7

The transcendent values Dershowitz cites to govern his judgments are “equality” and “fairness.” The drama is given life by Dershowitz’s claim that feminists’ arguments for equality in treatment between prostitutes and their customers become a recipe for inequality, and that their pleas for fairness become most unfair. This drama is given rhetorical power by the paradox in his appeal—his call for equality and fairness is grounded in an assumed hierarchy between the prostitute and her customer. Insight into this hierarchy provides a glimpse into the values underlying his argument.

Obviously, the surface level rhetorical message of his column reveals his civil libertarian concerns regarding the wisdom and moral rightness of the policy of arresting johns. But other more intriguing motivational frames are performed in the rhetorical forms of his message. The clue to the second level is Dershowitz’s reference to the johns as “middle- and upper-class” and the contrast of that characteristic with the “working-class” metaphor of the prostitute. A clear class distinction inheres in this dichotomy.

Finding the class distinction in this column by a law professor leads us to the role of law in ruling-class behavior. Considered within the context of social order, law is an institution of hierarchical control.8 The law is defined in terms of the interests of the ruling classes and serves to regulate social behavior by (1) eliminating from the ruling class those pretenders who would violate the code of the class and (2) maintaining the integrity of the class distinctions by declaring as illegitimate the deviant behaviors of those classes out of power. Thus, for example, the cycle of theft, criminal conviction, prison, economic deprivation, and theft is defined by the property code and establishes the class distinction of the criminal class. From this perspective, the law functions properly as long as it perpetuates the rituals of class celebration. These rituals consistently monitor the conduct of the lower classes and occasionally require the purging of the few in the ruling class who break the behavioral code of their class.

Viewed from this perspective, the Dershowitz column points to the danger that the sweeps of johns threaten to disrupt the delicate balance of legal ritual by failing to regard the appropriate differentiation of class. The language that establishes this claim is the union of the symbol of “equality” with the language of “effect.” Dershowitz declares: “It isn’t sexist to speak honestly about the different effect an arrest can have on the professional prostitute and the occasional john. . . . These are the facts of life and should be taken into account when deciding whether to conduct sting operations that target johns for arrest and prosecution.” “Effects” and “facts” designate Dershowitz’s notions about the materially real and true world. The many strains of his argument come together here—the distinction between prostitute and john, the value judgments of equality and fairness, the immediate issue of policy.
Dershowitz's plea is obvious—a warning to the ruling class of the dangers inherent in the practice.

There remains still a third level of rhetorical meaning. We have previously identified Dershowitz as a civil libertarian. He is ideologically identified with liberal causes, and yet the column contains an attack on feminism—a liberal cause. Clearly Dershowitz intends feminists to be a primary audience for his argument; he calls attention to his "feminist friends" and devotes a paragraph in the column to defending himself against a charge that he and his position are sexist. Is this paradox of identification and rejection synecdoche for some grander motivational construct?

Dershowitz's paradox is, in fact, a common social ritual among liberals—certainly common during the black civil rights era of the 1960s—urging those who would seek entry into the ruling class to do so in such a way that their admission to that class transforms their identity into the identity of the rulers. In other words, rhetorical framing seeks to divide women by absorbing their gender distinction into a class distinction, and then lectures to the accepted that prostitutes should be seen for what they are: the other class.

The effort to divide feminists begins early in the column. Dershowitz labels those whose ideas he attacks as the "feminist fringe" and carefully uses modifiers such as "some feminists" and "certain feminists" to create the division on the issue. He also comments that: "There is probably something to the [feminist's] argument, but not enough to justify sweeping sting operations." His overt moment for asserting the supremacy of the class distinction over the gender distinction comes in his defense against the charges of sexism that might be levelled against him:

It isn't sexist to speak honestly about the different effect an arrest can have on the professional prostitute and the occasional john. The same argument would apply to a professional male gigolo and the occasional female "jane," or to the professional gay male hustler and his occasional customer. These are the facts of life and should be taken into account when deciding whether to conduct sting operations that target johns for arrest and prosecution.

The tone is again that of a lecture, and Dershowitz accepts a fundamental burden to prove his identification with feminism by establishing that some feminists do pursue "proper action." The liberal thus opens his arms to accept those who will accept his hierarchy and maintain the power of his class.

THE TRADITION OF STUDYING SYMBOLIC FORM

The roots of our concerns for the moral work performed in Dershowitz's column are nourished deep within contemporary rhetorical theory. In fact, those who interpret the emergence of a moral dimension in criticism as merely another critical school misapprehend its import. We are convinced that the direction of contemporary rhetorical understanding obligates critics to become morally engaged.

The obligation grows from the direction of rhetorical scholarship in the last three decades. The fundamental shift over that time replaces a managerial rhetoric with a conception of rhetoric as symbolic form. At least from the Ramists through this century, the dominant perspective on rhetoric held that language was an expression of underlying ideas and that humans reasoned and manipulated ideas to affect material reality. These theorists conceptualized human interaction with a mechanical model of exchange, with rhetoric as the medium of exchange. The strategy of
inquiry was to differentiate dialectic and rhetoric—catalogue the language strategies that diminished or magnified the effectiveness of the rhetor in achieving purpose, and then reveal the dialectic substance by stripping the layers of meaning concealed in the language.

The writings of Susanne Langer, Kenneth Burke, and others stimulated a shift to a perspective that focused on the use of symbols as fundamental to human behavior. The forms that organize the behavioral patterns called culture are not expressed in language; rather social order is performed in language. With a rhetoric of symbolic form, inquiry shifted from the referential relationship of rhetoric to reality and the stylistic elements of expression, toward understanding rhetorical forms and their interpenetration with social behavior. By 1972, Ernest Bormann could write:

> When a critic makes a rhetorical analysis he or she should start from the assumption that when there is a discrepancy between the word and the thing the most important cultural artifact for understanding the events may not be the things or “reality” but the words or the symbols. . . . A critic can take the social reality contained in a rhetorical vision which he has constructed from the concrete dramas developed in a body of discourse and examine the social relationships, the motives, the qualitative impact of that symbolic world as though it were the substance of social reality for those people who participated in the vision.10

The focus of rhetorical studies thus shifted from the intermediate power of expression to the creation of social forms in human symbolic behavior. Rhetorical critics began to look for clusters of rhetorical strategies and particular forms (what Ernest Bormann called “rhetorical visions”); for the primary motivating symbols of the American experience (what Michael McGee described as “ideographs”); or for the dramatic episodes people created to describe their world (what Walter Fisher referred to as “rhetorical fictions”).11

This view of rhetoric as symbolic emerged from three major changes in perspective. First, the scope of the rhetorical act broadened from the individual orator who influenced society to the social rhetoric that contextualized individual and collective action. Even studies of movements and epochs of rhetoric were replaced by studies that attempted to reveal the interpenetration of rhetorical and cultural patterns. At the 1970 National Developmental Conference on Rhetoric, participants heard Hugh Dalziel Duncan assert that the primary problem of the twentieth century was not to explain the power of the individual speaker, but to understand the ritual power of the great sociodramas that organized societies and thereby permitted them to do both good and evil. Duncan pleaded: “We must learn to analyze both social and symbolic elements in social action. This involves acceptance of the reality of symbols as symbols, of needs which we can satisfy only through the responses of others, and finally, of the relationship between the two. For it is the form of relationship between symbol and society that contains socioanagogic reality.”12 Individual rhetors may still be of interest to rhetorical critics, as Dershowitz is to us. But they are now voices of a social milieu. The question of “Who is the author?” is thus answered with attention to the forms of the culture from which the speaker draws, or the speaker becomes interesting as an authority who speaks for society even as s/he speaks to society; thus the shift to rhetor as socially grounded.

A second change that shaped the alternative rhetorical perspective shifted the primary conception of rhetoric from an expression that occurs subsequent to the
construing of value and reality to the assertion of value and the meaning of materiality as qualities of the symbolic enactment of society. Karl Wallace described the old theory of rhetoric as asserting that "rhetoric is nothing more than the art of framing information and of translating it into intelligible terms for the popular audience."13 Wallace's work on morality and human values and Robert L. Scott's work on rhetoric and epistemology prompted the view that rhetoric transformed material contexts into social order. Reality and values came to be seen primarily as qualities of the transformation.14 By 1970, the Committee on Rhetorical Invention of the National Developmental Conference on Rhetoric concluded:

Even the ethical values and logic, which the speaker employs prior to "normal" invention, were themselves once discovered. All concepts and even all things in man's world were once—were first—discoveries. Thereafter they move towards the status of tradition. In any event, they continue to exist and exert influence in man's world only so far as men's minds and beliefs sustain them. From this perspective the core social process turns on the coming-to-be, the nourishment, and the evolution or replacement of inventions. Life may thus be looked at in terms of the processes of change and habituation which constitute it.15

The depiction of an evolving yet stable social order shaped in rhetoric, and reshaped through rhetorical invention, focuses attention on particular characteristics of Alan Dershowitz's column: the values that shape his statement of the reality of Edwin Moses' arrest define a social order that he defends against those who would attack it. His column is not only significant as an episode in an argument about police tactics, but transforms the event that precipitated the debate into an experience of more basic social values.

The third change that shaped the new perspective on rhetoric located the power of rhetoric in the motivational power of symbolic form. The move was implicit in Wallace's concept of good reasons, informed by the symbolic interactionists W. I. Thomas, George Herbert Mead and C. Wright Mills, and wedded explicitly to rhetoric by Kenneth Burke. Mills wrote, "A stable motive is an ultimate in justificatory conversation. The words which in a . . . situation will fulfill this function are circumscribed by the vocabulary of motives acceptable for such situations. Motives are accepted justifications for present, future, or past programs or acts."16 By 1970, Walter Fisher incorporated this concept of motive as symbolic transformation into a motive view of rhetoric. "A communicator perceives a rhetorical situation in terms of a motive, and . . . an organic relationship exists between his perception and his response to that circumstance. . . . Rhetorical communication is as much grounded in motives as it is in situation, given that motives are names which essentialize the interrelations of communicator, communication, audience(s), time, and place."17 Questions of motive directly address action, and the assertion that motives are rhetorical relates criticism directly to an associated social order. Motivation in the Dershowitz column begins in his questioning of police tactics, but more is evident. His challenge orders the people, places, and forces surrounding Moses' arrest in ways that identify with more general rhetorical motives. He performs a rhetoric of class distinction that efficiently conserves the social order.

In the new, more socially focused rhetorical scholarship that has now emerged, the critic's task has become to study the ways in which rhetoric converts experiences into culture and history. One cluster of this scholarship inquired into the interpenetration
of the flow of rhetorical forms and social actions. For example, Ernest Bormann studied the Puritan culture and its grounding in the vision of the “city on the hill.” Robert Ivie studied the consistent strategies of justification in American war making. Robert L. Scott and Donald K. Smith studied the social implications of the rhetoric of confrontation of the 1960s. The other major cluster has examined rhetorical action at the moment of encounter with the novel, when rhetorical strategies must convert a most extraordinary moment into socially performed response. James F. Klumpp and Thomas A. Hollihan studied the public response to the offensive humor of Secretary of Agriculture Earl Butz. J. Vernon Jensen studied the influence of the family metaphor on British response to the American revolution.18

THE IMPERATIVES FOR CRITICISM OF SOCIAL RHETORIC

Our criticism of Alan Dershowitz’s column shares with each of these earlier criticisms the goal of exposing the strategies through which rhetoric transforms the material events of the world into sociopolitical power. Elements in our criticism, however, go beyond these previous studies. Most obviously, we go beyond the overt message of the column to reach into a rhetorical purpose that we would readily admit is not the conscious focus of the speaker. We overtly discuss the implications of social class on the rhetoric. We move beyond description of the rhetorical strategy to comment on the social form promoted by this rhetoric. We believe that in doing these things we are not just being consistent with contemporary rhetorical study, but are engaging in a criticism implied in the symbolic understanding of rhetorical processes.

Criticism that features the interpenetration of rhetorical and social form in the symbolic responds to two imperatives: the moral imperative and the rhetorical imperative. The moral imperative demands that the critic recognize that a society remakes its values in responding to problems and opportunities through rhetorical choice. The critic studies the rhetorical moment as a point in time when the appearance of the novel places a premise of the social order at risk; the response to the moment can reinforce the values and motivational approval of the society or contribute to the process of change in the society. The critic seeks the power of rhetorical moments to fix the complex combinations of values and motivations that congeal at a level beneath the obvious appeals of the messages.19

Critics responding to this imperative become moral actors. Their criticism illuminates the moral force of a rhetorical moment. In labelling this moral force “a choice,” the critic opens moral debate and thus places social order at risk. Indeed, Burke argued that the rhetorical reinforcement of a social order is strongest in those societies in which the consensus of rhetorical form is most ingrained.20 In such societies the playing out of stable values in encounters with events enacts without questioning what Burke has called the social “mystery.”21 By raising the issue, the critic destroys the mystery’s power to carry an unquestioned framework of values. Thus, the interpenetration of rhetoric and social order charges the critic to penetrate the complexity of motivation to illuminate the process by which the moment is socialized. In the act of criticism with the mystery at risk, the critic enters morality in criticism’s version of biology’s “Heisenberg effect.”22

The essence of the moral imperative is evident in less theoretical terms as well. Clearly some criticism attempts to explore effectiveness without attention to
morality. Criticism must, however, be appreciative in some sense to be criticism, and when the critic appreciates s/he tacitly accepts the rhetor’s moral position. At the very least, the act of appreciation is normative, conveying a positive evaluation of the rhetor’s skills that easily catches up the moral. We would point, for example, to Martin Medhurst’s “The First Amendment vs. Human Rights: A Case Study in Community Sentiment and Argument from Definition.” The essay is a chronicle of a campaign for a gay rights ordinance, and the critic describes the intentional obfuscation of issues, use of fear appeals, and strategic timing of messages designed to limit rather than promote issue discussion. Medhurst warns against “substituting axiology for argument” and reducing “criticism to ideology.”23 Yet, who could read his essay and not see the interpenetration of these rhetorical strategies into the lives of people in this community—people who will be denied housing or employment because their sexual preferences differ from the established community values? Medhurst’s account tells us much indeed about the values and morality of the critic by telling us so little about the values and morality of the rhetoric. Medhurst’s decision to separate the moral question from his rhetorical analysis, and the sense of embarrassment (borrowing a term from Kenneth Burke) at the omission that we trust our readers share with us, speak eloquently about the nearness of moral issues to the heart of rhetoric. Contemporary rhetoric embraces this principle that language is moral. If rhetoric interpenetrates action through motivational frames, and if the scope of our rhetorical focus is social, the critic cannot escape a responsibility for the morality of his/her critical response within the social fabric.

Criticism that makes only a moral point is moral criticism, however, not rhetorical criticism. Contemporary rhetoric insists on the rhetorical imperative. Considering morality is not new for critics. The tradition of criticizing language that “makes the worse seem the better” has long been with us. Recent examples are Robert Newman’s criticism of Richard Nixon’s rhetoric, and Philip Wander’s analysis of the material antecedents of the rhetoric of important figures in our field.24 These two studies fail as models for rhetorical critics because they stop at the level of comparing the world of the rhetoric with the material world. The notion that rhetoric and social order interpenetrate rather than reflect demands that critics go beyond comparisons of rhetoric to materiality to focus on rhetoric converting the material world into support for the social order. The imperative for the rhetorical critic is to interpenetrate rhetorical processes into the society of which s/he is a part.

We offer our criticism of Alan Dershowitz with a consciousness of both imperatives. Our approach features the structuring of hierarchy laden with moral implications. We emphasize Dershowitz drawing the arrest of Moses into the valences of American class morality. The moment plays out the mystery of the moral hierarchy as Dershowitz writes about its grander significance. Thus, the rhetorical choices interpenetrating the mystery turn inevitably on the moral imperative. But our explanation rests in the language that performs the hierarchy rather than the hierarchy itself; thus the understanding of Dershowitz’s interpretation turns on the rhetorical imperative.

THE CRITICAL PERSONAE

The socially active critic’s loss of moral detachment emphasizes the importance of the character of the critic in discussion of critical method. Past discussion of the
critic's relationship to method has focused on purpose, and the dominant interpretation of the rhetorical critic's purpose over the last three decades has formed from the relationship of critical method to social science. Indeed, the perspective of the critic as morally neutral has sprung primarily from the linkage with the objective methods promoted by American social science during that period.25 The celebration of critical objectivity, rooted in a trend common to many disciplines in this century, reached its full flower in the 1960s among those attempting to find comfort in academic departments experiencing the growth fueled by increased interest in social science and social engineering. The oft-longed-for unity of such departments was often achieved around the central symbols of the common task of "building and testing theory." After agreement on goals, the social scientists' tolerance in method made room for the rhetorical critic. The result was a self-image for critics that valued "objectivity" defined as moral noninvolvement.

So strong was the social scientific self-image that the response to it became an artistic self-image—the critic's task was to increase appreciation for the artistic use of language in the rhetorical act.26 This conceptualization of purpose emphasized the subjective character of the reading of the rhetorical artifact. Interpretation was a unique intersection of experience and intelligence infused with the character of the critic.

Both of these self-images alienate. The social scientist must alienate him/herself from his/her own involvement in the act and the artistic critic must alienate him/herself from the obvious social context and impact of the rhetorical and critical act. The result has been a criticism that seems sterile. One reads Martin Medhurst's criticism of the anti-gay rights campaign and his defense of the criticism and feels an estrangement from the morality of consequences that alienates all but the professional critic sharing the social science orientation.27 One reads Robert L. Scott and Wayne Brockriede's study of Harry S. Truman's elegant use of counterpoint musical form and feels the dominance of a rarefied technical theory of art estranged from the impact of a rhetor who fundamentally changed our world.28

We do not dismiss the social scientific or the artistic elements of rhetorical criticism. The critic's role must incorporate those elements from a different perspective, at the same time simpler and more complex than these images. We believe the critic's role per se has a simplicity that all humans share: a mixture of personae—the teacher, the interpreter, and the social actor—come together in the rhetorical act.

In an old tradition in the teaching of speech, those who taught public speaking as a liberal art viewed their task less to teach a skill to be used in appropriate situations, and more to enhance an ever present characteristic of public life.29 Their vision owed much to the same romantic emphasis fueling C. Wright Mills's distinction between public and mass.30 The public engaged as moral agent in discourse emerging from personal and collective experience. Thus public speaking was public speaking, teaching the student to take his/her place in public dialogue with a sense of morality and history. The model was heavily infused with the enlightenment notion of reason as the center of public life. Then, with faith battered by the Nazi experience and confronted with social science's demonstration of irrationality in human action, this notion declined. Mills lamented the emergence of the mass—the inert receiver of communication manipulated by the power elites—and public speaking turned to teaching students to be effective persuaders and wary consumers of persuasion.
The persona of critic as teacher recalls the earlier tradition, but entails a second critical persona—the interpretive persona. The pivotal question of the rationality or irrationality of human speech that marked the tradition is grounded in a particular vision of language (rhetoric as expression of mental states) that contemporary rhetoric rejects. Instead, the contemporary vision projects an interpretive persona.

"Every living thing is a critic," writes Kenneth Burke, and a human is a critic of symbolic action.31 To live symbolically is to engage socially in the interpretation of social and physical experience. Social communication places experience into moral and historical context; thus the substance of rhetoric is taken to be the criticism of symbolic action—hermeneutic, moral, social, historical, active.

Just as the interpretive persona refuses to separate the critic from ordinary experience, the teaching persona compels the involvement of the teacher in symbolic action. Frank Lentricchia writes, "the practice of a critical pedagogy must emerge from, be irritated into existence by, its own discomforting social ground."32 The centrality of the teaching impulse is implied in Lentricchia’s phrase "critical pedagogy." The sensitive critic, converting insight and experience with the hermeneutic, moral, historical, and social dimensions of language into critical commentary, instructs in the methods of criticism even as s/he leads those s/he touches through the Babel of social communication.

Obviously, such a teaching persona cannot isolate the rhetorical critic as an academic, professional, card-carrying member of the Speech Communication Association. The rhetorical critic is defined more appropriately by his/her activity—the examination of the interrelationship of language and social action. Thus columnists such as Ellen Goodman or William Safire, other academics such as Michael Novak and James Barber, and even reporters such as Charles Osgood and David Brinkley function as rhetorical critics in the public realm. But this does not begin to delineate the democratization of our concept of critic. The critic participates with others in creating meaning. His/her critical place is not the gallery seat of the drama critic, nor the press box seat of Rosenfield's color commentator.33 The critic talks and writes in a social community that composes community as it communicates to construct meaning. The critic listens to what has been said, and even hears what will be said, and offers his/her commentary woven into the emerging fabric of understanding. The fabric is not a product of the critic but of the community. In the end the authorship of the critic may be obscured, but influence radiates through the conversation of others. Thus the critic is not a teacher by virtue of institutional placement, but in a now obscure meaning of the term "to teach," the critic teaches by bringing attention to the relationship of language and social action. If s/he teaches well, others become his/her teacher as the conversation turns, and teaching and learning become characteristics of the conversation rather than of the individuals involved.

Thus, the interpretive and pedagogical personae merge into the third persona—the social actor. Social order is accomplished every day as the conversation transforms experience into socially meaningful human contexts. The dialectic of stability and change performed in the conversation is the essence of social order. The mystery that supports social order sublimates the experience into acceptance. Illuminate the mystery, bring it to consciousness, and you introduce the possibility of change. Experiences are transformed into issues only in the bright light of exposure that follows from awareness of mystery.
The critic's focus on language in social action involves him/her in the struggle between stability and change. If we draw the class implications of Dershowitz's rhetoric to the surface and explore the way the message sublimates the issues to the debate over Edwin Moses, moral issues follow: Do women wish to be admitted to the ruling class under such rules? Does acceptance of Dershowitz's arguments about Moses imply support of the reigning hierarchy? What other messages does the rhetoric of the ruling class use to transform values into support for the social order? The critic implied in contemporary treatments of rhetoric cannot escape the morality of rhetoric. The critic can ignore the moral implications of rhetoric and thus perform support of the sublimation of the mystery, or illuminate the implications and raise the issues.

The self-image these three personae establish for the rhetorical critic is an image in which social processes are central. In that sense the critic is a student of society, and some would be comfortable with the label "social scientist." At the same time, the creative energy of criticism—the invention power—is the essence of the thrust of the critic into social intercourse. The critical act matters because the critic's observations are nontrivial; they are examples of the act of appreciation. The critic is socially linked to society.

CONCLUSION

"There are not different kinds of criticism," one of our colleagues is fond of saying. "Critics just use different rhetorical theories." The characterization springs from the same social scientific roots that give rise to ideas of the moral neutrality of the critic. We disagree with his claim, for we believe that criticism is a rhetorical act and, thus, must assume different character as conceptions of rhetorical theory change. This was the challenge Scott and Smith heard in the rhetoric of confrontation in the 1960s.

Contemporary rhetorical theory has reached a maturity to release critics to become self-conscious of their responsibilities to engage the moral. The terms for this engagement do not suggest external standards of morality that the critic uses to objectively judge ethics. Rather, the contemporary critic approaches morality as a quality that inhere in rhetoric, and in criticism as rhetoric. "Criticism," argues Frank Lentricchia, "is the production of knowledge to the ends of power and, maybe, of social change. This kind of theory of interpretation presupposes a critical theory of society and history—what human beings have made, they can and will unmake and then remake and remake again."

Contemporary rhetorical theory posits that rhetoric and criticism possess such power to foster stability or change. Those who have illuminated the way—from Richard Weaver to Kenneth Burke, from Karl Wallace to Philip Wander—have understood that there is a task for the rhetorical critic that goes beyond interest in "mere" rhetoric. The critic that emerges—the interpreter, the teacher, the social actor—is a moral participant, cognizant of the power and responsibility that accompanies full critical participation in his/her society.

NOTES

James F. Klumpp is Associate Professor of Communication Arts and Theatre at the University of Maryland, College Park. Thomas A. Hollihan is Associate Professor of Communication Arts and Sciences at the University of Southern California.
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5. We do not mean to imply that Wander and his colleagues have completely ignored American thinkers on these subjects. They have, for example, often acknowledged their debt to Kenneth Burke. Our argument is that their search for starting places sends them to the European tradition so quickly that the involved critic is cut off from his own tradition. For example, Wander begins his essay on “The Ideological Turn” by tracing the European origins of the term “ideology,” which he will make a centerpiece of his theory. Then in note 2 he writes that “An interest in ideology is beginning to appear in rhetorical studies” and lists several essays that reflect the interest. The implication of a European genealogy in the choice of “ideology” as a key concept is overt in McGee’s 1980 study on the ideograph: Michael Calvin McGee, “The ‘Ideograph’: A Link Between Rhetoric and Ideology,” Quarterly Journal of Speech 66 (1980): 1-16. Our argument is that a natural rooting for the morally involved critic lies in more familiar moves in rhetorical theory. While we do not wish to be ethnophoric or ethnocentric, we do wish to focus on those roots to make a different argument for the involvement of the critic.

6. We took our text for the column from the Los Angeles Times, 23 January 1985, sec. II, p. 5.

7. The phrase “lusted in their hearts” does not appear in Dershowitz’s column. The phrase was made famous as a symbol for the failings of a common male in Jimmy Carter’s famous interview with Playboy (November 1976, p. 63ff) during the 1976 Presidential Campaign.

8. We are not arguing that the hierarchical control is the overt or primary purpose of the law. We are speaking of the functional relationship of the law to the social hierarchy.

9. The most common manifestation of this attitude is the differentiation of goals and methods, as in “I approve of what they are trying to accomplish but not their way of doing it.” Most often this indicates acceptance on the dominant social order’s terms for social change. Also included in the cluster of strategies is a differentiation between “good” and “bad” members of the group. Clearly, what is at stake in such language is “admittance,” not redefinition of the social order to a true integration of the dual character of the two cultures.


19. We should not think of such rhetorical character as subconscious, for “consciousness” implies the awareness of the individual mind. The power of authorship rests as well in the social order that provides the rhetorical form with which behavior is organized. See Kenneth Burke, Permanence and Change: An Anatomy of Purpose, rev. ed. (1931; Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1954).

20. “Meaning or symbolism becomes a central concern precisely at that stage when a given system of meanings is falling into decay. In periods of firmly established meanings, one does not study them, one uses them: One frames his acts in accordance with them.” Burke, Permanence and Change, 162.


22. The Heisenberg effect (named for its formulator, German physicist Werner Heisenberg) argued that the nature of scientific observation is always affected by the energy employed in observation.


See, for example, John Waite Bowers, "The Pre-Scientific Function of Rhetorical Criticism," in Essays in Rhetorical Criticism, ed. Thomas R. Nilsen (New York: Random House, 1968), 126–45. Wayne Brockriede's efforts to create a bridge between scientific and artistic approaches ("Trends in Rhetoric: Blending Criticism and Science," in Bitzer and Black, 123–39) demonstrates the tendency for such efforts to adopt a vocabulary and shape of social scientific efforts. Lawrence W. Rosenfield locates the sources of the concept in the classical notion of "theorain" from which we get theory (Bitzer and Black, 66).

See, for example, the explanation for eclectic criticism in Bernard L. Brock and Robert L. Scott, eds. Methods of Rhetorical Criticism: A Twentieth Century Perspective, 2nd ed. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1980), 137–42.

Medhurst extends his original position in response to a criticism by Barry Brummett, "The Skeptical Critic," Western Journal of Speech Communication 46 (1982): 379–82. In his response, Medhurst recognizes some of the very issues we discuss about the moral involvement of the critic but says he wishes to avoid them: "I did not choose to judge whether the arguments were accurate, consistent, ethical, or any one of a dozen other questions that a critic might have asked." The power that this statement gives the critic, however, fails to recognize the implicit power of judgment that language so often carries apart from our intent. Contemporary rhetoric deals explicitly with this implicit power of language, and thus considering criticism as a rhetorical act precludes the sterility of Medhurst's position. His explicit narrowing of the concept of "good" to "effective" seems an explicit statement of the alienation of the critic from moral judgment to which we object. Ultimately our objection is not that Medhurst is unaware of the morality of the campaign, but that, true to the precepts of the critical method within which he writes, he chooses to alienate his criticism from that morality. When criticism is viewed as an interpretive interaction rather than an expressive act, such a position becomes inappropriate. See Martin J. Medhurst, "The Sword of Division: A Reply to Brummett and Warnick," Western Journal of Speech Communication 46 (1982): 384.


Burke, Permanence and Change. 5. Burke explains that his sense of criticism here is "discrimination." We may be pushing Burke further than he would be willing to go in our usage here, but we believe the position is the essence of his treatment of rhetoric in this book.

Frank Lentricchia, Criticism and Social Change (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 5. Lentricchia is describing the tendency of pragmatism to evolve into an involved pedagogy. We believe the same thing happens with rhetorical criticism.


Lentricchia, Criticism and Social Change, 11.