THINGS MADE BY WORDS:
REFLECTIONS ON TEXTUAL CRITICISM

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This essay is in part an effort to influence the continuing debate about textual criticism and critical rhetoric and in part an exercise in self-criticism. Since I am a principal in the debate, I cannot pretend to assume a neutral or disinterested position, but my present concern is not polemic, or at least not explicitly polemic. Instead, following and extending a point made by Dilip Gaonkar, I want to frame the debate in terms that differ from the prevailing conception and in fact differ from the way I have thought about it in the past. Gaonkar argues—quite rightly, I believe—that unlike earlier disputes in the field which concentrate on method, the conflict between critical rhetoric and textual criticism centers on the object of study (that is, on the conception of rhetorical practice). On reflection, I have discovered—much to my own surprise—that this distinction is theoretically motivated, and that my work does not simply promote a direct encounter with rhetorical texts, but that it involves something very like a "theory" of rhetorical reading. From this perspective, not only does the difference between textual criticism and critical rhetoric emerge in clearer relief, but certain modifications in my approach to reading seem necessary.

Critical rhetoric and textual criticism present fundamentally opposed views of rhetorical practice, and the differences appear in a great number of manifestations. At bottom, however, I believe that this opposition reflects a basic and persistent distinction embedded in the classical tradition, which recognizes two different foci for rhetorical persuasion. Rhetoric, on this account, is persuasive in two senses, since it has both an intentional and an extensional dimension. The intentional dimension has to do with the purpose of the rhetor as he or she composes a discourse designed to persuade an audience. The extensional dimension has to do with persuasive effect, the actual impact of discourse on an audience. In De inventione, Cicero succinctly expresses this commonplace when he defines rhetoric both in terms of its duty (officium) and its end (finis). The duty is to "speak in a manner suited to persuade," whereas the end is to "persuade by speech." And this separation allows the rhetorician to distinguish between what is done by an orator and what happens to an audience. The first consideration, of course, stresses the artistic integrity of a discourse; the second stresses its social impact.

Broadly speaking, this distinction seems to apply to the two contemporary approaches to practice. Textual criticism (or "close reading") centers on the effort to interpret the intentional dynamics of a text. Ideological criticism (or "critical rhetoric") studies the extensional, social and political force of discursive practice. This traditional terminology, however, does not mesh precisely with contemporary developments, and it remains useful only if we recognize important differences that exist between current interests and the older frame of reference. Thus, in the case of "textual criticism," as the focus shifts from composition (which is primary in the classical tradition) to criticism, the initial locus of interest becomes the finished text.
rather than the person who intends to make one. This change obviously complicates the status of intention, since the ratio between intention and production, though still crucial, emerges from interpretative work rather than direct consciousness. In the case of "critical rhetoric," the departure from the tradition is much more dramatic. The discourse/audience ratio no longer centers on a single point of contact, since the effect of rhetoric is charted through the accumulation of discursive practices, and these practices establish a network of social control that constrains the production as well as the reception of texts. In fact, the traditional conception of "text" becomes problematic within this frame.

In spite of these qualifications, however, the contrasting general direction of inquiry developed in the two approaches seems strikingly similar to the intentional/extensional distinction located in the old rhetoric. This point might encourage us to view textual criticism and critical rhetoric as connected through a tension inherent within the study of rhetorical practice, since the modes of producing discourse and the effects of discourse seem necessary but not entirely commensurable aspects of persuasion. Moreover, the revival of this dormant tension suggests some general points of commonality between the two projects. It is significant, I believe, that both find a common, albeit negative, origin in their resistance to "modernist" rhetoric, and thus both deny received notions about the relationships between knowledge and opinion, theory and practice, and form and content. Textual criticism is directly and heavily indebted to pre-modern sources, most notably to the Isocratean and Ciceronian texts that attempt to hold form and content in solution and give pride of place to concrete practice over abstract theory. Critical rhetoric, of course, is decisively post-modern, but its advocates acknowledge classical antecedents in Isocrates and the older sophists, and some of its crucial tenets fit comfortably with both the older tradition and its more recent incarnation. Celeste Condit rather clearly indicates these lines of similarity in this explication of McGee's position:

For McGee an ideological study cannot separate form and content. It is precisely the thrust of McGee's theoretical program to deny that we can or should study abstract "ideas" that are not embodied in particular historical movements and therefore in particular "forms" (which he calls usages). An ideograph, like "liberty," is not an idea (a content disembodied from any form); it is precisely a particular constellation of usages, identifiable solely by the specific forms it takes in past history and the present historical moment. The apparent simplicity of ideographs disguises a complex "dispositional" structure. The meaning of "liberty" is every bit as complex as a sentence from Longinus. It is simply that the disposition of an ideograph is to be found by reaching out to other parts of a text or to other texts, rather than by treating a phrase or a text as self-contained.

Condit's remarks, in fact, suggest both the crucial points of convergence and divergence between the two approaches. Both seek to ground themselves in practice and to explain rhetoric in terms of the way it actually manifests itself in practice. They differ, however, in their conception of the level at which this practice achieves integrity. As a textual critic, I regard ideographs as fragments that appear in texts, the text being a whole construction and the fundamental unit of the rhetorical art. As a critical rhetorician, McGee views the ideograph itself as a kind of text, a fundamental unit of social/rhetorical construction, and what I call a text (e.g. Lincoln's "Second Inaugural") is a fragment. That is, a particular speech is part of a larger ideological formation, and the whole "text" emerges only at the collective
level constituted by the system of ideographs. To return to my earlier terminology, the difference here is between an intentional approach that works from a finished product toward the processes that constitute it and an extensional approach that breaks down these products in order to apprehend their participation in much broader social/political processes. These two orientations do not admit the same conception of text, and as critics accept one or the other, they not only turn their readings in different directions, but they arrive at different conceptions of what it is that they are reading.

Viewed from this angle, the two positions appear as nearly polar opposites, and both take on a distinctively radical tincture. This radical quality is also, I believe, a result of common origins. Both projects arise out of an impulse to reform rhetorical criticism by clearing away the taxonomic, historical, and biographical clutter that encumbered the old paradigm and by shifting attention to genuinely rhetorical phenomena. Having moved out of the modernist frame, both projects regard practice and not theory as the focal point for rhetorical inquiry, and so the problem is to locate the radical of practice. But at this point things take an ironic turn. As McGee might say, no one has seen rhetorical practice strut into her office. Rhetorical practice is not a simple, tangible, and objectively present phenomenon, but something that must be identified through conceptual effort. Thus, in order to displace theory so as to concentrate on practice, one has to theorize—at least implicitly—about the domain of practice.

Consequently, the distance between these two conceptions of practice follows from different theoretical impulses. Concerned about establishing the autonomy of rhetoric and influenced by critical social theory, McGee expands the domain of practice until it becomes "a globally pervasive constitutive agency." Concerned about the status of rhetoric as a verbal art and influenced by the classical tradition, I narrow the focus by concentrating on what I regard as the "primitives" of rhetorical art—exemplary oratorical texts. The specific elements that inform these positions reflect differing currents now at work in the academic world and accidental differences of temperament and training. Nevertheless, I do not believe that the emergence of the schism is an accident. Once rhetoricians focus upon practice, the tension between intentional art and extensional power enters almost inevitably, even if unconsciously, into the conceptual arena. What we have now, therefore, is a contemporary embodiment of a persistent problem rooted in Western thought about rhetorical practice.

One way to deal with this problem is to attempt to disarm it by merging the two opposing orientations. Given the apparently radical and symmetrical contrast between the two, this option almost automatically suggests itself. Moreover, existing critical practice routinely works within this middle ground as critics move between ideological issues and specific features of texts. Yet, this negotiation is often awkward, and the conceptual grounds for effecting it remain very murky. And if our disciplinary history teaches us nothing else, it surely proves that conceptual confusion on this matter can have disastrous practical consequences.

No flaw in the neo-Aristotelian program was as telling as its failure to acknowledge the tensions between the intentional structure of texts and their extrinsic effects. Implicitly following the existing literary model, the neo-Aristotelians accepted the oration as the basic unit of study in rhetorical criticism and regarded the oration as
an artistic product. Yet at the same time, anxious to break free from the domain of literary criticism, they evaluated oratory according to the standard of extrinsic effect. This unrecognized inconsistency between the conception of the object and the standard of judgment forced critics to stagger aimlessly between texts and contexts without learning much about either.

The current generation of critics is less inclined to entrap itself in this bald contradiction, but our literature still does not offer a secure basis for achieving equilibrium between the intentional and extensional dimensions of practice, and the persistence of this issue, in varying forms, might suggest that it is very difficult to give equal weight to both simultaneously. A hasty synthesis is liable to occlude the issues involved here and produce apparently reasonable but less than fully considered compromises. Consequently, I think there are good theoretical and practical reasons to acknowledge the poles represented by textual criticism and critical rhetoric and to give some critics the space needed to work within and through this opposition.

Thus, while others quite reasonably advocate synthesis, I would prefer to hold the two orientations in a dialectical relationship. This dialectical interaction, as I imagine it, is not designed to merge the two positions nor to subsume one within the other. Instead, the opposition would be sustained as a friendly but serious competition which might produce leveraged adjustments within the economy of either project. Since both projects gravitate toward extremes, they have a tendency to purify themselves to the point that they lose contact with the grounded complexity of practice. Irritations arising from the other side of the pole should help prevent either side from becoming rotten with its own perfection.

I am not in a position to know whether this dialectic would prove useful for critical rhetoric, but I am reasonably certain that it can help refine my own efforts in thinking about textual criticism. Critical rhetoric reminds adherents of close reading that questions of power and social circumstance always enter into the texts they study. In my own case, I certainly did not intend to ignore these matters but to locate them appropriately within a conception of rhetoric as a practical art. Nevertheless, in the effort "to construct a rhetoric at least as full as that of Cicero," I am afraid that I have adopted a narrow and probably anachronistic view of power. In general terms, the problem is this: In my version of textual criticism, the text becomes stabilized as a field of rhetorical action through a calculus that subsumes its extensional thrust within its intentional dynamics. This allows for a synthetic judgment about particular cases, but it also tends to fix the particular text outside the larger field of intertextual developments. The narrowing of focus, I believe, has some heuristic and pedagogical advantages, but it tends to deflect attention from the scenes of controversy out of which these texts arise and for which they are made. Thus, the project is incomplete on its own terms, since it does not accommodate issues of power and social circumstance that decisively influence the focal object of study. The issue, then, is whether I can adjust my position to better encompass these social and political matters—not in terms of the way that McKerrow and McGee conceive power (since that would be to capitulate altogether), but on some basis that seems reasonable for current critical purposes. Before I can address this question, however, I need to present a clearer explanation of the origin and nature of the problem, and this entails some autobiographical reflection.
Most critics of my generation were motivated by a desire either to rescue or displace the classical tradition. I adopted the first of these alternatives; and, in pursuing this course, the most pressing problem was to refurbish traditional criticism by giving it some interpretative density. The neo-Aristotelian approach had treated classical lore as a collection of taxonomic modules, and “criticism” became an exercise in dissecting texts into so many bits that fitted within this static system. The result was to obstruct judgment of the whole and render interpretative work almost impossible. Moreover, the problem was assumed (I now think wrongly) to stem from Aristotle’s effort to produce a theoretically coherent account of rhetoric. Since “theory” (on the then prevailing modernist view) consisted in locating and organizing general regularities, it was an inappropriate vehicle for generating grounded interpretations of rhetorical texts. The composition of a text represented a synthetic response to a particular situation, and so it followed that abstract structure of “theory” was inadequate to engage the concrete requirements of rhetorical practice.

These considerations encouraged attention to Cicero, who offered a different account of the relationship between theory and practice. For Cicero, the faculty of the orator had absolute priority over the theory of rhetoric. Since theory was general and the orator’s task was particular and gauged against constantly shifting circumstances, the theory of rhetoric could have no more than a thin and equivocal status. The real issue, therefore, was the development of the oratorical faculty, the flexible capacity possessed by an individual to engage situations as they arose. Rhetorical precepts had some value in nurturing this faculty, but knowledge of them was never an end in itself, and the faculty gained more from other sources, such as broad knowledge, experience, and the study of models. The use of models, of paradigms of eloquence, proved more useful than abstract precepts because a paradigm embodied the organic integrity of eloquence as it displayed itself in response to concrete issues and circumstances, and thus the paradigms could show what the precepts could not tell.

Since oratory was not regulated by abstract rules but by the changing demands of practice, only one principle could apply to the art universally, and that was decorum or appropriateness—the flexible standard that measured the quality of a discourse against the context of the situation; and decorum became the master term in Ciceronian rhetoric. As explicated in the Orator, decorum exercised a complex function, coordinating both the internal structure of a discourse and its extrinsic accommodation to the occasion. Internally, decorum governed the relationships among all the elements within a discourse, rounding them out into a coherent pattern. Extrinsically, decorum worked to adjust the discourse as a whole so that it could offer a fitting and effective response within a specific context. Decorum, then, regulated both form and content even as it mediated between the formal and functional dimensions of a discourse.

This conception cuts across the bias of the modern form/content dichotomy which has plagued criticism in our field since its inception. Form or style is no longer alienated from content or argument. Instead, the two blend together within the unfolding development of a discourse, a development that simultaneously holds the discourse together and holds it out as a way of influencing the world in which it appears. Form, then, plays a decisive role in rhetorical discourse, but only as it
promotes the function of the discourse, as it acts to produce an effect on the social world. A somewhat similar concern manifests itself in Kenneth Burke's effort to coordinate the intrinsic and extrinsic aspects of rhetoric, and it appears in his definition of form as "an arousing and fulfilling of desires. A work has form in so far as one part of it leads to another, to be gratified by the sequence." Here the form of a work extends toward the auditor's response, and the critic's task is to discover how a work is constructed in order to produce a response. Or, as Tom Benson nicely puts the point, the critic "inquires into the states of thought and feeling an audience is invited to experience."

In short, by taking a Ciceronian turn and then by turning Cicero to critical purposes, we achieve something that might be called formal/functional criticism. This approach is committed to understanding discourses in their full complexity, comprehending them both as linguistic constructions and as efforts to exercise influence, and it operates through paradigm cases rather than abstract principles. The critic occupies the position Cicero assigned to the orator, and equipped with general knowledge, including a practical command of the percepts of the art, he or she studies paradigm texts. Over time, the critic develops a repertoire of such texts and a heightened sensitivity to the possibilities of rhetorical practice gained from the study of situated practice. In this way, the critic attempts to cultivate the capacity, the practical judgment, necessary to interpret and assess any new case that comes to hand, and judgment moves laterally across cases, thus fixing attention on embodied rhetorical performance rather than on abstract forms. Within this project, the lore of classical rhetoric becomes something more than a guide to the naming of parts; it becomes available for doing interpretative work, since metaphors and enthymemes, prose rhythms and topics, hyperboles and examples take on a life within the metabolism of a discourse.

This whole operation depends upon restricting rhetorical action to one level—its manifestation in a particular text. But, as McGee and others constantly remind us, rhetorical action is a complex business that occurs simultaneously at many levels, some of them extending far beyond the artistic representations located in a single case. Thus, if this project disarms the dichotomy between form and function, it may also unwittingly sponsor another version of formalism—a local formalism that isolates the text from larger discursive formations and restricts interpretation within the orbit of the text's own construction. Hence, the project lies open to the charge that it "aestheticizes" practical discourse and discounts the ratio between rhetoric and social action—a complaint registered by virtually everyone who has commented on this matter.

A minimal response to this problem requires attention to the interplay between texts, and this involves something more than just increasing the number of texts studied. Condit, I believe, mistakes the complexity of the issue, when she argues that "theoretically close readers of multiple texts would end up doing the same things done by readers of a single text, only more of it." Within the economy of my project, the problem is that readers would do the same thing—namely read each of the multiple texts one at a time, since the text itself defines the horizon of critical attention. Nothing pushes the critic across intertextual space in the effort to locate and assess the movement of rhetorical strategies and themes. The extensional dimension of power is not wholly neglected, since each discourse must be treated as
a functional intervention in a local context. Nevertheless, the conception of power is limited to the dynamics of the particular case and refracted through intentional constructions found within the text. It seems that, in putting the critic into the slot Cicero gives to the orator, I have overextended the Ciceronian view of power as a personal attribute and failed to appreciate the way that ongoing social and intertextual developments influence rhetorical practice. Thus, I believe John Campbell is correct when he argues that my “concern to preserve and celebrate the uniqueness of the text and protect it from the distortions of reductionism limits . . . attention to history to the immediate context of a single event.”

Is it possible, then, to sustain this concern for the unique integrity of the oratorical text and to remain sensitive to the social and historical dimensions of rhetorical practice? Perhaps it is not—at least not in the long term, and my textual psychosis ought to be incorporated within some larger frame of reference. Nevertheless, while still working within the premises of the original system, I believe that the approach can be adjusted and rendered more sensitive to intertextual developments.

This adjustment absolutely demands attention to a unit beyond the single text, but once established, the larger unit tends to absorb the unique features of any particular work. Thus, as critics in our discipline have become more concerned about intertextual issues, their attention has shifted away from the single transaction. Genre studies, for example, seek to identify the stylistic and argumentative features common to a body of texts, and this focus “reduces the significance of any single speech.” Particulars assume importance only as “paradigms” that represent the generic norm or as deviations from this norm. Likewise, movement studies stress systematic regularities, grouping discursive practices into phases and assimilating single texts into the composite structure of the movement itself. Neither approach seems compatible with the intense concentration on particulars required by my theory of reading.

The study of controversy seems to offer a more promising alternative, since a controversy is not a discursive formation but a sustained activity consisting of particular instances of oppositional discourse. As matters now stand, these instances are not central to the study of controversy, since the prevailing method is thoroughly analytical. Once a controversy is identified, the critic abstracts recurring issues from the relevant texts and defines the controversy in terms of these issues. But it is possible to conceive controversy in a different way and to stress its fully embodied manifestations rather than its persistent themes. From this perspective, critics can focus upon synthetic moments, selecting certain texts as “representative anecdotes.” Such texts (e.g. Booker T. Washington’s “Atlanta Exposition Address” paired with W. E. B. Dubois’ “Of Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others”) function as paradigms not because they represent what is typical, but because they offer “substantial representations” of opposing positions. In other words, the texts do not represent the controversy through schematic reduction but through synecdoche, each text as a whole standing for one of the positions in the debate, and the ensemble of paradigm texts constituting an embodied representation of the entire controversy. At this point, the controversy is open to close reading, since the critic can deal with these texts in their full complexity and treat them as substantive wholes. A thorough understanding of the intentional construction of the paradigm cases, then, links the critic’s effort to differing visions of the social world as they are
embodied in the controversy. The texts become connected within an intertextual network and with the issues of power and situated interest that inform the whole development, but they retain their integrity as things made by words.

In short, controversy, when approached through "representative anecdotes," offers an appropriate frame for expanding textual criticism into an intertextual arena. This frame preserves the unique and complex integrity of the particular text while it prevents the critic from closing interpretation within the orbit of any single perspective. The presence of opposing texts constantly calls attention to other perspectives and other ways of achieving closure. Viewed in this light, the text is not an autonomous container of meaning, nor is it a failed paradigm of truth. Instead, we can see it as a positioned response set within a constellation of other positioned responses.

What I have just presented is a bare sketch that requires more detailed explanation and further development through case studies. Even when fully articulated, however, this approach would leave important problems unanswered, since students of argumentation would continue to study the issues involved in controversies, generic critics would persist in their effort to understand the common characteristics of types of discourse, movement critics would still investigate complex aggregates of symbolic behavior, and critics generally would remain concerned about the extrinsic effects of persuasive discourse. These are matters that textual criticism is not intended to engage directly, and it does not seek to displace or even compete with these critical interests. On the contrary, it exists in a cooperative relationship with all critical practices that deal in interpretative understanding and evaluation. Textual criticism sustains a narrower focus than other types of criticism, but it does so in order to concentrate on the fundamental operations of rhetorical language. If the focus becomes too narrow, the theory of reading loses contact not only with other critical endeavors but with the social world where practice occurs. On the other hand, if its focus is extended too broadly, it loses the discipline required to engage texts with precision and to comprehend the fundamentals of practice. If it achieves the proper balance, textual criticism can offer a theoretically sound and practically useful base for the one activity shared in common by all other interpretative projects—the rhetorical reading of texts.

NOTES

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I was alerted to this point by reading an unpublished manuscript by George Kennedy.

De inventione, 1.6.


Gaonkar, 290.

Condit, 342. Condit's essay implies that I do not measure up very well against this standard. I admit it, but it is a high standard, and I continue to struggle toward it. The Ciceronian tincture in my critical approach is noted by Gaonkar, 311–312 and is elaborated below in this paper.

Recent uses of Aristotle's Rhetoric indicate a different interpretation of the text and a markedly different
attitude toward theory than is apparent in "neo-Aristotelianism." Farrell, for example, holds that the function of theory is to inform practice and argues that Aristotle offers a way to ground theory in practice. See Thomas B. Farrell, "Practicing the Arts of Rhetoric: Tradition and Invention," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 24 (1991): 183–212, and "Inventing Rhetorical Culture: Some Notes on Theory and Practice," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* (in press). Likewise, Michael Hyde and Craig Smith, "Rethinking 'The Public': The Role of Emotion in Being-With-Others," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 77 (1991): 446–466, reread Aristotle's theory of the emotions so as to provide a less modular and more fluid way to apprehend the theory/practice relationship. These efforts at practical theory come very close to the interest in a theory of rhetorical reading; in fact, it is difficult, perhaps impossible, to draw a clear line of demarcation between them, and both are far closer to each other than either is to the conception of theory sponsored by Hart. The important point is that criticism cannot divorce itself from theory, and much of the recent "theory bashing" in our field results from the failure to distinguish the modernist version of theory from other possibilities.


7Condit, 331. One sentence later, however, Condit asserts that the unique feature of my approach is its attention to "the dispositio of the single text."

8Campbell, 366.

9Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Jameson, *Deeds Done in Words: Presidential Rhetoric and the Genres of Governance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990): 9. Interestingly, however, Karlyn Campbell's *Man Cannot Speak for Her, Vol. I: A Critical History of Early Feminist Rhetoric* (New York: Praeger, 1989), while it also deals with a genre, devotes much more attention to single speech texts; in some cases, such as her critique of Stanton's "Solitude of Self," Campbell presents detailed and nuanced readings that are models of textual criticism. Following the model she presents in this, close reading and genre would appear more compatible.


11The key terms I use here—"representative anecdote," "substantial representation," and "metonymy"—are, of course, borrowed from Kenneth Burke. Concerning substantial representation and its relation to metonymy, see the essay "Four Master Tropes," which appears as "Appendix D" in *A Grammar of Motives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969): 503–518, and my essay, "Burke's Ciceronianism," in *The Legacy of Kenneth Burke*, ed. Herbert W. Simons and Trevor Melia (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989): 115–127. I am indebted to Bill Balthrop, who suggested to me that the "representative anecdote" might serve as a way of dealing with the kinds of problems outlined in this paper. I am also indebted to Tom Goodnight for encouraging and guiding my interest in controversy. Goodnight's keynote address at the 1991 Alta Conference, "Controversy," was very useful to me in preparing this paper.
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