

Text, Context, and the Fragmentation of Contemporary Culture

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IN THE MID-SIXTIES, rhetoricians were led away from their study of public address by a new way of asking questions that centered on understanding the methods rather than the substance of their academic practice. The result was a limited ability to deal effectively with new cultural conditions that require different strategies for managing the relationship between a text and its context. This essay suggests that the fragmentation of our American culture has resulted in a role reversal, making *interpretation* the primary task of speakers and writers and *text construction* the primary task of audiences, readers, and critics. (Interpretation and text construction go together like reading and writing, of course, so it is important to understand from the outset that I am not suggesting that today's critics no longer need to worry about interpretation, or that today's speakers need not make speeches. "Primary task" means "the most essential" or "crucial" operation in successful reading/listening and writing/speaking.)

CRITICISM IN COMMUNICATION STUDIES

For the past twenty-five years or so, the field has been preoccupied with the pure act of criticism. From the beginning, in such books as Thonssen's and Baird's *Speech Criticism* (1948), we have recognized that criticism is intimately connected with any analysis of discourse. We translated Greek and Roman theories of communication into a theory of criticism, implying that rhetoricians possess performative skills which permit role-playing the part of great speakers at the moment of eloquence, or even the part of great authors at the point of writing a masterpiece of literature. Our theory of criticism treated the finished discourse as a final choice from among possible arguments and arrangements, styles and media. This way of conceiving discourse presupposes that criticism is purposive and tendentious: Great oratory ought to be celebrated for its wisdom and eloquence; bad oratory should be exposed for its bombast and eristic. The *telos* of both kinds of judgment is

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ultimately pedagogical, the clear faith that fledgling orators can profit from studying the successes and mistakes of more experienced speakers.

Since 1965, however, a spate of books and essays redefined criticism, making it an *object* of study rather than a *vehicle* of study. That is, we translated *how* we study into *what* we study, suggesting that our practice as critics is self-justifying. In Black's words (1978, p. 4), "criticism is what critics do." It need not "lead" to other kinds of knowledge or "go" anywhere in particular. *The critic* became portrayed as an entirely independent agent, so much in charge of his or her intellectual labor that whatever is produced under the name of "criticism" should be acceptable in principle, subject only to criteria of internal consistency and a reader's tutored preference. As Gronbeck (1985) tells the story, our reorientation resulted in the "death" of public address, an academic practice killed when some of us decided that we were "critics" and others that we were "analysts" (cf. Hart, 1985). Whatever you think of Gronbeck's death metaphor, "public address" has clearly dissolved, being no longer a discrete object of study nor a necessary ground for critical judgment. But notice also that *rhetoric* has dissolved! Most obviously, in the sheer linguistics of the new terminology, rhetoric shifted from noun to qualifier, and in its new adjectival state, it remains occluded by focus on "criticism." It is now more important to be familiar with the theories of those who write about "criticism" from any field of the Academy than it is to understand the nature of the "rhetorical" in human life generally, in and out of the Academy. Though we all know better, we write as if *rhetoric* were uncontested, uninteresting, a subordinate term.

Where has rhetoric gone? The term "rhetorical criticism" invites us to Black's emphasis on critical practice. The term "critical rhetoric" (McKerrow, 1989) invites emphasis on rhetorical practice, "rhetoric is what rhetoricians do." With Black's accent, rhetoric is too easily submerged in philosophical and/or literary thinking.

WITH ACCENT ON CRITICISM

From one angle, emphasis on "criticism" dissolves rhetoric into philosophy. Nearly everyone has called Plato the "Father of Philosophy," but Richard Rorty more specifically claims that Plato "invented philosophical thinking" from the materials of rhetoric, the lore of "Sophists" (1979, pp. 156-57). Plato's criticism of rhetoric emphasizes its easy acceptance of appearance and lack of concern for truth. Rhetoricians such as Isocrates did recognize a clear tension between appearance and reality, but they described it as *opposition*, not as *contradiction*. That is, when different modes of interpretation are also at odds, each claiming to be true, rhetoricians saw a *stasis*, an impasse resolved when judges imbued with *phronesis* (practical wisdom) make decisions. Plato doubted the practical wisdom of the Athenian *polis* that usually made such judgments, claiming that decisions are often polluted by the superstition

and fear of uncritical minds. He wanted a more reliable, certain criterion of truth, so he invented philosophical thinking by characterizing an opposition as more than *stasis*, as *krisis*, a contradiction that results from the imperfection of language. Words cannot capture the reality, the truth, of what they "stand for" in discourse; but some are closer to the mark than others. We must begin with the supposition that reality is hidden by appearance, truth by discourse. We search for that interpretation which most closely mirrors nature, truth for its own sake. Rhetoricians claimed that Plato made the study of *krisis*, the act of criticism, an object rather than a vehicle—discourse should "lead" somewhere beyond truth for the sake of truth, specifically to an enactment and embodiment of practical wisdom (Isocrates, 1961, pp. 329-33). For a while yet, until Rorty and his allies succeed in reshaping "mirror of nature" philosophy, there will be a place in the Platonic tradition for "the critic" whose labor goes nowhere beyond truth for the sake of truth. But this will be, as it has ever been, a place without rhetoricians, a place where rhetoric is degraded, where truth and action, theory and practice, have precious little to do with one another.

From another angle, the emphasis on "criticism" dissolves rhetoric into literary theory. As McKerrow (1989) has suggested, we might have said "critical rhetoric" instead of "rhetorical criticism," thus keeping it clear that criticism is a vehicle for doing rhetoric. When we reduced rhetoric to its adjectival state, however, we accepted the literary habit of taking the bite out of criticism by conceiving it as a kind of interpretation. Literary critics celebrate artists and worship art. "The Critic," like the high priest of antiquity, assumes the burden of making the hidden meanings of the artist/oracle manifest. Art is *presumed* to be an articulation of truth. If you can't understand the James Joyce novel, it's not because Joyce was an incompetent communicator—the fault is yours, because you haven't invested enough intellectual labor in reading it properly. When we teach performance, rhetoricians insist on bearing a burden of communication: The responsibility for any audience's failure to understand rests with the speaker or writer. Rhetoric is artful, but it is artful as a *performance*, not as an artifact. When rhetoric dissolves into literary criticism, the performative skills of the rhetorician are devalued, buried in literature's deep association with religion and the sacred text. The Bible simply presents itself, requiring interpretation because it is sacred. A clear supposition of literary criticism is that literature deserves the same regard. This is why readers are supposed to assume a burden of interpretation in the process of understanding Joyce's *Ulysses*. A muse bit Joyce and infected him with a divine madness. What he writes is not just a *message*, but a *divine message*, a revelation like the discourse of prophets. To condemn it and ignore it for its lack of clarity is vaguely sacrilegious. Rhetorical critics who valorize discourse that is "only" communicative are thus in a double-bind: If they emphasize what distinguishes them from literary critics,

their mastery of *rhetoric*, they are incompetent readers of literature, because they cannot account for transcendence ("divinity") very well. If they emphasize what they have in common with literary critics, their mastery of *critical theory* and practice, they dilute their ability to deal with materiality (the everydayness of practical discourse), for they are in the position of using techniques for interpreting "divinity" on discourse distinguished by its lack of "divinity" (by the absence, or the presence in lesser degree, of "literary value").

In terms of contemporary discourse theory, the distance between rhetoric and literature, performance and artifact, is the distance between speaking and writing. Notice how important it is to those thinkers most influential on contemporary literary theory that they are dealing with *writing*. Barthes wanted to study problems of constraint and determination, so he drew a firm line of dialectical opposition between speech as "open" communication and writing as "closed anti-communication":

All modes of writing have in common the fact of being 'closed' and thus different from spoken language. Writing is in no way an instrument for communication, it is not an open route through which there passes only the intention to speak....writing is a hardened language which is self-contained and is in no way meant to deliver to its own duration a mobile series of approximations. It is on the contrary meant to impose...the image of a speech which had a structure even before it came into existence. What makes writing the opposite of speech is that the former always *appears* symbolical, introverted, ostensibly turned towards an occult side of language, whereas the second is nothing but a flow of empty signs, the movement of which alone is significant. The whole of speech is epitomized in this expendability of words, in this froth ceaselessly swept onwards, and speech is found only where language self-evidently functions like a devouring process which swallows only the moving crest of the words. Writing, on the contrary, is always rooted in something beyond language, it develops like a seed, not like a line, it manifests an essence and holds the threat of a secret, it is an anti-communication, it is intimidating (Barthes, 1968, p. 19-20).

Ricoeur, whose "hermeneutics of suspicion" greatly influenced the recent "interpretive turn" in literary theory (see Mitchell, 1983), specifically excludes speaking from the meaning of the term *text*, and thus from being considered in analysis of social, political, and cultural structures, until such time as it has been *inscribed*, written down, and thus ceased to be what it is in everyday life, *spoken*:

I assume that the primary sense of the word 'hermeneutics' concerns the rules required for the interpretation of the written documents of our culture. In assuming this starting point I am remaining faithful to the concept of *Auslegung* as it was stated by Wilhelm Dilthey....*Auslegung* (interpretation, exegesis) implies something more specific [than understanding, comprehension]: it covers only a limited category of signs, those which are fixed by writing, including all the sorts of documents and monuments which entail a fixation similar to writing....if there are specific problems which are raised by the interpretation of texts because they are texts and not spoken language, and if these problems are the ones which constitute hermeneutics as such, then the human sciences may be said to be hermeneutical (1) inasmuch as their *object* displays some of the features constitutive of a text as text, and (2) inasmuch as their *methodology* develops the same kind of procedures as those of *Auslegung* or text-interpretation (Ricoeur, 1971, p. 529).

Derrida and the Yale school of literary theorists mark the development of writing as a decisive moment in western civilization. "Fixing" speech

in writing introduces problems of power and domination in cultural analysis, all but irretrievably disabling discourse as a vehicle or mediator of truth:

At the precisely calculated center of the dialogue [Plato's *Phaedrus*]—the reader can count the lines—the question of *logography* is raised. [‘Logography’ is the ‘writing down’ of ‘speech,’ giving up one’s own ‘speech’ to be ‘spoken/read’ by someone else.] Phaedrus reminds Socrates that the citizens of greatest influence and dignity, the men who are the most free, feel ashamed at ‘speechwriting.’ . . . They fear the judgment of posterity, which might consider them ‘sophists.’ The logographer, in the strict sense, is a *ghost writer* who composes speeches for use by litigants, speeches which he himself does not pronounce, which he does not attend, so to speak, in person, and which produce their effects in his absence. In writing what he does not speak, what he would never say and, in truth, would probably never think, the author of the written speech is already entrenched in the posture of the sophist: the man of non-presence and of non-truth. Writing is thus already on the scene. The incompatibility between the *written* and the *true* is clearly announced (Derrida, 1981, p. 68; cf. Burke, 1961).

There are some striking ironies in literary theory’s fascination with problems arising from the differences between speaking and writing. The *worshipful attitude* of the literary critic is preserved, but texts themselves are profaned: The truths they contain are hidden messages of secular exploitation and dominion, not the divine revelations of an oracle. Writing and truth are incompatible; yet the scholar’s time and attention should be preoccupied with the interpretation of writing. Because it is set in such stark contrast over and against writing, speaking is almost a regulative ideal of discourse: It is open, embodied, enacted, capable where writing is not, in its capacity to bear communication and engender community. Yet, among influential writers, Karl Apel (1972) and Jurgen Habermas (1981) are virtually alone in their attempt to theorize speaking as the regulative ideal of discourse—and they are almost never encountered in approving ways in the work of literary theorists.

WITH ACCENT ON RHETORIC

I do not entirely disapprove of new literary theory or of the turn in some circles toward the deconstruction of the history of philosophy. These trends have been inspiration to many, myself included. I believe that Barthes in particular is responsible for setting in motion a revolution in the Academy that will ultimately unify science and the humanities in a common quest for control over unimaginably complex post-industrial societies and economies. A circle of negativism (decentering, deconstructing) should be broken, however. I think it is time to stop whining about the so-called “post-modern condition” and to develop realistic strategies to cope with it as a fact of human life, perhaps in the present, certainly in the not-too-distant twenty-first century. I believe that an assertion of critical rhetoric, a reappraisal of the way we associate the terms *criticism* and *rhetoric*, might lead to such strategies.

Instead of beginning with the claim that “criticism is what critics do,” we might begin conceiving our academic practice by saying that

rhetoric is what rhetoricians do. This announces that we are concerned more with speech than with writing (in the same sense that the difference between speech and writing is critical in contemporary discourse theory); and, therefore, that our focus is more on the performance of discourse than on the archaeology of discourse. These two implications need to be drawn out in some detail before the argument can proceed: (a) We must understand what it means to treat discourse from the first principle that it is a performance; and (b) we must understand how this first principle affects the way we describe the features of discourse.

TEXTUAL "FRAGMENTS"

With criticism as a master term, we assume that rhetoric is a form or genre of discourse presented for study as are novels, plays, or poems. The question of what constitutes "the text" is unproblematic—the discourse as it is delivered to its audience/readers is considered "finished," whole, clearly and obviously the object (target) of critical analysis. "The text" is Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech, for example, or Leni Riefenstahl's film *Triumph of the Will*, and close textual analysis will not stray far from the terms and the resources of the target discourse's world.

By contrast, with rhetoric as a master term, we begin by noticing that rhetors *make* discourses from scraps and pieces of evidence. Critical rhetoric does not *begin* with a finished text in need of interpretation; rather, texts are understood to be larger than the apparently finished discourse that presents itself as transparent. The apparently finished discourse is in fact a dense reconstruction of all the bits of other discourses from which it was made. It is fashioned from what we can call "fragments." Further, whether we conceive it in an Aristotelian sense as the art of persuasion, or in a Burkean sense as the social process of identification, rhetoric is *influential* (see Condit, 1987a, 1987b). That is, the rhetor understands that discourse anticipates its utility in the world, inviting its own critique (the interpretation and appropriation of its meaning). So "I Have a Dream" and *Triumph of the Will* are "in between" elided parts that will make them whole. They are simultaneously structures of fragments, finished texts, and fragments themselves to be accounted for in subsequent discourse, either (a) the audience/reader/critic's explanation of their power and meaning, or (b) the audience/reader/critic's rationalization for having taken their cue as an excuse for action. As a finished text, "I Have a Dream" is an arrangement of facts, allusions, and stylized expressions. As a fragment in the critic's text, the speech is only a featured part of an arrangement that includes all facts, events, texts, and stylized expressions deemed useful in explaining its influence and exposing its meaning.

THREE STRUCTURAL RELATIONSHIPS

One can get a more developed picture of a whole "text" by considering three structural relationships, between an apparently finished discourse and its sources, between an apparently finished discourse and culture, and between an apparently finished discourse and its influence.

We are most familiar with the relationship between the apparently finished discourse and its sources. Fledgling orators and writers have for centuries been taught research skills under the heading of "invention." They go to the library, locate other discourses deemed relevant to the topic of their speech or essay, and take note on index cards of "important," or "representative," and "essential" passages. Foreign policy expert Henry Kissinger may have chosen 8,000 words to express in *Foreign Affairs* his opinion of U.S. policy in the Middle East. The debater, the public speaker, the journalist, the legislator, or the essayist, however, will represent that discourse in 250 words, reducing and condensing Kissinger's apparently finished text into a fragment that seems more important than the whole from which it came. This fragment is said to be "the point" Kissinger was trying to make, "the bottom line," the argument "in a nutshell." The relationship between the fragment and Kissinger's whole essay is nominalistic or semiotic: The fragment is a sign that consists of a signifier (the whole discourse it represents) and a signified (the meaning we are urged to see in the whole discourse). The relationship between the fragment and its new location—in the rhetor's discourse—is more forensic or approbative: The truncation we call "Kissinger's opinion" is clustered with other similar fragments in relation to a claim we are asked to approve. The clearest abuse of this process is "taking something out of context," allowing the requirements of an approbative structure to determine meaning by ignoring the requirements of the fragment's semiotic structure. In the best of possible arguments, the meaning of a fragment is invariant when structuration changes. That is, the advocate will so fairly represent Kissinger's opinion that the meaning of the fragment will be the same inside a critic's essay as in Kissinger's whole argument.

Though it is frequently featured in rhetorical theories, we are less familiar with the relationship between an apparently finished discourse and *culture*. Aristotle's notion of the enthymeme, and Cicero's use of the epicheireme, as well as the discussion of *doxa* among most of the Greeks, get at what we now call "culture," though in a back-handed way. Human beings, the story goes, exist in a matrix of rules, rituals, and conventions that we "take for granted" by assuming their goodness and truth and accepting the conditions they create as the "natural order of things." This conventional wisdom (*doxa*) is identical to the concept *culture* that is so prominently featured in much contemporary discourse theory. Present-day writers, however, are primarily concerned with problems of *constraint*, investigating why, how, and with what result culture

silences people. In contrast, rhetoricians have usually been concerned with *empowerment*, seeking to discover how and with what consequence *doxa* can be used to authorize a redress of human grievances. Enthymemes and epicheiremes are argument forms that incorporate *doxa* in exhortations to action. Rhetors are advised to ground their arguments in *doxa*, using the taken-for-granted rules of society as the first principle (premise) of a chain of arguments. Further, advocates are urged not to "insult the intelligence" of audiences by directly proving what can safely be taken for granted—*doxa* is silent, and it should be kept silent, unless it becomes itself the source of grievance. When *doxa* is the source of grievance, rhetoricians in both the Platonic and Isocratean schools envision a kind of "social surgery" where new cultural imperatives are substituted for old taken-for-granted conventions. The exhortations of Socrates in Plato's *Apology* and of Isocrates in orations on pan-Hellenism are clear examples, respectively, of inconsequential and influential "surgery" on Greek culture.

Since all apparently finished discourses presuppose taken-for-granted cultural imperatives, all of culture is implicated in every instance of discourse. In principle, even the most basic cultural imperative (that the discourse is in one language as opposed to another—Russian, for example, and not French) is implicated in an apparently finished discourse and is thus part of "the text." In practice, however, only a finite and discrete set of cultural imperatives, discoverable by application of a simple test, need to be treated as implicatives within a specific discourse. The test has to do with the effects of unmasking cultural imperatives, giving voice to the silences of *doxa*: If recognition and statement of a rule, ritual, or convention is necessary to understand any fragment of the discourse, or if such recognition and statement would motivate an audience/reader/critic to resist the claims of the discourse, we can infer that the discourse derives its rhetorical power more from the *silence* of the cultural imperative than from the imperative itself. Whether we supply elided premises of enthymemes and epicheiremes or keep them silenced should make no difference in interpreting or acting upon apparently finished discourses. If missing premises do make a difference, they must be clearly articulated, thus becoming part of "the text."

Considering the relationship between an apparently finished discourse and its influence calls attention to the fundamental interconnectedness of all discourse. Writing makes no sense unless there are readers. The response of an interlocutor ("feedback") is an essential component of any communicative event. Every bit of discourse, in other words, invites its own critique. It is in this sense, perhaps, that Kenneth Burke keeps reminding us that we are all critics. In the most radical sense of this claim, as "everyday critics," we make a series of "snap judgments" in response to discourse. The first is a judgment of *salience*: The discourse is silenced, dismissed and forgotten, if it seems uninteresting or irrelevant; but if it matters, the discourse will be

remembered, structured into our experience. If the discourse is memorable, it will at the very least affect our *attitudes*: Even if we disapprove and disagree with what the discourse seems to be saying, it will influence what we think by altering a motive state (increasing anger, for example, or decreasing anxieties hitch-hiking in descriptions of the world) and providing an example of someone else's foolishness. The discourse may also affect our *beliefs*, in dimensions of intensity and *substance*: With regard to intensity, the discourse could strengthen or weaken our confidence in what we think we know about the world, or our commitment to the truth of facts we have in the past taken on faith. With regard to substance, the discourse could simply add to our store of knowledge, or, with more complicated consequence, it could cause us to discard prior facts as erroneous and to accept new facts as truth. The fourth snap judgment of everyday critics has to do with the translation of our beliefs into *action*: At the very least, we decide to engage in a speech act when we verbalize our motive-ridden beliefs in response to a discourse judged to be salient. At the most, we intervene in the world, physically interposing ourselves upon a problematic condition in an attempt to make the world conform to our will.

Professional critics (whether they be critics of art, society, literature, or any other thing) differ from everyday critics in that *they are always trying to make the world conform to their will*. Their criticism is on its face that sort of action which intervenes in the world. Put another way, professional critics are all rhetorical critics, in either of the two dominant contemporary senses of "rhetoric": In Aristotelian terms, professional criticism functions to persuade readers to make the same judgments of salience, attitude, belief, and action the critic made. In Burkean terms, professional criticism promotes identification with the critic, suggesting that critics give voice to communal judgments of salience, attitude, belief, and action, stating a collective will to which the world should conform. The everyday critic *may* create discourse in response to discourse; but the professional critic *always* creates formal discourse in response to discourse. (The object of criticism is always either discourse or discourse analogue, in the sense that it is treated as meaningful and in need of interpretation.) Professional critics must thus be sensitive to rhetoric in two dimensions: With regard to the object of criticism, they will be perceived as respondents and interpreters responsible for providing in a formal way the missing fragments of the object of criticism, its influence. With regard to their own formal writing, they will function as advocates or adversaries of "the text" who invent, arrange, style, remember, and deliver arguments in favor of particular judgments of salience, attitude, belief, and action (see Brockriede, 1972, 1974).

THE TERMS "TEXT" AND "CONTEXT"

In calling attention to three structural relationships that make an issue out of deciding what a "text" is, I have done no more than change

the way we have traditionally described the problematics of rhetorical criticism. In the past we separated "text" from "context" and discussed the sources, presuppositions, and effects of discourse as parts of "context." The result of such conceptual separation, I suggest, has been confusion about the root nature of discourse. Unfortunately, an unkind way of articulating the problem is also the clearest: Separate consideration of text and context makes question-begging too easy and attractive. "Context" can be reduced to any of its parts. If you can't chase down the fragments from which an argument was constructed (if you can't find the prosecution's case in the trial of Socrates, for example), you use the discursive equivalent of the theory of spontaneous generation and treat the argument as *ex nihilo* philosophy and/or literature, words without history, or words with only an "intellectual" or "literary" history. If you can account for the sources of discourse, but have difficulty understanding the cultural milieu in which it was socially and politically significant, you reduce the communicative event to a simple stimulus-response mechanism wherein discourse is said to have discrete and independent effects on history. (This results in such odd critical judgments as Nichols [1972] holding Lincoln to account for failing to stop the Civil War with his First Inaugural Address.) If you understand the cultural milieu, but discover the difficulty of showing how one bit of discourse contributes to an overdetermined cultural condition, you can ignore the problem of influence altogether by celebrating the artistry (eloquence) of the rhetor who combined sources into an insightful, well-said commentary on his or her life and times. The Chicago School has even given us the conceptual wherewithal to ignore all three parts of context by performing "close textual analysis" on presumptively self-contained discourses.

My way of stating the case (using the concept "fragment" to collapse "context" into "text") emphasizes an important truth about discourse: *Discourse ceases to be what it is whenever parts of it are taken "out of context."* Failing to account for "context," or reducing "context" to one or two of its parts, means quite simply that one is no longer dealing with discourse as it appears in the world. The belief that the formation of words we call King's "I Have a Dream" oration can be construed as sufficient unto themselves is sheer fantasy. Put another way, the elements of "context" are so important to the "text" that one cannot discover, or even discuss, the *meaning* of "text" without reference to them. This is not to say that scholarship focussed on parts of "the text" (as I describe it) is impossible or nonsensical. Each of the "question-begging" strategies I have discussed (and several others not enumerated here) could be reframed in a sensible and productive way. Even the Chicago School strategy of ignoring "context" altogether can be redeemed by consistently, rigorously acknowledging the "incompleteness" of the analysis. Make it clear that King's speech is a *fragment*. Look for the particular locutions that implicate its sources. Show where cultural conventions are presupposed. Locate the places where "I Have a Dream"

is trying to create, or is seeking, its audience. Show where and how the speech anticipates its own "everyday" critique. Frequently the best evidence you have of the missing parts of a text are there in front of you as implications of the fragment you are looking at. Certainly, every fragment is a map of the structures that will make it complete, and in that sense focus on a part can be a speculative, "incomplete" study of the whole.

THE FRAGMENTATION OF CULTURE

I believe that problematizing the concept "text" is generally productive, even in dealing with deeply historical fragments such as *Magna Carta* or Burke's "Speech on Conciliation with the Colonies." If the human condition had not changed so radically in the past seventy years, I could therefore be content to leave this argument with a pluralistic claim, that I have posed one of several plausible ways to account for the relationship between text and context. This announces that I would be pleased to see others follow up the suggestions made here, but that I see no *necessity* in them, nothing that makes choosing my way of thinking better than the traditional disjunction of text and context. Radical change has occurred, however, and our new condition makes it necessary to insist on the concept "fragment" and to suggest that alternatives embrace error. This point can come clear in a line of reasoning that begins by asking what features of discourse inclined critics to treat "text" as self-evident.

In the not-too-distant past, all discourses were what some social theorists call "totalizations" (see, e.g., Mannheim, 1972). That is, all structures of a text were homogeneous. Education was restricted to a scant minority, and as a result the content of an education was so homogeneous that an orator could utter two or three lines in Latin, identified only with the words "as Tully said," in complete confidence that any reader/audience/critic would be able to identify the source of the words—and even recite the next several lines from Cicero's *De Oratore*! Except for everyday conversation, all discourse within a particular language community was produced from the same resources. Further, all discourse found its influence on the same small class of people who comprised the political nation. And it was the same small class that received the benefits of a homogenized education. There was little cultural diversity, no question that there was in every state a well-defined dominant race, dominant class, dominant gender, dominant history, and dominant ethnicity. The silent, taken-for-granted creed of all true-blue Americans (Frenchmen, Englishmen, etc.) could have been articulated by any one of them who had been conditioned by the education system and admitted as a member in good standing of the political nation, even those who fancied themselves revolutionaries.

Discourse practices reflected the presumed homogeneity of western cultures. Rhetors invested a great deal of effort to insure that their discourses appeared to be "harmonious," whole, ending with allusion to their beginning. The same air of formality that dictated proper dress at public occasions and in restaurants also dictated proper discourse practices. Public argument was also formal argument modelled after the courtroom. The dice were loaded in favor of existing circumstances, so that advocates of change were forced to assume a "burden of proof" and to meet the stiff requirements of the *prima facie* case. Regardless of whom they silenced, what they ignored, or weakness in their argument, advocates tried mightily to write or speak as if they had an "airtight case" that accounted for all possible interpretations of evidence and all conceivable courses of action that appeared to follow from the truths the evidence appeared to support. Ethical public figures, those who refused to "stoop to demagoguery," addressed everyone in their target audiences as if the meanest laborer, the most ignorant rounder among them, had all the skills of reason and wisdom of an appellate judge, a Member of Parliament, or a U.S. senator. Adaptations to ignorance, apathy, and vulgarity were fundamentally linguistic rather than logical, the choice of a smaller vocabulary instead of truncations of what was supposed to be the rational process. This commitment to the rationality of *homo sapiens* led to the cultural imperative that we all should take our time in making deliberate judgments. The wise judgment was precisely the deliberate judgment that carefully weighed evidence and balanced alternatives with the skill of a juggler.

I believe that a persuasive history of the twentieth century could be written with the motif that presumed homogeneity has been replaced by the presumption of cultural heterogeneity. If I were telling the story, I would likely begin with the agitation that led to the passage of the 19th Amendment, the women's suffrage movement. I would point to the "psychologizing" of literally every social-political institution. Clarence Darrow invented the plea of insanity. A parole system evolved based on our presumed capacity to psychologically rehabilitate criminals. Dr. Spock inspired American families to rear children with less emphasis on the formalities and requirements of public life and more emphasis on the psychological contentment of the child. Mainstream religions put less emphasis on Christian doctrine and their role as moral watchdogs than on their community service functions ("good works"), frequently transforming the cleric into a combination social worker and therapist. The Supreme Court legitimized ethnicity in several decisions related to *Brown vs. The Board of Education* which argue, in main part, that America's traditional "melting-pot" rhetoric causes psychological harm to minorities who cannot find themselves in WASP-ish cultural depictions of the ideal society. Politicians, both in campaigns and in executing the duties of office, increasingly consult their audiences as if they were fundamentally irrational, *homo cognito* rather than *homo*

sapiens. The "bottom line" of politics these days is the instantaneous public opinion poll which measures popular *reaction* to current conditions rather than the *considered, deliberate judgment* of "We, the People." John Dewey inspired a revolution in education based on our capacity to condition all citizens to the psychology of democracy. People have grown less interested in the *content* than in the *process* of a public education, suggesting that what people know is less important than the process of learning (see Cheney, 1988b). As a result, there is no longer a homogeneous body of knowledge that constitutes the common education of everyone. Students are more likely today to learn English literature by reading science fiction than by reading "the classics," and the ability to remember specific things about a particular essay or novel is no longer valorized.

We stand now in the middle (or at the end, if reactionaries have their way) of a seventy-year movement which has fractured and fragmented American culture. Contemporary discourse practices reflect this fragmentation. Indeed, changes in discourse practices have been so obviously dramatic that several theorists portray new communication technologies as *the cause* of cultural fracturing. Some take the broad view of deep intellectual history, vacillating between near-Luddite polemics that merely implicate technology in a general indictment of capitalism and science (e.g. Burke, 1945, pp. 113-17, 175-76, 214-23, 507-11) and jubilant epideictics that celebrate those fragmenting effects of new media which constitute or presage a recuperation of good things in long-lost "oral cultures" (e.g. McLuhan, 1964 and Ong, 1982). Others take a more political view, oddly enough condemning new discourse practices from both extremes of the relatively narrow spectrum of American politics. From the right, reactionaries worry about "the fate of the book" (Cheney, 1988) and the alleged "closing of the American mind" (Bloom, 1987). From the left comes a voice with French accent, the voice of so-called "post-modernism," worrying about the "colonization" of the psyche (Deleuze and Guattari, 1983) and "the precession of simulacra" (Baudrillard, 1983).

Settling the cause-and-effect issue regarding the relationship between culture and discourse practices is ultimately an ineffable chicken-and-egg problem of scant interest. However we got there, the human *condition* has changed. Put whatever adjectives you want in front of the concept "condition." (I grit my teeth and shudder as I say it, but I think the term *post-modern condition* is likely to prove best.) One clear truth will not change: The public's business is now being done more often via direct mail, television spots, documentaries, mass entertainment, and "quotable quotes" on the evening news than through the more traditional media (broadside, pamphlets, books, and public speeches). A central requirement of our new circumstance is simply finding a place to start thinking about it. Scholars are all analysts at heart, but nothing in our new environment is complete enough, finished enough, to

analyze—and the fragments that present themselves to us do not stand still long enough to analyze. They fly by so quickly that by the time you grasp the problem at stake, you seem to be dealing with yesterday's news, a puzzle that solved itself by disappearing. A few years ago, for example, the Cable News Network broadcast two stories, in tandem, every thirty minutes for forty-eight hours. The first was a Romeo and Juliet tale of a tragic, dramatic teenage suicide. The second reported that a causal connection exists between news of teenage suicide and suicide attempts. By the time the network recognized the contradiction and its potential effect, it was trapped by "the public's right to know" into reporting an epidemic rash of copy-cat suicides. By the time policy-makers and academics recognized that public health may require re-examination of traditional attitudes toward "free press" issues, the epidemic was over. The network had other news to confront, policy-makers had no immediate cause for study or action, and academics had no opportunity for response other than adding another item to the laundry list of topics that warrant tooth-gnashing polemics against the insensitivity of those who run the culture industry.

I agree with Said (1983a, 1983b) that the fundamental root of frustration in such situations is our inclination to treat scraps of social problems and fragments of texts as if they were whole. In his vocabulary, the solution is to look for *formations of texts* rather than "*the text*" as a place to begin analysis. I like the term "formation," but I want to keep clear that we are dealing with *fragments*, not texts, and that we mean to treat a "formation" as if it were a singular text—only then can we interpret, analyze, and criticize. I would therefore state the case in two somewhat different ways:

From one angle, provided by the traditional disjunction of text and context, I would want to explore the sense in which "texts" have disappeared altogether, leaving us with nothing but *discursive fragments of context*. By this I would mean that changing cultural conditions have made it virtually impossible to construct a whole and harmonious text such as Edmund Burke's "Speech on Conciliation with the Colonies." If by "text" we mean the sort of finished discourse anticipated in consequence of an essentially homogenous culture, no texts exist today. We have instead fragments of "information" that constitute our *context*. The unity and structural integrity we used to put in our texts as they faithfully represented nature is now presumed to be *in us ourselves*.

From another angle, provided by my proposed collapse of context into text, I would want to explore the sense in which we are constantly harassed by the necessity of understanding an "invisible text" which is never quite finished but constantly in front of us. By this I would mean that changing cultural conditions have forced writers/speakers and readers/audiences to reverse their roles. At one time producers of discourse could circumscribe even the most difficult human problem in a single finished text. (With reference to the enthymeme and epicheireme, one would say

that producers of discourse provided more in their texts than they presumed in their audiences.) The communication revolution, however, was accompanied by a knowledge explosion. The result is that today no single finished text could possibly comprehend all perspectives on even a single human problem, let alone the complex of problems we index in the phrase "issues of the day." The only way to "say it all" in our fractured culture is to provide readers/audiences with dense, truncated fragments which cue *them* to produce a finished discourse in their minds. In short, *text construction is now something done more by the consumers than by the producers of discourse.*

In my vocabulary, the problem calls for the skills of a rhetorician. I think we can reconcile traditional modes of analysis with the so-called post-modern condition by understanding that our first job as professional consumers of discourse is *inventing a text suitable for criticism*. I will elaborate on the subject of text construction in a subsequent essay. For now, this first step requires closure: So long as one reads historical documents ("finished" texts produced in consequence of demonstrated cultural homogeneity) it is possible to take a pluralistic attitude toward the concept "fragment." The strategy I propose can be understood as one of many alternatives in the business of managing the theoretical relationship of texts and their context. If you analyze contemporary discourse, however, "fragment" or some concept that can be made equivalent (Said's "formation," for example) is *necessary*. Only something very similar to the strategy I propose has the power to account for discourse produced in consequence of the fragmentation of culture.

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