Where Theory and Criticism Meet: A Look at Contemporary Rhetorical Theory

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Reviews of contemporary scholarship often begin by citing a significant antecedent, a watershed work that has influenced the most recent of publications. For example, in contemporary rhetorical criticism that watershed work seems to be Edwin Black's *Rhetorical Criticism*, as attested to by several articles in *WJSC*’s Special Report on *Rhetorical Criticism: The State of the Art*. Though the nomination for a contemporary watershed in rhetorical theory may not be as unanimous, one candidate very likely would be the inaugural volume of *Philosophy and Rhetoric* in which both Lloyd Bitzer’s “The Rhetorical Situation” and Douglas Ehninger’s “On Systems of Rhetoric” first appeared. The remarkable influence of these two works is verified repeatedly in the most recent of our communication journals.

But beyond their influence upon rhetorical theory, the two essays possessed at least two common substantive features contributing to their status as watersheds. Both of these features rejected a view of rhetoric as a commodity the production of which is prescribed and encouraged viewing rhetoric as an event that is experienced. First, each article emphasized to an unprecedented degree the nature of rhetoric as defined by external constraints rather than internal parts, these constraints determined by place (situation) or time (historical context). And second, each identified rhetorical theorizing with the characterizing of groups of discourses, rather than, say, techniques, canons, or powers of the orator, though one focused upon groups of rhetorical transactions within similar situations, while the other examined rhetorical theories as discourses categorized by time. Rhetoric, these two articles suggested, is best understood as perceptual wholes functioning in specific contexts. Consequently, rhetoric is best described from the perspective of the receiver, rather than the practitioner, whether that receiver be an audience of a speech or a student of rhetorical theory.

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Of the two approaches identified by Bitzer and Ehninger, contemporary rhetorical theorists, as opposed to historians of rhetoric, view rhetoric situationally rather than historically. However, Ehninger's approach toward viewing rhetorical theories as products of time and place, and rhetorical theorizing as a characteristic of theories, may yet produce most interesting long-term results. Ehninger's essay seems to have identified for the field of rhetoric an approach toward theorizing that is becoming apparent in other fields—that is, the process of characterizing the historical development of a discipline, not merely to record its theoretical statements, but to interpret and evaluate them as well.

In this enterprise, as I have indicated, Ehninger is not unique. Thomas Kuhn, of course, has attempted this kind of historical theorizing in the physical sciences. Stephen Toulmin has extended these interests into the social sciences in his book *Human Understanding*, though he does not adduce the same set of generalizations nor employ the same methods as Kuhn. But regardless of their disciplinary and methodological loyalties, Ehninger, Kuhn, and Toulmin pursue similar goals. As Toulmin has put it:

> Suppose we wish to develop our understanding, both of the world with which we have to deal and of our own dealings with that world; and suppose that we wish to do this, reflectively, and with self-awareness. In that case, it will not be enough for us to rely on our existing concepts unthinkingly—either as they are, or with minor modifications. We shall need, in addition, to come to terms with our own intellectual creations: recognizing them for what they are, and facing once again, in terms operative for our own time and context, the central epistemic questions about rational judgment and appraisal.

The result of a scholarly work in any discipline, then, would be an interpretation, a self-interpretation, that yields understanding about how the processes of human knowledge function.

Yet such activities as "interpretation," "evaluation," "judgment," and "appraisal," particularly with reference to contextually-bound discourse, traditionally have been critical rather than theoretical functions. Indeed, rhetorical theorists have conventionally described their work as the systematic explanation or accounting for rhetoric as a general phenomenon or set of principles, while critics have been concerned with description,

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interpretation, and judgment, especially of particular rhetorical events. Nevertheless, some rhetorical theorists seem to be following Ehninger’s lead by recognizing and incorporating the processes of interpretation and judgment which they share with rhetorical criticism. Some theorists, in addition, are taking on the task of drawing for rhetoric an “epistemic self-portrait,” by examining critically both contemporaneous and historical theories of rhetoric. Thus the thesis of this paper is that rhetorical theory is beginning the critical examination of its own basis as a humanistic activity which possesses a history, a context, an audience—and even a rhetoric—not only as a description of its past but as a means of confirming its status as a discipline.

At this point I wish to insert a caveat. The proposition that rhetorical theory is beginning actively to recognize and incorporate such self-analytical procedures may not be immediately apparent, particularly in light of recent criticism of the discipline. I wish to qualify my claims by emphasizing the exploratory nature of this activity; articles are being written which discuss tentatively such critical functions as interpretation and assessment in theoretical contexts, while a few actually perform such activities upon other rhetorical theories, with varying levels of self-awareness.

This review, then, presents several specific examples of contemporary rhetorical theorists who are building a rationale of self-criticism to augment their traditional activities of explaining and accounting for rhetorical

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2Toulmin, p. 3.

3As expressed by Edwin Black in “The Mutability of Rhetoric,” in Rhetoric: A Tradition in Transition, ed. Eugene E. White (University Park, Pa.: The Pennsylvania State Univ. Press, 1980), p. 83: “A . . . consequence of subordinating the study of rhetoric to the history of consciousness might be to impart a more historical character to theory making in rhetoric. . . . Such a theory would not be an abstract or dual model of a rhetorical transaction. It would, rather, be a general interpretation of a body of discourse. It would be occupied with disclosing relationships among discourses in their historical contexts, and its probable form would be a system of rhetorical genres which were comprehended developmentally.” If the discourses Black discusses also include rhetorical theories, then his description of an historical approach to theory applies here.

activity. I shall sketch how the theoretical-critical integration occurs in three areas: in the growing emphasis upon the interpretive function of theory; in the incorporation of critical judgment into traditional rhetorical theory; and in the increasing recognition of the pluralist nature of rhetorical theorizing.

THE INTERPRETIVE FUNCTION IN THEORY

For most of its lengthy tradition, rhetoric had been conceived of as a set of formulas of the generation of discourse to be handed down from one practitioner to the other. Later, during the eighteenth-century era of "psychological" theory described by Ehninger, theorists postulated universal receptive processes, though the audience for rhetorical theory itself remained primarily the producer of discourses. The notion that there might be individually varying facilities of reception, or indeed varying modes of reception which could be aided by what today we may call receivership skills, was confined to the rhetorics of "taste" or assigned to the realm of literary criticism. Only very recently has the development of receptive and evaluative skills, in other words the critical function, been recognized as the focus and purpose of rhetorical theory. Robert Scott, writing in the edited collection *Rhetoric in Transition*, makes the point:

It is important to break with traditional rhetoric in one respect regarding intentions. Although in creating or knowing a rhetorical action one may start legitimately with a speaker-as-initiator, one should relinquish the notion that such a starting point exclusively marks the province of rhetoric. To put the matter a little differently, it is as legitimate to take the listener as the maker of a message as the speaker.

He continues by noting that "Gary Cronkhite has argued that 'rhetoric is the study of how people come to believe that which they believe.' From this basis Cronkhite recommends rhetoric as a critical, rational procedure which would teach receivers to evaluate messages."

This attitude toward reception is stimulating research into theories both past and present for clues in identifying such functions as perception, interpretation, and understanding. In the process, rhetorical theorists are rediscovering other scholarly traditions which they are relating directly to their own. Hermeneutics, as Scott suggests, is such a tradition. For example,

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11 Scott, p. 56.
Michael J. Hyde and Craig R. Smith, in “Hermeneutics: A Seen But Unobserved Relationship” affirm that a key function of rhetoric is interpretive; that is, it facilitates understanding of the world. In Hyde and Smith’s terminology, “the primordial function of rhetoric is to ‘make known’ meaning both to oneself and to others. Meaning is derived by a human being in and through the interpretive understanding of reality. Rhetoric is the process of making-known that meaning.” Note that Hyde and Smith stress both interpersonal and intrapersonal functions. Rhetoric, they suggest, is not simply something that makes available a rhetor’s interpretation of things to an audience; it also facilitates the audience’s apprehension and assimilation of discourse. In other words, the interpretive function of rhetoric is not only a tool of transmission, but also an aid to reception.

The core of Hyde and Smith’s definition of rhetoric, however, is the phrase “interpretive understanding.” This version of “understanding,” as the Verstehen of the German sociologists, is too complex a concept to define fully here. Yet it is clear from Hyde and Smith’s article that interpretive understanding may be characterized in terms of its conditions: first, it is constrained by historical and cultural boundaries; second, it is centered in the characterizing of experience through language; and third, it is transmitted through a discursive tradition. The process of understanding, then, is an act of human consciousness, shaped by its inherited historical and cultural contexts and centered in language, which interprets other historically-bound contexts, by, and through, a shared and enduring tradition. Apparently, if the hermeneutical view of understanding is accepted, all these conditions apply not only to the understanding of rhetorical events but also the understanding of rhetorical theory itself, insofar as it exists as a discursive tradition. The conduct of rhetorical theory, from the hermeneutical view, is a continually self-understanding and self-interpretive activity.

Interestingly, Hyde and Smith themselves conduct a form of self-interpretation in their examination of Lloyd Bitzer’s theory of the rhetorical situation, and thereby ground their own theory in a specific example. They suggest that Bitzer presents the theory of situation in such a way as to require a form of literary interpretation of audiences that transcends their response to immediate situational exigencies. To account for such oratorical works as the Apology of Socrates and Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address, works which failed in their immediate rhetorical aim, Bitzer must argue that certain “universal situations” obtain over time. But what, one is led to ask, are the conditions which can produce situations which recur, given the

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13 Hyde and Smith, pp. 350 and 353.
immediacy of the particular situation? Hyde and Smith postulate that the interpretive activity of the audience produces the conditions in which rhetoric resulting from a past situation may address future situations more effectively than their own. To understand messages from the past, or as Hyde and Smith put it, to convert the “potential consciousness” of the past to the “actual consciousness” of the present, audiences perform at least two interpretive functions: an imaginative recreation, in order to understand the historically-bound idiom of a Socrates or Lincoln; and a situational analogy, to relate meaningfully that idiom to their own place and time. In effect, audiences imaginatively re-create past rhetorical situations by applying them to their immediate experience.

Based upon the concept of “ universality,” however, a further function of interpretation suggests itself. For any audience to interpret a message as universal, it seems they would need to perform a third interpretive function, a kind of “projected generalization,” to extend the meaning of the *Apoloogy* or the *Gettysburg Address* to all conceivable places and times. Discourses which addressed Bitzer’s universal situation, then, would attain for particular audiences the status of being universally true, perhaps in much the same way as those discourses which are addressed to Perelman’s “universal audience.” Certainly, a comparison of such notions as universal audiences and universal situations would be intriguing, whether or not the comparison were conducted in hermeneutical terminology.

Hyde and Smith’s essay, then, is a good example of how rhetorical theory may be built, not only by explicating theoretical concepts, but also by interpreting other rhetorical theories. The significance of their effort lies in the fact that they are not content simply to provide an overarching synthesis of rhetorical principles and those of another tradition; instead, they actively interpret a contemporary rhetorical theory through the perspective donated by another tradition. The result is an increased understanding of how audiences function in rhetorical situations.

Another, less implicit locus for describing the interpretive function within the tradition of rhetorical theory is to be found in the genre of epideictic. Actually, the term epideictic may be seen as only a convenient tag for those discourses which do not elicit assent so much as understanding, that is, discourses which inform, narrate, describe, and celebrate. In any case, increased interest in these rhetorical-discursive forms may aid theorists in understanding the interpretive processes employed by audiences in reception.

Lawrence Rosenfield’s essay on epideictic is a significant example of theoretical investigation into the receptive functions which also shows how

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14Hyde and Smith, pp. 357-59.
reexamination of concepts from past theory may aid in developing contemporary theory. Rosenfield recognizes that the distinctive form of understanding that is evoked by epideictic celebration “calls upon us to join with our community in giving thought to what we witness, and such thoughtful beholding in commemoration constitutes memorializing.” This description resembles Hyde and Smith’s concept of rhetoric as making-known, both privately and publicly, interpretive understandings of reality. Further, Rosenfield traces back the concept of understanding through Heidegger, to the pre-Socratic idea of the “luminosity” of being. “The experience afforded the participants [in epideictic] is the opportunity of beholding reality impartially as witnesses of Being.” Finally, Rosenfield perceives the apprehension of Being implied by epideictic as the foundation of rhetorical re-creation. “To witness appreciatively is to succumb to a “theatrical” state of mind . . . as both reader and listener share in the lyrical spell of re-creation.”17

Significantly, Hyde and Smith also recognize that “the rhetorical critic attempts to interpret and recreate past rhetorical phenomena by showing their meaning for the critic’s own cultural situation.”18

Interpretation, then, is receiving increasingly sophisticated treatment as a rhetorical concept. It appears to be present as a function of the audience in rhetorical situations; it is an integral part of the response to epideictic discourse; it is an indispensible critical activity; and it may be a potentially powerful theoretical technique when applied to rhetorical theories. The theorist who integrates all of these functions in a comprehensive theory merits accolades; until then, interpretation remains a most promising area of investigation.

THE JUDGMENTAL FUNCTION IN THEORY

Though “interpretive understanding” remains at this point principally a subject of theoretical investigation rather than the method by which that investigation is conducted, it is still receiving attention for its significant place in certain rhetorical concepts and its function in the process of criticism. But judgment is a function that has been almost exclusively confined to the critical realm, specifically that kind of judgment which rests upon variable and contingent standards. Critical judgment is a kind of obverse form of interpretive understanding in that it points out qualities of a discourse from outside of the particular context of the discourse.19 Unlike logical demonstration, however, it does not prove or disprove so much as approves or disapproves of its subject, with no guarantee that its own standards are less subject to disapproval than the ones judged. Judgment in theory, then, rests upon the premise that theories themselves are positions which are susceptible to critical judgment.

18Hyde and Smith, p. 356.
Surprisingly, despite the formal allocation of judgment to the realm of criticism, the notion of the critical judgment of theory is not new. The critique of theory as a kind of higher philosophy of theory was argued by Maurice Natanson in his early essay, "The Limits of Rhetoric." He ascribed to theory the task of "ordering" and "examining" the central principles of rhetoric, while he described the philosophy of rhetoric in the following manner:

Finally, we come to the critique of the rationale of rhetoric which inquires into the underlying assumptions, the philosophical grounds of all the elements of rhetoric. It is here that a philosophy of rhetoric finds its placement. If rhetoric is bound to and founded on dialectic, and dialectic on philosophy, then the limits of rhetoric find their expression in the matrix of philosophical inquiry.

What distinguishes the current approach from Natanson’s concept, however, is the idea of critique as a central process of rhetorical theory itself, rather than an overarching and possibly ahistorical “philosophy of rhetoric.” In this view, the critical examination of the rhetorical tradition is as theoretical, that is, tells as much about rhetoric, as the examining and ordering of central principles.

For antecedents in the process of judgment in theory, we may need to look no further than the work of Kenneth Burke and Richard Weaver, who enriched their theoretical speculations with judgmental critiques of discourse which applied as well to the theory associated with the discourse. Weaver, for example, evaluated the respective qualities of dialectic and rhetoric by examining them in the context of Plato’s *Phaedrus*. And we are still not quite sure whether Burke is a critic or a theorist or both, partly because of the way in which he illustrated his theory with idiosyncratic critical judgments of controversial discourse such as military propaganda, rather than adducing unambiguous examples for which he could anticipate common assent. For Burke, the proof of theory was the degree he could compel his readers through his own critical discernment to assent to the general principle he wished to illustrate. Nowhere else is this critical process best illustrated than in the central sections of the *Rhetoric of Motives*, where he alternately interpreted and judged the rhetorical tradition itself in order to substantiate his own theory of rhetoric as identification.

In a similar way, the critical theory of the Frankfurt School, as explicated by Brant R. Burleson and Susan L. Kline, originates in the radical assessment and rejection of all ideologies, including ideologies of communication, that do not serve to promote the ideal of a liberal and expressive society. Burleson and Kline recognize that “much of [Jurgen] Habermas’ larger program depends upon the necessity of identifying and critiquing repressive ideologies” with reference to “an ideal speech situation.” The inextricable relationship of theory and criticism is apparent from their article;

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20 Natanson, in *Contemporary Rhetoric*, p. 156.
theory itself is subjected to critical standards, and these standards are constructed with reference to theory. As Burleson and Kline characterize rhetorical theory, it is "a framework wherein the aim of critique is to provoke an awareness of the objective possibilities inherent within an established social system, as well as self-reflection concerning the nature of these possibilities and the means for achieving them."22

The best recent example of critically-judgmental approaches to rhetorical theory, however, is the work of Michael McGee. McGee argues that "it is so easy for us to accept the god-terms of what we conceive to be 'rational' that we often confuse ideological claims (which we desperately want to be true) with logical claims (which are 'true' within the bounds of verifiability)."23 McGee puts many of the claims of rhetorical theory within his category of ideology, claims as sweeping as the greater objectivity of "issues" over "images," a distinction which may be very broadly construed as the Aristotelian preference for logos over ethos in the realm of political action. More generally, McGee advocates analysis of these basic theoretical concepts both within situations and across historical boundaries. "Such a description, I believe, would yield a theoretical framework with which to describe interpenetrating material and symbolic environments."24 From critical examination of theory, then, comes a framework which describes and orders theory with an aim toward understanding some of the general functions of rhetoric.

A closer look at how McGee moves from his ideological critique to a theoretical framework may illustrate how theory is produced directly through the process of critical judgment. While interpretive theory emphasizes the understanding of reality that rhetoric may help to produce, McGee emphasizes the distortion of reality rhetoric inevitably creates. He declares that interpretations of states of affairs, no matter how involved in the act of perception, are still always removed from direct experience. Thus when rhetors use such terms as "liberty" they are abstracting from our experience of liberty, the only truth we know: "We are not 'free' by fiat of definition or declaration, but by virtue of our feeling in the presence of the life conditions we must face daily." Still, the concept that rhetoric distorts reality, like the concept of interpretive understanding, is at its base radically democratic, for it emphasizes the active processes of receivers rather than the preconceptions of the sender's messages: "Effective ideas derive from the common sensation and experience of conditions which present themselves equally to all humanity, to a carpenter in Paducah as well as Einstein."25

Yet terms such as "liberty," "issues," "image," and "people," are themselves rhetorical terms; they make up the core of how we define rhetoric. Therefore, rhetorics themselves are rhetorical, and may be judged critically. But upon which grounds? McGee suggests that if our rhetorical theories are wrong, or even potentially harmful, they are wrong because they ignore what he perceives to be the nature of rhetoric, that is, rhetoric as creative distortion. With reference to "issues" vs. "image":

It is good to be reasonable, and it is easy to fool ourselves into believing that campaign rhetoric is a legitimate policy, that we understand the measures which we are asked to ratify, that we are making a 'logical' choice among potential leaders. This conception, however, is inherently unreasonable, for there is little to be gained in believing that our choices are or ought to be based 'on the issues' when such decisions are in fact impossible.²⁶

Indeed, belief in "issues" over "images" may be positively harmful, for it undercuts the democratic process:

Because we are never informed of the ways in which interpretation and judgment govern our policy decisions, there is a widespread feeling that policy is 'fact' rather than judgment . . . and that each of us is the prisoner of an army of 'experts' and bureaucrats.²⁷

Such false rhetorical theories as the appeal to "issues" assert the direct association of rhetoric with truth, and hence cannot judge rhetorical oppression and distortion when it does occur. Only by the criticism of these false theories may theorists affirm and demonstrate the contingent nature of rhetoric and its function as ideology. Rhetorical theory then has the nature of a moral judgment; a decision to affirm the right of ordinary people, through rhetoric, to make legitimate, if inaccurate, practical decisions.

Moreover, the processes involved in criticizing rhetorical theories are precisely those which create rhetorical theory. To criticize, one must demonstrate a theory's lack of truth-value, that is, its inapplicability to all times and places; therefore one must place the theory accurately in a matrix of place and time. With reference to the analysis of the term "equality," McGee writes:

No one has ever seen an "equality" strutting up the driveway, so, if "equality" exists at all, it has meaning through its specific applications. In other words, we establish a meaning for "equality" by using the word as a description of a certain phenomenon; it has meaning only insofar as our description is acceptable, believable. If asked to make a case for "equality," that is to define the term, we are forced to make reference to its history by detailing the situations for which the word has been an appropriate description. Then, by comparisons over time, we establish an analog for the proposed present usage of the term.²⁸

²⁸ "The 'Ideograph',' p. 10.
Theorizing, then, is a process of relativizing theory by historical and situational placement, a placement that requires a carefully constructed schema of cultural development relevant to our own situation. McGee's own efforts at examining key rhetorical concepts through their origins in British public address, like Hyde and Smith's interpretive approach, is a step toward developing such a well-grounded cultural theory.

Now at this point an explication of the relationship of the interpretive theorists and the judgmental theorists would seem to be in order, but that comparison is hindered by some important problems. The presumptions of interpretive theory as represented by Hyde and Smith, and judgmental theory as represented by McGee, seem irreconcilable, as one asserts the association of rhetoric with reality and the other emphasizes its dissociation. Perhaps, indeed, the theorist striving for consistency must take one or the other of these positions. But even more of a problem for the conscientious theorist is the apparent inconsistency of the functions of interpretation and judgment themselves, one being a receptive activity, the other a projective one. As Edwin Black has suggested, when interpreting discourse the critic yields sympathetically, while when evaluating discourse the critic actively applies pre-existing concepts. Particularly from the viewpoint of the theorist whose goal is to construct an overarching, universally defensible system of principles, interpretation and judgment are mutually exclusive processes.

Still, there remains one observation both critics and theorists admit; functioning critics (and some theorists) do both interpret and judge, as they go about their business of examining discourse. The task awaiting the rhetorical theorist appears to be investigating further the relationship of interpretation and judgment, with particular attention to the question of how rhetoric may facilitate passage from one mode of activity to the other.

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26 "A Note on Theory and Practice in Rhetorical Criticism," Western Journal of Speech Communication, 44 (1980), 334. In the following passage, Black associates the "emic" critical approach with interpretation and the "etic" approach with evaluation: "I am confining my remarks about the emic approach to the interpretive phase of criticism only. I don't believe that a critic should evaluate an object emically, but an emic interpretation may be an avenue into a fair and full evaluation." Note that etic criticism is associated with the application of theoretical principles to discourses in order to discover commonalities (p. 332). Evaluation, then, not only assumes a theoretical system, it also assumes discourses can be compared for similarities, a premise which interpretive criticism rejects outright.

30 Michael J. Halloran, in "Tradition and Theory in Rhetoric," identifies the problem of integrating traditional "cultural" theory and "abstract" contemporary theory specifically with the incompatibility of interpretation and judgment in theorizing. He claims that Perelman attempted the integration in his concept of the universal audience, but failed:

Rather than an ideal providing norms for performance, Perelman's universal audience is simply a feature of discourse that varies from speaker to speaker, like style. It is a theoretical construct rather than a cultural ideal. As with style, one can characterize speaker and/or cultures on the basis of how they conceive a universal audience, but one cannot appraise performances on the basis of whether they are address to the universal audience (p. 240). Halloran states that instead of characterizing speakers and audiences and then appraising them, the goal of theory is to "achieve an abstract understanding of the rhetorical process, and thereby to be able to predict the outcome(s) of a given rhetorical transaction" (p. 239).
RHETORICAL THEORY AS A PLURALISTIC DISCIPLINE

Finally, after a consideration of interpretation and judgment in theory, we must consider the notion of pluralism in theory, a notion which underlay Douglas Ehninger's thought and most of the assumptions of this paper so far. As may be expected, pluralism is best viewed as an alternative to theoretical monism, that is, the desire to create a single overarching system of definitions, propositions, and prescriptions accounting universally for phenomena of interest. In this view, competing theories not verified empirically are proven invalid or corrected if possible, but afterward are not considered to be living influences upon current theory. Some rhetorical theorists in the recent past have reaffirmed monism as a goal for their own discipline.

Increasingly, however, theorists have been admitting a description of rhetorical theory as pluralistic, in the sense of Wayne Booth's recent concept of critical pluralism. He defines criticism as a humanistic discipline in which no one individual interpretation of a phenomenon dominates, but in which various assessments of a phenomenon compatibly exist, both simultaneously and over time: "two or more conflicting positions may be entirely acceptable — acceptable, that is, with no other qualifications that the higher semantics of discovering their two quite different and irresolvable worlds of discourse." As expressed by Samuel Becker:

For rhetoricians, this is clearly a time to test new paradigms, but there is little or no sign of our relinquishing the old ones. We appear to be testing and comparing, searching for common ground, which seems to point to the conclusion that the seventies comprise a transitional period for rhetoric that will eventuate in the acceptance of a common paradigm. On the other hand, an examination of our history indicates that rhetoric has harbored these competing paradigms virtually from the inception of the field. With the exception of those periods such as the Renaissance when rhetoric went wholly over to the humanities, we have been both a humanistic discipline and a behavioral science. Even with each of these modes of inquiry rhetoricians have followed, and continue to follow, multiple paradigms. This 'transitional' state appears not to be very transitory.

Becker sees the discipline of rhetorical theory as large enough to accommodate those who would revise or replace existing theory and those

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Booth, p. 24.
who would reinterpret theory. In any case, his approach results in a theoretical pluralism.\textsuperscript{34}

Moreover, Booth describes the process of creating pluralistic critical theory as itself a "yes-but" procedure, which is a subtle mixture of interpreting and assessing existing theories while carving out a place for one's own. It is not surprising to find Booth lapsing into rhetorical terminology while describing such pluralisms, for insofar as theories are discursive, they are rhetorical:

Most contemporary pluralists thus neither attempt Northrop Frye's implicitly exhaustive kind of classification nor worry about an infinite regress [of critical relativism]. . . . They seek not truth, not total coherence, not even correspondence to reality. For the traditional cognitive ends, they substitute practical or rhetorical effects on readers and societies, on 'pedagogical communities' or on what Father Walter Ong calls 'negotiating' communicants.

Though Booth does not go quite so far as to abandon all attempts at coherence or correspondence of theory, he admits that his primary justifications as well are "practical reasons . . . pragmatic commitments, [which] run so deep that they are in fact untouched by any one theoretical failure."\textsuperscript{35}

The natural results of such pluralism, then, are approaches which interpret, understand, and assess previous or coexisting theories, not only to acknowledge their existence, but as an integral means of developing theory. The fact that we occasionally find rhetorical theories that do so, and that they often form the core of our best theory, indicates that we may be now simply rediscovering a process we have engaged in all along, however sporadically. Lloyd Bitzer's essay on "Rhetoric and Public Knowledge" is an example of how rhetorical theory may function as a discipline which interprets and assesses its own past as a means of creating theory, and so attains a kind of pluralist ideal.

Somewhat after the beginning of the essay, Bitzer reviews the theoretical context for his own theory of public knowledge. He writes, "Theories of rhetoric conceived as stylistics, or as the psychology of language and symbolic behavior, or as propaganda, do not require a conception of the public."\textsuperscript{36} He names a few of these theories; those of St. Augustine, Campbell, Whately, Bain, Perelman, and Burke. Yet he does not suggest that these rhetorics are inadequate to their own particular tasks. Instead, he places his own construct into perspective, into a world where there indeed


\textsuperscript{35}Booth, pp. 215, 216.

can be competing conceptions of rhetoric, none invalidated by their dependency upon a particular kind of context or underlying premise. Bitzer seems implicitly to have accepted the notion, as Duhamel has written, that "the content of the idea of rhetoric . . . is dependent upon the epistemology, psychology and metaphysic of the system in which it occurs," and he is willing to interpret each theory according to its presuppositions.  

Nevertheless, why then does Bitzer pursue a particular idea of a public, an idea admittedly conditioned by the situation in which he writes, and which is not demonstrably more reflective of truth than any other rhetorical theory? The answer is twofold, both explicit and implicit. Explicitly, "practical motives, as well as theoretical, underly this study. We suspect, perhaps, that contemporary publics are in disarray, unable to give expression to truths and impulses essential to high achievement." But why this particular characterization of publics, as in disarray, and why a disarray only suspect? Bitzer's implicit generalization, an assumption that motivates his choice of topic, his terminology, and to a great degree his pragmatic orientation, is the implied analogy of contemporary American political life with the circumstances described and indeed responded to by John Dewey in the 1927 work, The Public and Its Problems. As Bitzer quotes Dewey, "If a public exists, it is surely as uncertain about its own whereabouts as philosophers since Hume have been about the residence and make-up of the self." Thus Bitzer's and Dewey's concept of the public show a common significance—they are needed in times when the public is "in eclipse." By relating Dewey's situation to his own, Bitzer performs the interpretive function of theory.

Yet the critical function of theory does not end with interpretation. Bitzer goes on to judge Dewey's theory on the basis of its shortcomings—particularly in the circular reasoning displayed in assuming that publics require communication while admitting that communication is impossible without the prior existence of publics, rather than derive an understanding of them through investigating external conditions and consequences of actions such as the existence of communication:

There is a puzzle regarding the community's shared ideas, views of good and evil, interests, values—those things which bond the community and guide its choices. The presence of this fund of shared knowledge is essential not only to the conception of community but also to the evolution of a public as Dewey conceived it. But how does this knowledge come about, and how should it be characterized? I believe that the best course is to begin not with a distinction between private and public transactions and consequences, but with the actuality of publics. After we have characterized publics, we can then inquire as to what in their possession may be called public knowledge.  

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In such manner Bitzer places his conception of the public on its own independent ground. Though "public knowledge" is informed by the shortcomings of Dewey's formulation, its fate in the critical arena is not linked to Dewey's, nor is the fate of Dewey's theory linked to the modification of Bitzer. Dewey and Bitzer are linked primarily because they share a similar set of practical and intellectual exigencies, and if The Public and Its Problems often sounds like "Rhetoric and Public Knowledge," it is due to Bitzer's, and our, recognition of common situations and needs.

Therefore, in "Rhetoric and Public Knowledge," Dewey is being used as an antecedent theory which provides confirmation, not of the conceptual validity of Bitzer's conception of the public (no reference to another theory can do that), but the rationality of his pursuit; not its truth, but its significance. In this sense, interpretation, understanding, and assessment of Dewey's theory becomes crucial to the interpretation of Bitzer's theory, and indeed, of our common experience. Bitzer is thus writing as a pluralist; he is not invalidating, replacing, or even refining Dewey. He is offering his own conception of the public as a companion to Dewey's, one which supposedly will stand by Dewey's, and indeed Aristotle's, as an alternative conception of the common set of theoretical problems and issues we call rhetorical.

"Rhetoric and Public Knowledge," by virtue of its nature as a pluralistic and humanistic theory, stands as a candidate for admission into the rhetorical tradition.

CONCLUSION

In the course of this paper, I have argued that some rhetorical theorists are adapting such critical procedures as interpretation and judgment to their theoretical concerns, and I have illuminated this notion primarily with reference to the work of Douglas Ehninger, Michael Hyde and Craig Smith, Michael McGee, and Lloyd Bitzer. No doubt the methods used or the conclusions reached by these theorists are subject to scrutiny; perhaps they do not even illustrate the best of their own kind of work. But they do demonstrate approaches to theorizing which introduce new opportunities, and new requirements, to the enterprise of rhetorical theory.

Not surprisingly, the requirements are similar to those expected of rhetorical critics. Whereas the critique of theory has revolved around such standards as generality, comprehensiveness, systematicity, and parsimony, the standards for judgment of new theories may very well emphasize the quality of their interpretation, the successful recreation of the material under investigation, the brilliance of their synthesis, and the profundity of their evaluative principles. New forms of theorizing may result from subtle shifts in criteria between the activities of theory and criticism. However, problems in the characterizing of the two activities may also result, sending our discipline into new waves of self-scrutiny and self-definition.

Even more problematic, however, is the possibility of confusion among the principles and standards used in theory and criticism. The problem of determining the relationship between interpretation and judgment is one
example. Another example is the confusion of one theoretical procedure for another. As Thomas Farrell has suggested with reference to “model” criticism, classification in the name of systematicity is not critical judgment, and it could be added that bias in the name of judgment is not theory.\textsuperscript{41} Each step in the theoretical and critical process would seem to require a description and justification of its function in the process, a goal that seems consistent with the self-interpretation of a discipline.

To ward off such methodological problems, then, perhaps the most natural step would be to create a concluding paradigm or ideal of the theoretical-critical activity described thus far through example. But to do so now, I believe, would be to set up a descriptive category so far in advance of an adequate sample so as to invite premature prescription. Besides, a quality of the examples cited which may or may not have to do with their methodological uniqueness is their capacity to provoke and stimulate through their deviation from prescribed formulas. Establishing a theoretical-critical model particularly at an early stage in the development of a new approach may invite the dangers of stifling vitality and preventing surprise.

Rather, the theoretical-critical approach may for now be viewed as an alternative to the kind of theorizing derived from scientific procedure, an alternative that rests as comfortably as may be within a pluralism of theories. The rigorous defense of such an approach must necessarily be deferred to another forum. Until then, the theorist is referred to those significant antecedents, such as Douglas Ehninger’s “On Systems of Rhetoric,” which themselves display the depth and excitement of theoretical self-interpretation, even as they constitute a part of the rhetorical tradition.
