

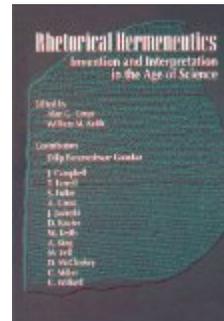
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Alan G. Gross, William M. Keith, eds. *Rhetorical Hermeneutics: Invention and Interpretation in the Age of Science*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997. \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7914-3110-8.

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Rhetorical Hermeneutics is a fascinating collection of essays assessing the theoretical foundations, critical strengths and weaknesses, achievements of and challenges facing the movement known as the “rhetoric of science.” The volume is presented as a debate-in-print, an on-going conversation among participants who are asked to address key theoretical issues at work in their rhetorical interpretations of scientific texts and practices.

“Rhetoric of science” is a movement within rhetorical studies aspiring to a disciplinary equivalent of “history of science” and “philosophy of science.” Its contributors are conversant with issues in the fields of speech communication, literary theory and hermeneutics, and science studies. Its origins are recent, its contours and practices taking shape over only the last twenty-five years or so. Indeed, its beginnings can be traced to two interdisciplinary conferences sponsored by the Speech Communication Association in 1970 which resulted in an appeal for the constitution of “a theory of rhetoric suitable to twentieth-century concepts and needs” (p. 3). As the editors of this current volume suggest, this conference anticipated a number of important issues now facing rhetorical theory, particularly regarding its scope and philosophical foundations.

What has happened in the intervening years is a transformation of rhetoric from a technique of composition to a universal hermeneutic. In other words, rhetoric, by taking seriously its Aristotelian definition as “the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion,” has come to understand the function of language, indeed knowledge itself, as governed by concerns of interpretation and selection evidence and warrants, adaptation to norms of inquiry and audience, pre-

sumptions regarding the nature and function not only of presentation of ideas, but indeed of the universe.

What this extension has effectively done is to question objectivist epistemological foundations of inquiry. Appeal to logical positivism, Cartesian epistemology of subject-object split, effacement of the role of observer, are now seen as rhetorical discursive practices that function within systems of power and pursue inquiry within accepted values and under a particular construct of Truth. This critique does not lead to a radical relativism, but instead exposes the underlying, understated and often overlooked norms and values governing the field of inquiry. It makes us aware of the function of analogy and metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, the importance of an assumed world-view, the ‘usefulness’ of both the inquiry itself and its results to others, in all strategies and productivities of knowledge. The ‘rhetoric of science’ works within such a view to make us aware of these strategies not just within the human or social sciences, but even within the soft (biology) and hard (physics) sciences.

The question which this volume squarely faces is whether this ‘globalization’ of rhetoric is both justifiable and useful in its resulting critical practices, taking as its test case the ‘extreme’ position of the ‘rhetoric of science.’

Gaonkar, in his introductory essay (a revision and elaboration of “The Idea of Rhetoric in the Rhetoric of Science” first published by the *Southern Communication Journal* in Summer, 1993) fires the first volley, a broadside condemnation of rhetoric as a hermeneutical enterprise. This essay is thick, difficult at times to understand, and is complex enough to warrant the large and diverse number of responses it generates. If it can be summarized, which I fear to do, the argument seems to make at least the fol-

lowing points: 1) The traditional formation of rhetoric as a productive discipline meant to help in the generation of performances makes it problematic as an interpretive hermeneutic. 2) As a consequence of its productive basis, its terminology and theory are “thin,” i.e., its central terms (topic, enthymeme, persuasion, genre) are far too vague, and can be used with far too few restraints, enabling it to ‘go global.’ 3) This ‘globalization’ occasions a disciplinary anxiety, since, as a hermeneutic, this new rhetorical understanding is essentially parasitic, dependent upon other discourse domains for its operation. 4) Its origins as a productive art directed toward specific civic fora bring with it an outmoded and inappropriate ideology of human agency incapable of confronting other forces at work in the generation of discourse, such as economics, subconscious, politics, material forms communication distribution, etc... (cf., pp. 6-7).

He offers as examples of the kinds of difficulties encountered by this ‘ill-conceived’ rhetorical hermeneutics the works of John Campbell, Alan Gross and Lawrence Prelli: Campbell is accused of focusing far too much upon the model of ‘Darwin as hero’ (ideology of human agency), Gross is accused of not identifying the particularly rhetorical aspects of his critical analysis of *Narratio Prima* (terminological and theoretical ‘thinness’), and Prelli is accused of causing the text to disappear beneath rhetorical taxonomy (and, actually, of being ‘laborious’). He concludes by asserting that “*globalization severely undermines rhetoric’s self-representation as a situated practical art* [emphasis his],” a warning he has voiced in a number of other works (“Object and method in rhetorical criticism: From Wichelns to Leff and McGee,” *Western Journal of Speech Communication*, 54 (1990), p. 290-316, and “Rhetoric and its double,” in: H. Simons, ed., *The Rhetorical Turn* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

To speak frankly, it would behoove the reader to skip this first, dense essay: Not only does the response by Michael Leff do a good job of summarizing its significant points, but the introductory essay by Gross and Keith sets the stage and describes the proceedings nicely. It is also the case that in the final essay of this volume where he responds to his critics, Gaonkar does an excellent job of clarifying the major points he wishes to make, points easily lost in his initial attempt to do too much with the introductory essay.

What next ensues is a brilliant series of responses, both ‘dissensions’ and ‘extensions.’ Leff’s essay “The Idea of Rhetoric: A Humanist’s Response to Gaonkar,” suggests that the distinction between production and inter-

pretation which Gaonkar claims exists in the practices of the ancients simply does not bare up under scrutiny. Campbell, in “Strategic Reading: Rhetoric, Intention, and Interpretation,” is gracious to a fault, submitting that he indeed is guilty of embracing far too fully an ‘ideology of human agency,’ but suggests that his recent works (of which Gaonkar is fully aware and to which he makes reference) are more balanced in their view of intertextuality and the impact of earlier discourses upon Darwin’s work. Furthermore, he simply thinks it important that we continue to recognize the significant impact and influence which individuals can have upon history. Gross, in “What If We’re Not Producing Knowledge? Critical Reflections on the Rhetorical Criticism of Science,” counters that he is indeed indebted to classical rhetoric and its insights, and that classical rhetoric is not nearly as limiting as Gaonkar suggests.

Carolyn Miller, “Classical Rhetoric without Nostalgia: A Response to Gaonkar,” takes Gaonkar to task for not being clear with his own terms: just what does he mean when he suggests that the classical rhetorical vocabulary cannot be ‘translated’ effectively from a vocabulary arising from practical and productive interests into a vocabulary for critical analytical interpretation? ‘Translation’ is indeed possible, and what’s more, justifiable.

To the editors’ credit, a number of works follow which, while not perhaps explicitly responding to these criticisms, nevertheless derive value from some of Gaonkar’s ideas and want to extend them further. James Jasinski, “Instrumentalism, Contextualism and Interpretation in Rhetorical Criticism,” accepts Gaonkar’s critique of the interpretive closure of ‘ideology of human agency’ and argues for the necessity of a ‘thicker’ theoretical and analytical vocabulary which considers a greater complex of contextual features (‘performative traditions’) of discourse practices. William Keith, in “Engineering Rhetoric,” offers an analogy to ‘reverse engineering’ which, as a pragmatic discipline interested in reconstructing the means by which an object was designed, may have important implications for the critical practices of rhetoric. David Kaufer, interestingly, also views rhetoric as a design art, similar to architecture, and in “From *Tekhne* to Technique: Rhetoric As a Design Art” offers a model which seeks to redress the failings of rhetorical-critical practices as Gaonkar sees them. Finally, Steve Fuller suggests that, according to Gaonkar, the “Rhetoric of Science” as is currently practiced either becomes too rhetorical and therefore less accessible to science, or more provocative and critical but then less ‘unique’ as rhetoric. In the face of this, perhaps

the rhetoric of science should conceive of itself less as a theoretical means of interpretation and more as an agent of change in the way science is practiced.

The book's final section is introduced with "An Elliptical Postscript" by Thomas Farrell which tries to note the value of the contributions made by all parties, but also notes some of the limitations which have been uncovered through this discussion, and which need to be overcome. Finally, Gaonkar himself addresses his critiques, and as a result, I believe I can adventure what it all comes down to by extracting a quotation. For Gaonkar:

"First, a certain ideology of human agency is operative in rhetorical studies; and, that ideology underwrites the intentionalist reading strategy in rhetorical criticism. Second, Campbell's early essays show in a paradigmatic fashion how the intentionalist reading strategy can lead to the deferral of the text. Third, the privileging of the text is a taken-for-granted background assumption shared by many contemporary rhetorical critics ... [T]o insist on individual consciousness and its contents as the originary site of public discourse (including the discourse of science), when that discourse is produced and populated with significations within a matrix of technologies—literary, social and material—that elude the reach and imprint of the subject, is surely to cripple the critical enterprise before it gets off the ground."

It is only when one gets through to the end of the book that I suggest one then turn to the criticisms of Dierdre McCloskey ("Big Rhetoric, Little Rhetoric: Gaonkar on the Rhetoric of Science") and Charles Willard ("Rhetoric's Lot"). The former is a scathing, withering, and utterly accurate critique of Gaonkar's introductory article in which, as McCloskey points out: Gaonkar through definitional caveat excludes a plethora of works as not 'truly' rhetorical (therein also begging the question), and then condemns rhetoric of science as having few participants; his condemnation of the movement is comprised primarily of generalized, opinionated assertion with no evidence offered in support; he faults one critic (Prelli) for doing exactly what he explicitly desires (thick *rhetorical* readings); he rejects globalization on the basis of "if something means everything, it means nothing," a thoroughly fallacious argument; he accuses rhetoric's 'thinness' of not being falsifiable, not only an ideological appeal implying the superiority of science, but a standard of evaluation which the philosophy of science itself has rejected; he himself participates in the 'intentionalist' fallacy of the 'ideology of human agency' when he critiques the critics he condemns; and many

others. Willard's critique focuses upon the broad condemnation of the "politics of recognition" which Gaonkar accuses the rhetoric of science of perpetuating in its attempt to legitimate its 'globalized.' The two of these essays, in my view, effectively undermine Gaonkar's introductory essay, leaving the reader with the appropriate question: Why bother with Gaonkar at all, and why read any further?

If for no other reason, the answer is simply: because the total reading experience is breathtaking. Gaonkar's supporters offer some interesting and important correctives to rhetorical analytical practices, correctives which should be addressed and adopted, particularly with respect to the impact of extra-textual factors governing the context of the production of any discourse. But even more, the fascinating aspect about this volume is that, because all of the contributors appear to be aware of the essays of their counterparts in this volume, the discussion becomes dynamic, invigorating, challenging, as each contributor impacts upon the work of the others around her/him. This is no (typical) slap-dash hodge-podge of essays loosely centered around a general concept and whose relationship to one another must spelled out by the editor's introductory overview. Rather, we walk into a forum and are witness to a lively debate where the participants respond to each other, posture at one another, are forced to clarify their positions, hone their critiques, offer constructive models. The result is exciting, because what we find happening is the transformation of a critical praxis brought about through a sometimes wrenching assessment of its own failures and blind spots, but also through an inspiring celebration of the profound insights, impacts and challenges it has contributed through its efforts. This, alone, guarantees the current and future strength and promise of "rhetoric of science."

This volume should be of particular interest to members of H-Nexa and H-Rhetor lists, practitioners of the general movement of the 'rhetoric of inquiry,' as well as historians and philosophers of science. But I would suggest that such an obvious identification of audience is not enough: The fascinating experience brought about by the public discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of a new and promising discipline, the honesty of the debate and transformation of the participants through it, is something that will be of benefit to anyone who is wondering what the current and future promise of interdisciplinarity, the humanities, and higher education is and will look like.

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