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From the Selected Works of David Fleming

2006

Review of The Viability of the Rhetorical Tradition by Richard Graff, Arthur Walzer, & Janet Atwill

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An Invitation

Going through experience, hooking some version of it to ourselves, accumulating what we know as evidence and insight, ignoring what does not look like evidence and insight to us, finding some pieces of life that become life for us, failing to find others, or choosing not to look, each of us creates the narrative that he or she is [. . .]. Sometimes we don't see enough. Sometimes we find enough and see enough and still tell it wrong [. . .]. We never quite get the narrative all said: we're always making a fiction/history that always has to be remade, unless we are so bound by dogma, arrogance, and ignorance that we cannot see a new artifact, hear a new opinion, or enter a new experience in our narrative [. . .]. We open ourselves as we can to insight and experience and say what we can, but what we say will invariably be incomplete.

—Jim W. Corder

("Argument as Emergence, Rhetoric as Love" 16–18)

From the editor: *RR* began its "Burkean Parlor" in 1988, trying to create not the traditional "comment and response" format that moves too quickly toward closure but a parlor where various voices can generate a continuing conversation. "All authors, to be sure," Corder tells us, "we are more particularly narrators, historians, tale-tellers." As such, we might learn to speak and hear a commodious language, "creating a world full of space and time that will hold our diversities" (15, 31).

Through this journal the parlor doors open onto an ongoing dialogue for those of you who accept our invitation to enter. When you enter the parlor of "unending conversation" that Kenneth Burke dramatizes in *Philosophy of Literary Form*, you "listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar. Someone answers; you answer him [or her]; another comes to your defense; another aligns himself against you [. . .]. The hour grows late, and you must depart" (110–11). Not many of you have entered *RR*'s parlor lately; we hope to hear more of your voices in forthcoming issues.

So that all of the guests can have a turn in the conversation, we do need to establish parlor etiquette. Thus we ask that each parlor submission be no more than

500 words, enabling us to create, as far as we are able, “space and time” for all of the voices in the parlor. (Please use internal documentation for any citations.)

With this issue we present David Fleming’s reflective review. Listen. Join in.

Richard Graff, Arthur E. Walzer, and Janet M. Atwill, eds. *The Viability of the Rhetorical Tradition*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005. 203 pages. \$25.95 paperback.

Like other readers of this journal whose academic careers have taken place mainly in English departments, I came to rhetoric relatively late. As an undergraduate English major at a liberal arts college in the early 1980s, I thought literature was the only true language art. When I graduated and found myself suddenly immersed in the worldly discourses of everyday life, therefore, it was somewhat unsettling. It was also very satisfying: I taught English as a second language in East Africa, worked in the nonprofit sector in Washington, DC, and became deeply interested in social issues—in politics, urban affairs, literacy, and education. Why, then, four years later, I returned to school to pursue an MA in English and American Literature, I’m not quite sure; the reading and writing struck me now as precious and obscure, and I thought I had made a terrible mistake.

Then, two fortunate things happened—I read the last chapter of Terry Eagleton’s *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (1983), in which the author tries to recall literary studies to the “ancient paths which it has abandoned,” namely *rhetoric*, defined as the study of the “effects that discourses produce, and how they produce them”; and I took a course titled “Rhetorical Theory and Practice” from Erika Lindemann, in which I read, among other things, Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* (the Modern Library edition, translated by W. Rhys Roberts and introduced by Edward P. J. Corbett) and Lindemann’s own *Rhetoric for Writing Teachers*. Eagleton showed me an alternative to the theories of language and literature I had known up to that time, a way of linking reading and writing inextricably to politics and turning their study into a profoundly *practical* discipline. Lindemann showed me that there was an attractive *pedagogical* project associated with that discipline, one infused with the hope that all students could develop the discourse habits and attitudes needed for the political work that Eagleton described. I was surprised that I had never known about this “rhetoric”

before, and I thought, as others have thought before and since, that it was what I had been searching for all along. The experience was life-changing.

Unfortunately, there were no other courses in rhetoric for me to take. I was told that it would not be an appropriate line of research to pursue at the doctoral level, and, though I was allowed to write a master's thesis on a "comp-rhet" topic, it was seen by nearly all concerned to be an odd request. I remember working in the computer lab one day (this was in 1989) when a fellow student, discovering what I was writing about, asked, "You mean you can get a whole thesis out of that?" But I knew now that there was a world out there for me, a community of students, teachers, books, conferences, and *traditions* that could cure my academic loneliness and give my new career plans legitimacy and support.

After teaching English for two years at a community college, I joined a PhD program in rhetoric in an English department, where I knew I would not be a second-class citizen. And there the rhetorical tradition was practically inescapable, though it was now less inspiration for a certain kind of study than a collection of historical and philosophical problems for investigation and inquiry. During the next several years, I took coursework in "classical rhetoric," read intensely in ancient Greek and Roman rhetorical theory, and was tested on the history of rhetoric in my prelim exams. I also began to realize that my study of the tradition had a kind of natural limit to it. My main professional and intellectual interests—the interests of most of us in that place and at that time—were in contemporary projects: pedagogy, service, theory, discourse analysis, empirical studies of situated human action, and so forth. In this sense the tradition was important but subservient, and I knew that I was guilty of what Edward Schiappa would later call the appropriation rather than reconstruction of history. But if some people found this unabashed *use* of ancient materials for contemporary problems suspect, I found it enormously productive: I couldn't help but see connections between the old rhetoric and the new world around me, between Aristotle's enthymeme and the arguments my students were producing, between Protagorean antilogic and my own emerging goals for liberal education, between the classical account of tropes and figures and what (post)modern philosophers and scientists were referring to as the embodied nature of human thought. I was attracted to the tradition because it seemed to illuminate contemporary life for me, because it provided a precise vocabulary to talk about the problems I was interested in, because in it I found an endless source of material for reflection, inspiration, and inquiry—and, yes, because it gave intellectual sheen to a set of projects that sometimes felt like, and seemed to others to be, one step removed from academic tutoring.

Thus by the time I finished the PhD, I found myself in a somewhat awkward position: I was fascinated by, curious about, and increasingly knowledge-

able of ancient rhetoric, but I never really developed the ambition to be a *specialist* in it. I returned again and again to Aristotle, but my interest was that of a compositionist or rhetorician, not an historian, classicist, or philosopher. I wanted to write about ancient rhetoric—but for *Rhetoric Review*, not the *American Journal of Philology*. So I taught myself just enough Greek and Latin to be dangerous, I offered a graduate seminar in classical rhetoric every couple of years, I designed an undergraduate course for English majors on rhetorical criticism, I attended ISHR and RSA meetings, I subscribed to *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, and I published in the area: on ancient definitions of rhetoric, on the *topoi* and the *progymnasmata*, on the relations between rhetorical theory and urban form in the polis, and so on. But in every case, my main motive (at least as far as I was conscious of motive) was to better understand some *contemporary* problem or issue, and in every piece, I ended up in the present tense.

This worked for a while, but only because composition-rhetoric, at least at the time, still allowed its scholars to be generalists and its theories to be intensely (if sometimes promiscuously) *used*. But as I found myself increasingly involved in both general *and* graduate education and increasingly asked to take responsibility for *programs* in general and graduate education during times and in places of limited resources, the instability built into the situation described above—the situation of both being and not being an historian in a “practical” discipline like composition-rhetoric—threatened to erupt. Scholarship and teaching, after all, are never as autonomous, the choice of research topics and specializations never as free as we’d like them to be. Sometimes, you have to make decisions; you have to align with some projects and not others; you have to steer your students toward certain paths, to invest your energies and resources in particular ways; you have to think about who your most crucial audiences and your highest professional and personal goals are; you have to *choose*.

For example, in the PhD program in composition and rhetoric where I currently work, graduate students take only six courses in their major area of study (there’s also a four-course minor that must be fulfilled outside of our program). How is “the rhetorical tradition” supposed to fit into such a program, especially given a diverse faculty not all of whom find the value of that tradition self-evident, equally diverse students who come to us *not* primarily interested in historical problems and issues, and manifest conditions in the surrounding world—like unequal educational access, the increasing role of electronic communication and information technologies, the complex and diverse demands on writing coming from both within and beyond the academy, and so on—that would seem to call for their own kinds of (mostly nonhistorical) inquiry?

In situations like these, I have increasingly found that as a field of study, the “rhetorical tradition” has some strikes against it—at least from the point of view of composition-rhetoric, and at least for me. First, the texts, theories, and prob-

lems of ancient rhetoric require enormous time and effort to master: There are languages to learn, technical vocabularies to acquire, historiographic skills to develop, an immense literature to read. Second, the tradition carries with it highly problematic ideological baggage not only because so much of it originated in societies that systematically excluded women, slaves, and others from both participation in and study of public discourse but also because that tradition was then subsequently used for centuries with devastating effect and to further marginalize individuals and groups deemed ignorant of it.

Can a field with such strikes against it be made relevant, in a time like ours, in a discipline like composition-rhetoric, with the kinds of projects that its scholars and teachers are currently engaged in? The answer is: Of course it can. Problems like those described above can be “got over,” scholarly resources can be marshaled, the past can be productively problematized, useful lessons can be drawn about our world that are as rich, relevant, and interesting as the lessons drawn from any other kind of research project. It takes hard work, but it can be done. My question here, however, is not can work on the rhetorical tradition still be done, but is that work useful enough to overcome the problems described above? And what kinds of arguments will convince ourselves, our colleagues, students, and funding agencies of that usefulness?

So if the first chapter in the story of my relationship with the “old rhetoric” is about standing on the shoulders of giants and the second is about hopping down to take their measure and finding out that they’re not giants after all but still worthy of our attention, the third chapter is about realizing, finally, that whether they’re giants or not, whether we were ever even standing on their shoulders, they’re dead and gone, we live in a different world, and it may be time to move on, to attend more fully to our world, with both eyes open and looking straight ahead. In other words, this latest chapter is about how the unstable and complicated situation of studying the past (especially *that* past) in an insistent worldy and adamantly forward-looking discipline like composition-rhetoric begins to take its toll, seeming less and less like the best way to spend one’s professional time, energy, and money.

I thus find myself in a quandary: I need no convincing that the rhetorical tradition is dynamic, rich, and interesting. I need no argument that it is fascinating, even fun, to study. I do not regret the time I have spent on it, and I do not mean to impugn the work of those who engage with the tradition or to deny any scholar the right to pursue whatever research project she or he finds interesting. My questions, as I’ve said, are pragmatic, local, and probably, in the end, mostly personal. They concern not the *absolute* value of work in the rhetorical tradition but the *relative* value of such work when one takes into account the problems involved in its production and reception and the alternative kinds of inquiry

available to students today. And they concern the kinds of *arguments* we employ to make the value of such work persuasive to ourselves and others.

It was with all that in mind that I read *The Viability of the Rhetorical Tradition*, a new collection of original essays edited by Richard Graff, Arthur E. Walzer, and Janet M. Atwill and published in 2005 by SUNY Press. I approached the volume with great interest and hope, and I have come away from it with enormous admiration. The essays are wonderfully brief and well written. They come from some of the smarter and more influential rhetoricians of our time, representing a wide range of institutions and departments. And they all acknowledge, in varying degrees and in different ways, the somewhat unusual role that history has played and continues to play in disciplines like composition-rhetoric and communication-rhetoric, fields so clearly indebted to the past—even “haunted” by it, to use Graff’s word—yet so insistently “presentist” in their professional orientations and obligations. That is, they engage the *historical* tradition from a point of view that is not *traditionally* historical, viewing the past with one eye on contemporary needs and goals, including rhetoric’s ongoing and crucial role in general education.

But these writers do not belabor the exceptionalism of composition and communication studies as much as I have been doing here. What they seem most intent on doing is, first, redefining the rhetorical tradition itself and, second, providing concrete examples of its continuing relevance. The most progress is made here on the former goal. That’s because, despite important differences in their approaches, these authors are unanimous on at least one point: We should no longer think of ancient rhetoric in *honorific* terms, as a unitary, objectively available, and inherently praiseworthy *thing* from the past that functions as the origin, foundation, model, and standard of all subsequent rhetorical practice and study. There are two reasons given for this rejection: First, foundationalist approaches to the rhetorical tradition are bad history (because they treat the past uncritically, as an inert, univocal, and reified inheritance), and, second, they’re too easily susceptible of an ethnocentrism that glorifies an alleged European past in comparison to which all subsequent cultures and the cultures of all non-European peoples are inferior.

But how then should we think about the *tradition*? Here the answers vary, though there is clear overlap among them. For Alan G. Gross, the tradition is simply a “succession of theorists” (33) united by certain questions or problems (for example, the “question of whether rhetoric is merely persuasive, or is a mode of truth” [35]); for Robert N. Gaines, the tradition is that corpus of “all known texts, artifacts, and discourse venues that represent the theory, pedagogy, practice, criticism, and cultural apprehension of rhetoric” (65); for Richard Graff and Michael Leff, meanwhile, the tradition is the teaching of writing and speak-

ing as a *practice* transmitted through time (25). What should be clear from these redefinitions is the extent to which “classical rhetoric” is now seen by its leading scholars in largely *neutral* terms, as a collection of contested historical phenomena—problems, texts, practices—that require from us close study and critical regard rather than glorification or subservience.

The only place here where there is even a hint of rhetoric’s old connection with the “classical” occurs in Robert Gaines’ essay, when he delimits his “corpus of texts, artifacts, and discourse venues” to the “ancient *European* discourse community” (65, emphasis added)—and thus provides an example of the very problem I raised above: Rhetoric’s traditional association with a narrow cultural attitude that turns out to understandably repel many of today’s students and readers. Given the historical importance of the eastern Mediterranean for early rhetorical theory and practice, the complex relationship of that region (then and now) with the word *Europe* (a word often used as code for a certain set of normative cultural assumptions), and given the Greeks’ own intense economic, cultural, political, and philosophical interactions with the Levant, Persia, and Egypt (that is, Europe’s Others), it’s not clear why Gaines insists on this remnant of the very “canonical” approach he otherwise so persuasively rejects here. But my problem is not that Gaines is wrong—I’m not even sure how his claim could be assessed on such grounds—or that he is unreflective (in fact, he’s very aware that his delimitation is controversial and writes that his purpose is not to privilege any particular culture but simply to “distinguish” among different rhetorical corpora [66–67], though why *that* is necessary, or how the word *Europe* allows for such distinction, he never explains). I bring the passage up here because I believe it’s an example of exactly the kind of trap that historical thinking about rhetoric has too often fallen into and that continues to drive away students and readers from rhetoric, a discipline that can easily be seen by those unfamiliar with it as incompatible with a genuinely multicultural, insistently contemporary attitude toward language, education, and public life.

But the reference to *European culture* here is an exception and, in my opinion, does not even fit the general drift of Gaines’ own essay. Everywhere else in this book, the rhetorical tradition is treated in decidedly nonhonorific terms: less a model or standard than simply a topic of study, a collection of problems, texts, and practices that should motivate our inquiry and investigation, not our submission. This is clearly preferable to an earlier approach that reified certain ancient rhetorics and then held them up as the first, best, and even only rhetorics—though it should be admitted that the new way is sometimes a little uninspiring.

I wrote above that there seemed to be two goals for this volume: to redefine the rhetorical tradition and to provide concrete examples of its continuing rele-

vance. Having accepted a scholarly recasting of the tradition as a field of study rather than a standard to which rhetors and rhetoricians must defer, we still need to persuade ourselves and others that such study is useful, that it's worth expending professional and intellectual resources on and recruiting students to. The essays included here offer arguments for the value of the tradition, which can be classified, I would argue, as either "internal" or "external" in their justification. An internal appeal is one that says we need the rhetorical tradition because it unites us as a scholarly community, gives us well-worked material to engage with and improve upon, and allows us to demonstrate intellectual progress to our colleagues in the academy. Leah Ceccarelli's reading of Lincoln's *Gettysburg Address* here, which proceeds by summarizing and categorizing previous readings of the speech and then contributes her own new reading to them, is an example of how the tradition can function this way. But it's Alan Gross who most explicitly argues in this volume for the importance of a shared tradition in motivating a certain kind of intellectual activity. For Gross the collected attempt of rhetoricians "over two and a half millennia to grapple with one or another scholarly quandary"—this succession of theorists working on the same problems and questions—provides contemporary rhetorical studies with the "academic prestige" that it needs to defend itself relative to other disciplines (36). The tradition, in other words, gives rhetoric intellectual identity, which in turn helps it acquire and retain "academic status" (34). This is an unabashedly Kuhnian view of an "authentic discipline with a solid past of problem-solving and a solid future of questions to answer" (42).

I worry about such *internal* rationales for the tradition because they seem to privilege a fairly narrow range of problem-solving within an accepted paradigm rather than allowing for a research profile that is always open to new problems and approaches, because they locate disciplinary unity and coherence by looking backwards at a succession of mostly philosophical questions rather than looking forward to shared social ends and purposes, and because they assume no burden on our part to justify what we do to those outside the field or the academy. I also worry that lurking behind calls for a shared tradition organized to motivate advanced research is envy of our supposedly more rigorous disciplinary neighbors—philosophy, history, sociology, linguistics, the sciences, and so forth—and that what we really want is for rhetoric to have clearer intellectual boundaries, more richly delineated internal specializations, a less abashed research orientation, a more prominent body of technical knowledge, and so forth. But academic prestige, I believe, is a game that rhetoric can never and will never win, and we should probably give up trying to play it. Now I fully admit to benefiting personally from the increased academic status of "comp-rhet" over the past generation, and I'm grateful for the exertions of those who earlier fought for this status. But I also know first-hand the dangers of professional envy, the damage that can be

done by having an intellectual chip on your shoulders, the resentment that often accompanies a field lacking academic “prestige” and “status.” And I worry that internal justifications for study of the rhetorical tradition, in the end, sound too much like a plea for simple self-perpetuation, as if we were telling our graduate students: I have responded to my predecessors; now you respond to me. There must be more to academic life than that.

An external appeal, by contrast, sees study of the rhetorical tradition serving mostly *non-academic* (or at least *non-disciplinary*, *non-specialist*) constituencies, goals, and projects, contributing to a variety of social, political, and material ends: for example, to increased and deepened political participation in the population, to enhanced civic virtue in our students, to more effective and widespread nonviolent problem-solving, and so forth. It sees the rhetorical tradition, in other words, as broadly relevant and widely useful *beyond* our own careers and *outside* of our own scholarly communities. If the first half of this book is largely taken up with “internal” questions about what exactly the tradition is and how it can motivate our research, the second half is more concerned with questions of *relevance*, with what value the rhetorical tradition has in our society. Why, in other words, should we continue to study it? And how do we persuade others that such study is a good use of professional, intellectual, and material resources?

The most common answer given here, sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly, is that the tradition provides its students with *tools* that can help them better understand, participate in, criticize, and improve their lives, discourses, and communities: terms and theories that can travel from ancient to modern contexts, old habits that remain powerful in the new world, “classic” examples that continue to teach. But if the tradition is no longer *necessary* for imparting certain lessons, for making certain points, if it’s no longer the origin, foundation, and standard of rhetorical theory and practice, then what exactly is the status of these terms, theories, habits, and examples in contemporary life? Can the same lessons, the same points, be accessed through *other* means that our students, colleagues, and funding agencies might see as *more* relevant and less costly? How do we argue for the value of a tradition that is now so clearly *optional*?

Take Susan C. Jarratt’s piece in this volume. In many ways “A Human Measure: Ancient Rhetoric, Twenty-first Century Loss” was a highlight of this book for me: an intelligent, rich, moving piece about the discourses surrounding September 11, 2001, and the problems of national space, public and private memory, religion, and history that that event raised. But it’s precisely because I admire the essay so much that I want to trouble it here in terms of the questions I’ve been asking. In the piece Jarratt continually finds connections between the rhetorical tradition and our world, connections that she presents as helpful to her and

potentially, therefore, helpful to us. What I want to try to understand, though, is whether those connections are helpful *enough* to justify the considerable investment in the rhetorical tradition that scholars like Jarratt have made and implicitly invite us (and our students) to make as well. To put this in crass terms, is the intellectual payoff of the tradition worth the cost? And, if so, how are authors like Jarratt presenting that trade-off to their readers? How persuasive are their arguments for investing in the tradition?

Let me briefly trace the language that Jarratt uses in her piece to link past and present, rhetorical tradition and contemporary rhetoric. She begins the essay with fairly strong language about the connection between past and present:

In an active engagement with traditions, we preserve and value our rhetorical heritage but also view practices and institutions with the critical distance provided by our historical remove [. . .]. In this chapter [. . .] I ask how the rhetorical materials we have inherited can be called into service in a time of national crisis and public trauma. Where within our panoply of rhetorical materials (histories, theories, pedagogies, and practices) can we find explanatory power, guides for response, or even consolation for the events of September 11? (95)

The past is a *guide*, Jarratt writes; it serves us in time of need. And precisely because the past is in the past, because it is separated from us, it may be *uniquely* qualified to guide us.

By the second paragraph, however, the value of the tradition is already presented in somewhat weaker terms: “I look to ancient materials as *resonant analogues* for contemporary uses of public spaces as sites of contestation about violence and as scenes of mourning” (96, emphasis added). In moving from “guide” to “analogue,” I would argue, the tradition loses some of its hold on us. Similarly, in the next section, Jarratt again begins with fairly strong language: “[T]he availability of public space for deliberation over collective concerns” is a “legacy,” a “bequest,” of the rhetorical tradition (96). But by the end of the section, the value of the tradition already seems weaker: We hear “*echoes* of ancient rhetorical tropes, arguments, or rituals in September 11 rhetoric”; each of the contemporary political tensions she explores “finds its *echoes* in ancient Greek scenes” (97, emphases mine). This is the language she will now use to describe the value of the tradition in our world: A few pages later, for example, after a penetrating analysis of George W. Bush’s post-9/11 apocalyptic rhetoric, Jarratt turns to ancient Athens for “notable *examples* of rhetoric wherein the imagined polis is grounded in a mythical past” (100, emphasis added). Later still, “the

broad sweep of ancient Greek rhetoric serves as a uniquely flexible *source for reflection* on these questions” of imperialism and space (101, emphasis added). And further on, Jarratt writes that the fall of the World Trade Center “*brings to mind*” the story of Simonides and the collapsed banquet hall associated with him (102, emphasis added). Similarly: “The Athenian funeral oration offers the prime *example*” of civic memorializing (103, emphasis added); and the 9/11 fliers are “contemporary *examples*” of epideictic rhetoric (104, emphasis added). We are now fully in the realm of exemplification—a far weaker way of *using* the rhetorical tradition, I would argue, than that with which we started.

At the end of the piece, Jarratt explicates lucidly her theory of the connection between the rhetorical tradition and contemporary rhetoric: “The brief touchpoints offered here establish that in both ancient Greece and the United States of the twenty-first century, rhetoric has been used to define and consolidate the power of an imperial polis and to organize mourning in its service but that, at the same time, both operations have been resisted and disrupted by counterdiscourses and practices.” And she offers this summation: “There is no returning to a golden age of ancient rhetoric. But the rhetorical responses to a national trauma verify that [. . .] rhetorical traditions continue to prove their viability as a measure of a most human experience” (106). I find the word *prove* here a bit strong given that what Jarratt has actually done in the piece is to find in the past similarities, parallels, and echoes of a present that is clearly her (and, understandably, our) main focus. Pericles’ *Funeral Oration*, in other words, has been little more here than an example of a point that Jarratt wants to make about contemporary public discourse—an evocative and resonant example, but an example nonetheless. Is the past here a guide for the present, as Jarratt seems to argue in the opening paragraph, or a set of illustrations about the present? And couldn’t Jarratt’s argument here—about Bush, about post-9/11 US public discourse—have been made just as eloquently and effectively without those illustrations?

I had the gnawing suspicion throughout the piece, in fact, that the key text for Jarratt was not Thucydides’ *History of the Peloponnesian War* but Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities*, that if I really wanted to engage this piece, I would do better to read Habermas’s *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* than Nicole Loraux’s *Invention of Athens*. And I kept wanting to ask Jarratt: If she had a roomful of undergraduate students in front of her or a group of fellow citizens at the local library, what would she have them read in order to intelligently discuss her claims about public discourse? Would it really be Libanius’s *Olympic Oration*? I don’t presume to know the answer to that question, but I was struck while reading this piece how “optional” the classical references sometimes felt.

I experienced a similarly disconcerting moment of doubt regarding the *relevance* of ancient rhetoric while reading Janet Atwill’s essay about rhetoric and

civic virtue. Having carefully walked us through differing notions of civic virtue from sixth-, fifth-, and fourth-century (BCE) Greece—a wonderful example of complicating an otherwise inert and reified “tradition”—Atwill suddenly admits toward the end of the essay that, in fact, none of these ancient Greek models has been very influential in our contemporary understanding of civic virtue, which has been shaped more powerfully by the terms of eighteenth-century political debate (84). From the point of view of our fellow citizens, in other words, the classical tradition, *however construed*, has receded into some hazy, distant, largely irrelevant background. Given that, does the sophisticated historicizing, contextualizing, and criticizing of that tradition represented here by Atwill’s study really repay the efforts required to do it? The situation reminds me of my own experience with graduate students in composition: The rhetorics of ancient Greece and Rome often leave them cold; but the history of late nineteenth-century North American composition-rhetoric, for example, engages them, helps explain things for them, provokes them in useful ways. The former seems distant, unattractive, and, ultimately, beside the point; the latter is interesting, pertinent, alive. It’s hard not to conclude from this that while the ancient rhetorical tradition may be a rich field of inquiry for scholars like Jarratt and Atwill (and even me, if I could put myself in their company), their (and my) presentations of its *relevance* for our work today have not been especially compelling.

I’m not saying here that we shouldn’t keep working to *make* ancient Greek models of civic virtue more influential than they currently are or that we should stop reading Thucydides with our students. And I’m not suggesting that we give up on ancient rhetoric because it’s difficult or not obviously relevant for our students. That would be parochial and anti-intellectual. I’m saying that because a foundationalist argument for the tradition is no longer available to us and because of the difficulties of studying that tradition—its distance from us, the problem of its languages, its association with centuries of European ethnocentrism—we bear a burden to make such study *useful* that we are not, in general, meeting these days. The authors of these essays paint a picture of a *rich* and *interesting* tradition but not really a *necessary* one. They hear echoes of the present in the past; I hear them, too. But are echoes enough to keep a tradition alive in contexts of limited professional resources and alternative research projects that seem on the surface, at least, to be more relevant? My dissertation director used to say, having read another of my endless ways of analyzing some qualitative data I had collected, that there were a million things I *could* do with the data—the question was, which ones *should* I do? I have no doubt that I could take President Bush’s recent State of the Union address and analyze it according to the principles and vocabulary of the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*—but *should* I?

It will surprise readers who’ve stuck with me so far, then, that for all of the difficulties I had with the individual essays here, reading this volume in its

entirety convinced me that there *is* a compelling argument for the viability of the rhetorical tradition; there *is* something that makes it not just rich and interesting but *needed*. If that argument is never made explicit here—if a reader must piece it together from hints and clues scattered throughout the book—it's there nonetheless. It's an argument that says the rhetorical tradition is vital because it provides crucial intellectual space for thinking about, developing, and protecting a *teachable art of public discourse*, an art of political interaction for communities whose members recognize that they are irreducibly different from one another yet manifestly interdependent, people riven by conflict who wish nonetheless to stay together, to manage their conflict through discourse rather than alienation or violence—an art that can be *learned* by ordinary people and practiced responsibly and effectively by all. This art—it is the direct descendent of Protagoras's *politike techne*, based on an assumption of universally distributed civic virtues, enacted through everyday social discourse, and amenable to instruction—cannot be found, at least not in these terms, outside of the tradition of *rhetorical* theory, practice, and pedagogy inaugurated by the Greeks; and where it can be glimpsed elsewhere, I would argue, it is because of contact with that tradition. For this reason, the history of rhetoric is not only rich and interesting—it *is needed*.

Yet no one here comes right out and says this. Is that because, as a professional community, we no longer believe it? Or is it because we find it difficult anymore to imagine an historical alternative to *canon* that isn't merely *corpus*? Is it because we think that if we give up on foundational thinking about the past, all we have left is a bunch of old texts to pore over, an assortment of opaque signs to decipher, a collection of unruly phenomena to interpret? For advanced historical work, perhaps that is enough. But, given that rhetoricians can never be *only*, or even primarily, *historians*, given that we are professionally compelled, every day, to look the present squarely in its face—rhetoric, after all, is “an art of ‘intervention and invention’ in the here and now” (Kinney and Miller 143, quoting Janet Atwill)—arguments for a tradition that is essentially a repository of scholarly problems for advanced historical inquiry do not seem to me to be sufficient to sustain our work anymore. What we need is an argument that says the tradition is useful because it clears intellectual and practical space that no other tradition or discipline clears, a space so important and unique that without it those of us concerned with protecting and developing *contemporary* arts of public discourse would be, literally, *lost*.

The closest this volume comes to making that argument is the proposal made in the first essay by Richard Graff and Michael Leff that we begin to see the rhetorical tradition in primarily *pedagogical* terms. Coming from one of the more distinguished scholars of the tradition, in collaboration with one of its

more promising younger voices, it marks, in my opinion, a key moment in the rhetoric revival of our time, a sign that the theoretical impulse of the past generation may have played itself out and that something more socially compelling is needed if the study of rhetoric is to flourish. Unfortunately, the argument that rhetoric be seen in primarily educational terms is never really elaborated here: Graff and Leff open the door, but they aren't exactly rousing—"[w]hatever else we are or do, we all teach rhetoric" (25) is how they justify their proposal—and no one else in the volume really develops the idea in any depth. That's a shame because it's not only an argument that *needs* to be made, it's an argument that is not very difficult to make. Virtually alone among the academic disciplines, rhetoric motivates a genuinely *civic* educational project, one oriented to helping people live well with diverse others in free communities. It sponsors, more fully and effectively than any other tradition, a common, practical, ethical schooling, one that accords political life the complexity, contingency, and variety it deserves while still opening that life up so that ordinary people can learn to participate effectively and thoughtfully in it. No other educational project so powerfully resists the fragmentation of our schools and universities, tempers so well the abstraction of "theory" in everyday public life, rejects so acutely the neutralization of knowledge in modernity. No other discipline marshals so many rich intellectual resources of such long standing in the service of a practical education that isn't narrowly vocational; a *cultural* study that isn't merely critical; a *moral* discipline based on something other than dogma.

I don't mean to imply that any of this is transparent or noncontroversial. The rhetorical tradition is not an inert, unitary thing, invented once and then available for all time to all people. It is a disparate, shifting collection of practices, texts, and theories—a site of constantly changing opinions and ceaseless contest. But it is also, after all, a *tradition*, an inheritance handed down to us from those who came before, a way of thinking and acting that connects us to the past, to one another, and to our various "publics," and whose force is not necessarily invalidated by simply calling attention to its social constructedness. Historians will always try to pierce through the honorific haze of that tradition, deflate its pretensions, correct its errors. But it persists—sometimes even *despite* that research—because it serves crucial social needs and attracts diverse new adherents.

In the present volume, a pedagogical vision for rhetoric peers through most notably in the essays by Arthur E. Walzer ("Teaching 'Political Wisdom': Isocrates and the Tradition of *Dissoi Logoi*"), William Hart-Davidson, James P. Zappen, and S. Michael Halloran ("On the Formation of Democratic Citizens: Rethinking the Rhetorical Tradition in a Digital Age"), and Thomas J. Kinney and Thomas P. Miller ("Civic Humanism, a Postmortem?"), the very titles of

which suggest how the rhetorical tradition might be enlisted in the project of civic education. But perhaps the strongest indication here that a *pedagogical* turn is underway in contemporary appropriations of the rhetorical tradition is the role that Isocrates plays in this book; he is granted almost as much space as Aristotle and far more than Plato or Cicero, suggesting to me, at least, that it is the civic, sophistic, educational tradition of rhetoric, not the philosophical or humanistic one, that is sparking fire at the beginning of the twenty-first century. If these authors do not seem especially self-conscious that that is what is happening, a reader piecing together the clues offered by this volume, I think, cannot escape it.

In closing, let me offer, then, one small example of how the rhetorical tradition might sponsor something more useful than specialized historical investigation but less oppressive than uncritical celebration. In an article published a few years ago in *College Composition and Communication*, Bruce Horner and John Trimbur trace the history of how college composition arrived at a “tacit language policy of unidirectional English monolingualism” (594), a history that has gone largely unacknowledged and unquestioned by scholars and teachers for whom the phrase “English Only” would otherwise be anathema (“English Only and U.S. College Composition,” 53.4 [2002]: 594–630). In telling that story, the authors glance briefly at the multilingualism of rhetorical education before the late nineteenth century; in fact, the piece suggests that an important but neglected inheritance of the rhetorical tradition is the idea that classroom language practice can and should be decidedly bi- or even multilingual—that students learning to “write” and “speak” can and should constantly translate and transpose from one language (genre, mode, style, register) to another. As the sixteenth-century English tutor Roger Ascham put it, such “double translation” teaches students

not onlie all the hard congruities of Grammar, the choice of aptest wordes, the right framing of wordes and sentences, cumlines of figures and formes, fite for every matter and proper for everie tong, but that which is greater also, in marking dayly and folowing diligentlie thus the steppes of the best Authors, like invention of argumentes, like order in disposition, like utterance in Elocution. (qtd. in Abbott 153. “Rhetoric and Writing in the Renaissance.” *A Short History of Writing Instruction: From Ancient Greece to Modern America*. James J. Murphy, ed. 2nd ed. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates [2001]: 145–72)

The story of the decline of multilingual rhetorical education and the rise of monolingual college composition, at least in the United States, does not

require Horner and Trimbur to hold up earlier educational practices or beliefs to unalloyed praise since they realize that much of the old rhetoric was built on cultural predispositions and enacted through pedagogical techniques that we would not wish to emulate today. But they are nonetheless able to use history here to question what would otherwise seem inevitable about present practices and beliefs—and to suggest how, in practical terms, we might responsibly meet the needs of the increasingly multilingual and multicultural society in which we are embedded and to which we must answer. Their study of the past, in other words, incorporates *both* expert scholarly investigation of historical phenomena (reconstruction) *and* powerful edification of the present (appropriation). In their hands the rhetorical tradition is thus more than a succession of theorists bound together by theoretical problems, more than a collection of resonant examples to trot out when we want to deepen our debates—it is the space wherein we understand how the present came to be and ask why it can't be different. How, for example, could we criticize the tacit monolingual language policy of our schools and propose a viable alternative to it if we didn't know the historical contingency of such policy—if we didn't know that schooling has been and can still be otherwise? In this way, the past—always simultaneously limiting *and* liberating—is *never* irrelevant.

Perhaps we might begin to see the rhetorical tradition, then, neither as canon nor corpus but as *home*, as the space of our past (and sometimes present) selves—more empirically real and valid than a reified standard or model but more emotionally and ideologically fraught than the site of an archaeological dig. Like all homes, the tradition is something we are both drawn to and repelled from at the same time. It represents for us an earlier version of ourselves from which we have grown and changed; it is also the place where, no matter what we do and how far we travel, we are (or at least should be) always welcome. Some of us have moved further away from this home than others; and sometimes even those who remain close see there only an ever-diminishing circle of increasingly conservative, increasingly decrepit relatives. Yet, occasionally, if we are open to it, we will find there the answer we were looking for all along.

For me, what I see in the rhetorical tradition is proof of a deep-seated and longstanding human desire for vibrant, meaningful, even pleasurable political relations with one another and evidence that that desire can be—imperfectly, partially, contingently—fulfilled.

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