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Rhetorical Criticism: The Past Fifty Years

David Zarefsky

Not quite fifty years ago, in its fourth volume, *Speaker and Gavel* launched a feature called “Current Criticism.” Under the editorship of Wayne Brockriede, the journal took on an added mission: offering criticism of very recent cases of public address. Rather than traditional scholarly studies, the critiques were moiré like editorials: brief statements of an author’s point of view, with supporting arguments and evidence, on topics of current interest related to public policy. The best of these essays were collected in a book edited by Robert O. Weiss and Bernard L. Brock and published for DSR-TKA in 1971.¹

Revolutionary Change of the 1960s

Read against the then-prevailing trends in studies of public address, the “Current Criticism” essays were little short of revolutionary. First, they were centered on texts, topics, events, and controversies, whereas the typical public address study was biographical and speaker-oriented. Second, they eschewed the prevalent method of criticism, which involved the almost formulaic invocation of categories derived from Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* and carried the unwieldy if not libelous description of “neo-Aristotelianism” in favor of an argument-based criticism that put forth claims and supporting reasons.² Third, they were frankly contemporary and unconcerned by the risk that judgments of current issues would lack perspective or that the critic would be unable to escape personal predisposition or bias.³ And fourth, they explicitly positioned the critic as an advocate, espousing and trying to convince others of his or her views about the subject of the criticism. They rejected the view that the critic should be seen as a *tabula rasa* uninfluenced by one’s own beliefs or those of society at large.

If in its time “Current Criticism” had a revolutionary character, read fifty years later it seems to merit that most troublesome of epithets, “traditional.” The essays regarded “public address” as oratory. They concerned politics and public affairs. They primarily focused on arguments as the unit of analysis. And they evaluated speeches in the context of the actual audiences assembled to hear them. They were not primarily interested in the development or application of theory, nor do they appear to have been prompted by a desire to unpack or unmask ideology.

The shift in understanding of the essays in “Current Criticism” can serve as a marker for the dramatic changes in the study of public address and the practice of rhetorical criticism over the past half century. The most common form of analysis until the mid-1960s, as noted, was speaker-centered. The analysis included sections providing his or her (usually his) biography, with special focus on rhetorical education and training. Major speeches were identified and briefly summarized. Then the analysis identified Aristotelian genres of rhetoric (deliberative, forensic, and epideictic), frequently used modes of proof with illustra-

tive examples, characteristic choices of organization and style, and observations about delivery. Finally, there would be discussions of audiences and their reactions to the speech, leading to the critic's judgment of the speaker's success or failure. Some of the most successful of these studies appeared in the two-volume *A History and Criticism of American Public Address*, edited by William Norwood Brigrance and published under the auspices of the National Association of Teachers of Speech in 1943.⁴ A third volume, edited by Marie Hochmuth, was added in 1955,⁵ by which time the national organization had changed its name to Speech Association of America. When this critical paradigm was applied in almost mechanical fashion, the essays were derided as "cookie-cutter" studies and this adjective sometimes was thought to be inherent in "neo-Aristotelianism."

To be sure, from the beginning this paradigm was not monolithic. In the late 1940s, S. Judson Crandell initiated what would come to be known as movement studies, focusing on collective discourse rather than individual speakers.⁶ Leland Griffin amplified the nature of movement studies with his brief theoretical essay in 1952 and his own investigations of the antimasonic movement of the 1830s and the "new left" movement of the 1950s and early 1960s.⁷ In an influential essay in 1947, Ernest Wrage called for replacing the conventional speaker-centered study with an idea-centered study, focusing on what happened to ideas in the process of their transmission to audiences.⁸ His emphasis encouraged the study of controversies, not only formal debates and discussions but also clashes among diverse advocates that often took place across time. For Wrage, the value of studying public address was the contribution it could make to intellectual and social history. A third challenge to conventional wisdom during these years was offered by Wayland Maxfield Parrish, who questioned the primacy of identifying and discussing effects.⁹ He was more inclined to emphasize the artistry of a speech than to be concerned with the instrumentalism of its effects.

The occasional challenges to the dominant paradigm before the mid-1960s, however, were nothing compared to changes that have taken place since. In part, this reflected the widespread questioning of norms and customs that characterized the 1960s. In part, it reflected the desire of scholars to explain (and sometimes to participate in) the rhetorical turbulence of their own times, phenomena that conventional approaches to public address did not seem able to explain. In part, too, it reflected a recognition that oratory no longer was the most common or influential form of public communication and hence might not serve as the appropriate paradigm case. Awareness of these anomalies unleashed substantial pent-up energy and encouraged pluralism in both objects and methods of study.

Trends Over the Past Fifty Years¹⁰

To begin with, the scope of "public address" was broadened. Oratory was only one of its forms, not its defining feature. Informal conversations could be seen as public address, as could written documents, pictorial displays, art and music, popular culture, or actions understood symbolically. Even society and culture, some argue, could be seen as texts or representations.¹¹ Social move-

ments became one of the most often studied rhetorical forms during the 1970s; in later years the focus broadened to campaigns of all different kinds. Recently there has been great interest in studies of visual rhetoric, in studies of the persuasiveness of popular culture, and in analyses of how rhetoric can be used both to buttress and to challenge prevailing ideologies – to cite but a few examples of what today is encompassed by the term “public address. What has happened is that the term “public address” no longer identifies a rhetorical form (oratory) but rather a rhetorical function (evoking a public and addressing it). A definition that might embrace the variety of public address studies is “situated rhetorical practice” and this is the activity rhetorical criticism seeks to explain and assess. This definition emphasizes that anything that instantiates rhetoric can be understood as public address, and that the key feature is that public address is grounded in particular situations and contexts. It resists universal principles and lawlike deductions; it builds to inductive generalizations only by engaging the analysis of particular cases.

At the same time that we have evolved a much broader notion of what counts as public address, the field also has been characterized by a return to its roots with new energy and sophistication. Surprisingly, many of the earlier studies, in focusing so heavily on the speaker, neglected the rhetorical text. This may be why there are precious few studies even of such canonical works as the orations of Daniel Webster and John C. Calhoun, the debates of Abraham Lincoln and Stephen A. Douglas, or the sermons of Jonathan Edwards and Henry Ward Beecher. In contrast, one of the dominant contemporary trends is the close analysis of rhetorical texts, whether delivered by those historical giants or by more contemporary speakers such as Franklin D. Roosevelt, Martin Luther King, Jr., or Ronald Reagan. The purpose of the textual analyses is to unpack the sometimes subtle rhetorical artistry that a discerning critic can find in the text, and thereby to identify with some precision both the skill of the rhetor and the potential of the text to affect audiences. Usually in such studies the emphasis is on the critic’s relationship with the text. Often no claim is made about the actual intentions of the rhetor or about the reception of the text by its actual audience. When there is information about either of these matters, it is taken into account, but the absence of such information is not regarded as disabling for the criticism. Some scholars have objected to this approach on the grounds that it exalts the critic above the rhetor and the actual audience, but their objection is mitigated by the tendency of textual studies to examine paradigm cases of rhetorical performance, in which the significance of the rhetor and occasion can be stipulated safely and in which the immediate outcome of the discourse is well known.

If textual analysis examines rhetorical performance at the micro-level, a dominant emphasis at the macro-level has been to subject public address to ideology-critique.¹² This approach rests on four key assumptions: first, that the ability to influence others through speech is a source of power; second, that this power is not distributed evenly but is vested in those who also enjoy institutional, economic, and political power and personal privilege; third, that this power is wielded hegemonically so that the disempowered or oppressed may not be aware of their own condition; and fourth, criticism of rhetoric should unmask

this hegemonic power and thereby serve an emancipator function. Not surprisingly, such studies presuppose the existence of intractable conflict. Whereas earlier studies located agency in the individual rhetor and assumed that one person, properly prepared and motivated, could make a difference, studies of this type locate energy in large political systems or societies that extend their reach at the expense of the powerless individual unless they are stopped by the adroit practice of rhetorical criticism. Studies of this type have been dismissed as tautological: if the critic's ideological position is known in advance, there seems little need to perform the criticism, since it will report what the critic already "knows." On the other hand, there surely are situations in which the subtle workings of language do minimize very real tensions and conflicts that an ideologically-based criticism can usefully bring to light.

As a counterweight to the rhetorical power wielded by elites, a growing emphasis in rhetorical criticism has been on the discourses of the marginalized and underrepresented. If their voices have been too often silenced, the rationale runs, surely we ought to pay attention to the extant discourse they produced – both to bring to light how they deployed the rhetorical resources they did have and to offer role models. This approach also emphasizes the role of vernacular voices in the public dialogue, paralleling the emphasis on "bottom-up" social history that predominated in the years after the 1960s. Dovetailing with this emphasis has been a focus on the rhetorics of identity–discourses that celebrate difference by drawing attention especially to the speaker's race, class, gender, or sexual orientation (to mention identity categories that currently loom large). The broader insight offered by these studies is the recognition that public discourse is a means both to express and to constitute one's identity.

A fourth tendency worth noting in recent studies is to examine social and cultural practices as if they were texts. Topics ranging from commemoration and performance rituals to the quotidian practices of daily life can be examined for the messages they convey, the values they symbolize, and the bonds of community that they fashion, strengthen, or weaken. Whether through the massing of bodies at protest demonstrations, the decisions to purchase or to boycott a particular product or service, the cultural penetration of metaphors of sports or war, the reception of works of art, or a variety of other stimuli, audiences are addressed – even though not in the discursive or linear fashion that characterizes oratory or persuasive writing. In contemporary life, broadcast and electronic media increasingly are the channels of address and topics increasingly blur the line between public affairs and entertainment. Rhetorical criticism accordingly has broadened its scope to encompass these messages and channels.

A final tendency to be mentioned here is the growing interconnection between rhetorical criticism and theory. The motives for early criticism were largely pedagogical (to offer judicious criticisms that would provide role models to students for their own rhetorical performances) or historical (to explain and account for texts that were known or established to be historically important). These motivations for study have not disappeared, although the pedagogical motive especially plays a much less significant role. But joining them as a principal motivation has been the desire to relate practice to theory. Sometimes this

relationship has taken almost a mechanical form: a general theory or principle is stated, a case study is offered to illustrate or apply it, and the unremarkable conclusion is reached that the theory can explain the case. The more general the theory, the less profound the conclusion that the theory fits the case.

More interesting perhaps are case studies that modify, extend, or challenge a theoretical position by examining what initially might seem like an anomalous case or even a counter-example.¹³ The astute critic might resolve the seeming puzzle by qualifying the theory, drawing attention to its unexplored ramifications, or reinterpreting its meaning, or alternately might conclude that the theory is questionable or that a different theory better explains the case. Also interesting are critical studies that essentially generate theory by yielding conclusions that not only apply in the context of the specific case but also seem as though they would have more general application.¹⁴ As for the nature of the theory to which criticism relates, it is most commonly thought to be rhetorical theory, a body of knowledge which traces to the precepts of the ancients. Increasingly, however, political theory or social theory can be seen as the point of contact for rhetorical criticism. And, indeed, the boundaries among rhetorical, political, and social theory sometimes seem artificial, since all are concerned with human action in the realm of the contingent.

From the foregoing brief review, it should be apparent that pluralism is the hallmark of contemporary rhetorical criticism. On virtually every dimension – scope of the field, object of study, method, even purpose – the limited range of choices that persisted until the mid-1960s had been replaced by a profusion of possibilities. The past fifty years have been qualitatively different from the preceding period of similar length. Despite the vast range, however, several patterns can be identified.

First, in keeping with the recommendations of the 1970 National Developmental Conference on Rhetoric,¹⁵ there is a decided preference for studying contemporary discourse. A relatively smaller group of scholars are interested in and knowledgeable about earlier periods. Second, despite the growing international community of rhetoric scholars, most studies of rhetorical criticism are nationally circumscribed. Scholars in the United States, for example, tend to concentrate on U.S. public discourse. Third, while studies of religious rhetoric may have declined as a proportion of the total, studies of political rhetoric remain strong. But studies of popular culture and what are traditionally regarded as entertainment media are gaining in frequency and significance. This reflects the fact that popular media supply the common *topoi* of contemporary culture in the way that, say, the Bible and the classics did in the early 19th century. Fourth, as noted above, there is increasing interest in the relationship between criticism and theory and in the belief that critical attention should focus more on how rhetoric sustains power. Fifth, while article-length studies continue to be published and to sustain journals such as *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, *Rhetoric & Public Affairs*, and *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, there has been a significantly increased emphasis on book publication. Several university presses have established book series in rhetoric in which there is a place for works of rhetorical criticism. This move toward book publication enables scholars to develop arguments in more

depth and to have more opportunities to reach audiences beyond the boundaries of one's own discipline.

Current Challenges

Pluralism, however, is something of a mixed blessing. It validates the desire of any individual scholar to study whatever he or she wishes, and it recognizes that valuable insight can be derived from a study of almost any type. But the number of scholars working in the vineyards of rhetorical criticism is not very large and the intellectual resources are spread thin. The number devoting themselves to any one critical object or even any one type of critical object can be very small, even for what are widely regarded as paradigm cases of rhetorical performance. This makes it harder to subject studies to rigorous analysis and testing or to develop collaborative relationships among scholars with similar interests that could result in the improvement and greater sophistication of rhetorical studies.

Determining priorities for scholarly attention is a challenge both to individual scholars and to the field as a whole. There are other challenges as well. Among them are: (1) Developing a concept of agency that avoids both the naïve belief that one person or one message can make a significant difference and the cynical view that outcomes are totally determined by large impersonal forces and that no meaningful intervention in the course of events is possible. (2) Understanding how rhetoric has effects, how we know the effects of rhetoric in any given case, and whether the question of rhetoric's effects is an empirical question or a matter of a discourse's potential as envisioned and argued by a critic. (3) Determining for any given study the appropriate balance between offering a case study of interest and developing or extending theory. If a given study aims to do both, then the question is about the right mix of these goals and how it can be achieved. (4) Determining what traditions in rhetorical criticism remain viable and what the balance should be between honoring those traditions and striking out on new paths. This challenge applies both to methods of study and to the question of balancing studies of historical and contemporary cases.

When "Current Criticism" was launched, rhetorical criticism received a significant boost. The critical pluralism of the past fifty years has strengthened the subfield immensely. That pluralism should be the platform for the next generation of studies in rhetorical criticism. May they build upon the strong foundation that has been laid, while taking the subfield to new and greater strength.

Endnotes

¹ Robert O. Weiss and Bernard L. Brock, ed., *Current Criticism* (Lawrence, KS: The Allen Press, for DSR-TKA, 1971).

² These studies anticipated by several years Brockriede's position that rhetorical criticism should be understood as argument. See Wayne Brockriede, "Rhetorical Criticism^{as} Argument," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*. 60 (April, 1974), 165-174.

- ³ This issue had been raised years earlier by Wayne N. Thompson, "Contemporary Public Address as a Research Area," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 33 (October, 1947), 274-283, but many still shied away from contemporary studies because of the risks noted above.
- ⁴ William Norwood Brigance, ed., *A History and Criticism of American Public Address*, 2 vols. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1943). The National Association of Teachers of Speech was the forerunner of what is now the National Communication Association.
- ⁵ Marie Kathryn Hochmuth, ed., *A History and Criticism of American Public Address*, vol. 3 (New York: Russell & Russell, 1965).
- ⁶ S. Judson Crandell, "The Beginnings of a Methodology for Social Control Studies in Public Address," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 33 (February, 1947), 36-39.
- ⁷ Leland M. Griffin, "The Rhetoric of Historical Movements," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 38 (April, 1952), 184-188; Leland M. Griffin, "The Rhetorical Structure of the Antimasonic Movement," *The Rhetorical Idiom*, ed. Donald C. Bryant (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1958), 145-159; Leland M. Griffin, "The Rhetorical Structure of the 'New Left' Movement: Part I," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 50 (April, 1964), 113-135.
- ⁸ Ernest J. Wrage, "Public Address: A Study in Social and Intellectual History," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 33 (December, 1947), 451-457.
- ⁹ Wayland Maxfield Parrish, "The Study of Speeches," *American Speeches*, ed. Wayland Maxfield Parrish and Marie K. Hochmuth (New York: Longmans, 1954), 1-20.
- ¹⁰ Because of space limitations, this section is an editorial overview of the field as a whole. For a fuller discussion, including examples, see David Zarefsky, "History of Public Discourse Studies," *The SAGE Handbook of Rhetorical Studies*, ed. Andrea A. Lunsford, Kirt H. Wilson, and Rosa A. Eberly (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2009), 433-459; David Zarefsky, "Public Address Scholarship in the New Century: Achievements and Challenges," *The Handbook of Rhetoric and Public Address*, ed. Shawn J. Parry-Giles and J. Michael Hogan (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 67-85.
- ¹¹ For example, Richard Harvey Brown, *Society as Text: Essays on Rhetoric, Reason, and Reality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).
- ¹² See especially Raymie E. McKerrow, "Critical Rhetoric: Theory and Praxis," *Communication Monographs*, 56 (June, 1989), 91-111.
- ¹³ This reflects the approach of Thomas Kuhn that new theoretical paradigms are developed when a pattern of anomalies accumulates that conventionally ruling paradigms cannot explain. See Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2d ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).
- ¹⁴ This contribution of case studies to theory building was identified almost 50 years ago by John Waite Bowers, but his essay was controversial because it seemed to suggest that criticism's sole function was to serve the cause of theory-building without also being valuable in its own right. See John Waite Bowers, "The Pre-Scientific Function of Rhetorical Criticism," *Essays in*

Rhetorical Criticism, ed. Thomas R. Nilsen (New York: Random House, 1968), 126-145.

- ¹⁵ See Lloyd F. Bitzer and Edwin Black, ed., *The Prospect of Rhetoric* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1971).

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