

## University of Windsor Scholarship at UWindsor

---

OSSA Conference Archive

OSSA 2

---

May 15th, 9:00 AM - May 17th, 5:00 PM

# Commentary on Cohen

Michael Leff

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholar.uwindsor.ca/ossaarchive>



Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#)

---

Michael Leff, "Commentary on Cohen" (May 15, 1997). *OSSA Conference Archive*. Paper 22.  
<http://scholar.uwindsor.ca/ossaarchive/OSSA2/papersandcommentaries/22>

This Commentary is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences at Scholarship at UWindsor. It has been accepted for inclusion in OSSA Conference Archive by an authorized administrator of Scholarship at UWindsor. For more information, please contact [scholarship@uwindsor.ca](mailto:scholarship@uwindsor.ca).

# ARGUMENT AND INTERPRETIVE PERFORMANCE: A RESPONSE TO COHEN

Michael Leff

Department of Communication Studies

Northwestern University

©1998, Michael Leff

Of the many attractive features of Dan Cohen's paper, none is so striking as his symmetrical and concise diagnosis of the war between the post-modernists and the realists. Associating the post-modernists with rhetoric and the realists with logic, he aligns both sides in terms of chiasmically balanced maladies: rhetoric suffers from a faulty logic while logic suffers from a faulty rhetoric. This is an elegant figure, and more than that, as Cohen ramifies its implications, it helps to explain some important points about the conduct of argument and the problems of studying argumentation in the current academic environment. Nevertheless, synoptic elegance has its limitations, and Cohen's trope boils complicated matters down into dangerously simple terms.

Of course, Cohen is aware of this problem, and he warns us that he must oversimplify "the presentations of realism and post-modernism and gloss over some important caveats." Since he is a philosopher, it is hardly surprising that Cohen worries mainly about slighting the complexity of philosophical positions he surveys. As a rhetorician, I suffer from a different professional neurosis, and so I am worried about other matters—about the way Cohen connects rhetoric and interpretation and the way he characterizes their interaction. On these matters, I think he glosses over some important issues, and in what follows, I hope to complicate Cohen's position. But, since I find his position generally congenial, my objective is to help advance his larger project and to contribute something to his search for constructive alternatives to existing conceptions of the relationships among logic, rhetoric, and argument

Cohen assumes a connection between rhetoric and interpretation that is intimate but also tilted in a single direction. For him, interpretation works through rhetoric, or to put the point in other terms, rhetoric is the medium or vehicle for achieving interpretative understanding. We might call this position "rhetorical hermeneutics," and the adjective/noun relationship indicates the priority of hermeneutics. Moreover, from this rhetorically tinted perspective, all interpretative tasks share crucially important features—e.g.: interpretation is never capable of reduction to pure logic or neutral evidence, but is always situated and open-ended; interpretation is never resolved by the text in isolation, but always requires a creative intervention on the part of the reader; interpretation keeps moving, is constantly subject to new readings and always admits multiple meanings.

Like most other contemporary rhetoricians, I would not quarrel with any of these premises. At the same time, however, in his effort to achieve a general description of interpretation, Cohen places so much stress on these points of commonality—on the features common to all species of rhetorical interpretation—that he blurs some traditional and important distinctions. The most obvious of these is the distinction between expressive and explanatory types of interpretation.<sup>1</sup> This problem surfaces when Cohen suggests a full-blown identity between a jazz artist and a literary critic.

John Coltrane's rendition of "My Favorite Things" is surely an apt instance of interpretive creativity. But when Cohen adds that Coltrane, in using an old text to "his own ends", has done "just what literary critics do to written texts," he has stretched things a bit too far. When I think of someone doing to a verbal text what Coltrane does to a musical score, I do not think of Stanley Fish on *Paradise Lost* or Wayne Booth on *Pride and Prejudice*, but rather Olivier playing the wilderness scene in "King Lear," or Charles Laughton's virtuoso delivery of the

"Gettysburg Address" in the film "Ruggles of Red Gap", or perhaps the recent cinema versions of Richard III and Romeo and Juliet that retain the original text but set the action in a contemporary environment. In these instances, interpretation occurs through expressive performance. Such performances demand an understanding of the text, and they can (and often do) change the meaning of the text for an audience, but they do not explicitly explain how the text works or what it means. These are the tasks of the critic.

I am not denying that critical essays are "original texts in their own right" or that critics are themselves performers. But I do want to retain the difference between interpretation as an expressive performance of an original text and interpretation as a critical performance designed to explain the meaning of the original in terms that are not indigenous to it. Thus, to use one final example, when Cohen, acting as critic, offers us differing interpretations of *The Odyssey*, he gives us a creative performance, but not the same kind of performance or just the same kind of interpretation provided by Ian McKellen when he literally reads Fagles' translation of the text.

Insofar as they are situated and contingent forms of interpretation, both expressive and explanatory hermeneutics may be considered rhetorical. Yet, they are still different in some significant respects, and my main point is that we should avoid regarding the relationship between rhetoric and interpretation as monolithic. There are many possibilities, and some of these entail not only differing forms of rhetorical hermeneutics but a basically different alignment between rhetoric and hermeneutics.

Because the current philosophical recovery of rhetoric has occurred by rubbing up against literary theory and criticism, contemporary philosophers think of rhetoric as it is connected with interpretation—that is as the aesthetic version of rhetoric that has been variously disparaged and celebrated since the Enlightenment.<sup>2</sup> But rhetoric is a multi-dimensional concept, and among other variants, it can be conceived as a productive or inventive art primarily directed toward political activity. This is, of course, the version of rhetoric that we find in Aristotle, Cicero, Quintilian, and the other major writers in the classical tradition.

The productive/performative emphasis of the old rhetoric does not eliminate the role of interpretation.<sup>3</sup> As an art of political action, rhetoric must have its hermeneutic moments, since the orator must constantly adapt to changing situations and turn the resources of the art to specific tasks that formal theory cannot encompass. But interpretation here becomes a medium or vehicle for rhetorical invention, and this reverses the priorities that Cohen (and many other contemporary authors) assume. Instead of a rhetorical hermeneutic, we get a hermeneutical rhetoric—a rhetoric that uses interpretation as a resource for producing or performing argument.

An adequate explanation of this concept is impossible within the few minutes allotted to me now. But I can try to illustrate it briefly by referring to a passage in Quintilian that also employs an analogy between musical and verbal performance.

In the fifth book of his *Institutes*, Quintilian devotes an entire chapter to an analysis of the topics of the person and the act, a conventional item in the lore of rhetorical invention. These topics are resources or lines of argument an orator might use for proof; there are a lot of them, and they are arranged in a rather complex matrix. (It might be noted here that the classical treatise on argument is detailed and complex in dealing with strategies an arguer might use, whereas modern informal logics and rhetorics become detailed and technical about what the arguer should not do—that is about fallacies.)

After treating this topical system in all its detail, Quintilian issues a warning. The reader, he says, should not treat this system as something to be learned for its own sake, since the real value of the topics has to do with application to actual argumentative situations and these situations are too numerous and mutable to be fully


encompassed by any set of precepts. Likewise, no one should expect to memorize the topics and then hit upon just the right one to use in some particular case. Nothing of the kind is possible, since things move too quickly and take on too much density in real situations for rote memory to have any value. The topics, then, have little value as an independent system (as what we would call a "theory of argument"), and Quintilian tells us that anyone who knows no more than the rules themselves possesses a "dumb science" (*mutam scientiam*). The real value of the topics is to be found in the training they provide for the would-be orator. By attending to these argumentative strategies and applying them in practice compositions, the student can develop verbal resources and habits of thought that allow for spontaneous application to actual argumentative situations. Or, in terms Cohen might use, the student develops an interpretative skill that allows for creative adaptation to changing circumstances. Quintilian summarizes his position in these words:






But it is only by constant practice that we can secure that, just as the hands of the musician, even though his eyes be turned elsewhere, produce bass, treble, or intermediate notes by force of habit, so the thought of the orator should suffer no delay owing to the variety and number of possible arguments, but that the latter should present themselves uncalled, and just as letters and syllables require no thought on the part of a writer, so arguments should spontaneously follow the thought of the orator.<sup>4</sup>

In the case described by Quintilian, interpretation functions as a creative process that requires understanding of situations and the ability to adapt rhetorical strategies to them. In other cases, the classical tradition indicates more direct uses of textual interpretation as an ancilla to invention. For example, the doctrine of "imitation" entails not simply copying something from another text, but an active process of understanding the rhetoric of the old text and the appropriation of aspects of it for use in a new composition. It is in precisely this sense that Cicero can use Demosthenes' orations as both a stylistic and political model for his Philippic orations.<sup>5</sup> And, to refer to a more recent example, Garry Wills has shown how Lincoln interprets the Declaration of Independence for rhetorical purposes. When Lincoln makes the phrase "all men are created equal" a proposition rather than a self-evident truth, he not only reinterprets Jefferson but he establishes the crucial premise in his effort to reconceive the nation and announce a "new birth of freedom."<sup>6</sup>

Dan Cohen maintains that we need metaphors for argument that go beyond the thoroughly entrenched view of arguments as verbal wars. In this response, I have attempted to consider one such metaphor by revising a conventional view about the relationship between argument and invention; or to be more precise, I have attempted to reinterpret some old ideas on this matter and apply them to current interests. By reviving one strand of thought in the rhetorical tradition, we can think of argument as performance. Interpretation, from this perspective, often enters into argumentation as a performative resource, and the arguer becomes a performer who works within the tradition of an art and the history of a community. While this performance occurs within a competitive environment, judgment about its quality is not limited to winning or losing. The performance of argument has aesthetic and ethical dimensions attached to it, and attention to these dimensions, as something intrinsic to argumentative performance rather than an extrinsic standard to be imposed on it, might help us generate new and better ways of conceiving the relationships among logic, rhetoric, and interpretation.

### *Notes*

1. On this distinction, see Richard E. Palmer, *Hermeneutics: Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger and Gadamer* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1969): 14-26. 

2. For a detailed account of this issue, see Timothy Engstrom, "Philosophy's Anxiety of Rhetoric: Contemporary Revisions of a Politics of Separation," *Rhetorica*, 7 (1989): 209-238. 
3. There is some controversy about this point. But in support of the position I take here, see, for example, Kathy Edens, *Hermeneutics in the Rhetorical Tradition: Chapters in the Ancient Legacy and Its Humanist Reception* (New Haven: Yale, 1997). 
4. 5.10.125, translation by H.E. Butler in the Loeb edition of the *Institutio Oratoria* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1921). 
5. See Cecil Wooton, *Cicero's Philippics and their Demosthenic Model: The Rhetoric of Crisis* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983). 
6. *Lincoln at Gettysburg: The Words that Remade America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992). 

<a href="#">View Paper by D. Cohen</a>
<a href="#">View Index of Papers and Commentaries</a>
<a href="#">Return to Main Menu</a>