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# Remembering Edwin Black

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# Remembering Edwin Black

## **Abstract**

Our doctoral advisers teach us what it means to be scholars, teachers, and colleagues. Edwin Black's expectations of a critic were implied in the first graduate courses he offered at the University of Wisconsin: critics wrote illuminating criticism because their sensibilities not their methods permitted them to mine nonobvious insight from stubborn texts. At the same time, Black did not believe that most should aspire to be rhetorical critics. He said as much in his dissertation-turned-book: "Except in the hands of a very, very few men, the critical methodology that minimizes the personal responses, peculiar tastes, and singularities of the critic will be superior to the one that does not. In this regard, neo-Aristotelian criticism has undeniable value." Since he provisionally and later patently rejected the notion that there was a method to rhetorical criticism, I focused on trying to figure out how to get into the category of "very, very few men" without a gender change and on determining how, absent the comfort of a method, one could acquire the sensibilities of a critic.

## **Disciplines**

Communication | Social and Behavioral Sciences



# REMEMBERING EDWIN BLACK

KATHLEEN HALL JAMIESON

Our doctoral advisers teach us what it means to be scholars, teachers, and colleagues. Edwin Black's expectations of a critic were implied in the first graduate courses he offered at the University of Wisconsin: critics wrote illuminating criticism because their sensibilities not their methods permitted them to mine nonobvious insight from stubborn texts. At the same time, Black did not believe that most should aspire to be rhetorical critics. He said as much in his dissertation-turned-book: "Except in the hands of a very, very few men, the critical methodology that minimizes the personal responses, peculiar tastes, and singularities of the critic will be superior to the one that does not. In this regard, neo-Aristotelian criticism has undeniable value."<sup>1</sup> Since he provisionally and later patently rejected the notion that there was a method to rhetorical criticism, I focused on trying to figure out how to get into the category of "very, very few men" without a gender change and on determining how, absent the comfort of a method, one could acquire the sensibilities of a critic.

The lessons I took from his classes and publications are various. Our capacity as critics could be expanded if we read widely and well. Black's reading lists included: Plato, Aristotle, Marx, Freud, Richard Hofstadter, Perry Miller, T.S. Eliot, and Lionel Trilling. A critic's taste could be refined by exposure to great literature: *Crime and Punishment*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, *Paradise Lost*, *The Symposium*. We could learn to recognize and appreciate exemplary pieces of rhetoric and instances of criticism. Kenneth Burke had written "some of our subtlest psychological criticism."<sup>2</sup> Martin Maloney on Clarence Darrow was "an extraordinary study . . . sensitively conceived and written in a style that is exactly suited to its subject."<sup>3</sup> Newman's *Apologia* was epiphanic.<sup>4</sup> A critic was able to assess a work in part because she commanded such "touchstones of

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rhetorical excellence—Demosthenes, Cicero, Edmund Burke, for example—and [could] show the relative merit of discourse by comparing it to these touchstones.”<sup>5</sup> There are concepts in great works that invite reflection. Consider Wittgenstein’s statement at the end of *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*: “What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence.”<sup>6</sup> The lessons of that sentence changed as one turned it at different angles to the light.

Under it all was one identified skill: a good critic knew how to argue persuasively. There are occasional moments in Black’s published work that resurrect flash-frozen memories from my time in graduate school. When he critiqued an assigned reading, he took no prisoners. It all came back to me as I read a footnote to the first chapter of *Rhetorical Questions* in which he annotated his argument that “We cannot postulate a choice without a chooser, and inasmuch as we talk of convictions as objects of decision and responsibility, then a social identity based on conviction implicitly assumes the prior existence of an individual will.”<sup>7</sup> Buried at the back of the book, the appended thought reads:

Without meaning to be defiant, I have to remind the reader who would dissent from this argument that such a dissent, in effect, absolves me of responsibility for being wrong. If people are not responsible for their convictions, then how can I be responsible for mine? And if I am responsible for mine, then there must be other people who are responsible for theirs. If no one is responsible for his or her belief, then why should any belief (including the present one) ever be objected to? Do people object to other “natural” phenomena? Has the reader objected to a storm or an earthquake? If so, to whom?<sup>8</sup>

A cascade of rhetorical questions designed to end argument: a Blackean signature move.

The author of *Rhetorical Questions* deployed questions for a different purpose when advising. In office hours, Ed shaped chapter after chapter of my dissertation simply by asking questions designed to provoke thought. Is it possible that you and the pope define natural law very differently, he wondered? What would prompt a pope to issue an encyclical rather than some other form of rhetoric? How could an intelligent person tasked with leading a major institution issue a document that you see as so wrong headed? Each of my first three publications originated in a question he asked, one in qualifying exams, one in office hours, one in a note appended to a drafty draft of a chapter. Persistently, he asked me to do what his view of criticism required—find a way to be susceptible to the text, in my case a papal encyclical, and in the process to read it sympathetically. In the process he showed me what and how a critic questions.

Black cared deeply about the discipline of Communication, a fact reflected in his investment in the work of the field's young scholars during his tenure as editor of the *Quarterly Journal of Speech* and in his service as an administrator within and beyond his department at my alma mater. He and his colleague Lloyd Bitzer shared that sense of dedication. Part of what made the Communication Arts department at the University of Wisconsin a special place in the late 1960s and early 1970s (and I presume, beyond) was the presence of the twosome that in 1971 edited *The Prospect of Rhetoric: Report of the National Developmental Project*.<sup>9</sup> Black and Bitzer modeled collegiality. Each served on the committees of the other's students. When one couldn't walk a student through graduation, the other did. Each seemed to know what the other was teaching and reading. And when one mystified his students, the other found a way to bring clarity from confusion. Their friendship was life-long and built on shared assumptions that forged powerful enthymemes. It was Lloyd who called me to report that Ed was seriously ill.

*Rhetorical Criticism: A Study in Method* was the outward sign of an inward discussion that Edwin Black was having with himself and with his colleagues as I entered grad school in 1967. That conversation morphed into one essay-length exploration after another in the following decades. The topical menu was rich: the history of consciousness; sincerity and hypocrisy; the nature, meaning, and importance of belief and believing; affirmation and denial; the relation between rhetorical theory and criticism; the dissuasive function of argument; the public and private; contextually and developmentally comprehended genres; and ambiguity and rhetoric constraint. It was expressed in a style at once recognizable and inimitable. Black wrote from within a world preoccupied with "variegation of beliefs"<sup>10</sup> and "interstitial adhesions."<sup>11</sup> Eavesdropping on that conversation was like watching a chess game in which one person was playing both sides of the board in an effort to find the perfect game.

Edwin Black wanted his students to be better scholars than some of us thought we could be. He believed that an essay should not be published or a dissertation approved until its author had perfected it and herself in the process. Do not be in too much haste to publish from your dissertation, he cautioned his advisees. He offered the same counsel to those who submitted undigested cuts of their dissertations to *QJS* under his editorship. When told in an admixture of desperation and defiance that following his advice would ensure that I would fail to hold onto my tenure track job, he replied that a major university would not ascertain the character of a faculty member's c.v. by counting her articles. At times I thought that he inhabited a parallel universe in which the social code prohibited premature publication, passive voice, and nouns that modified nouns. In his world, tenure committees measured scholarly productivity in insight, not pounds or pages.

As maddening as I found them, Ed Black's expectations elevated my own. And I smile to myself as I write his words in quotation marks on student papers, "Avoid passive voice. It deadens style and dulls authorial accountability."

Edwin Black "aspired greatly" and expected his students and the field to do the same. He wrote a paradigm-shattering book at a time when many in the field were still focused on creating edited volumes, textbooks, and articles. He produced one magisterial essay after another. He told us by word and example that publishing well was more important than publishing often. He asked questions worth answering. His answers have become part of the culture shared by those who self-identify as rhetorical critics.

## NOTES

1. Edwin Black, *Rhetorical Criticism: A Study in Method* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1978), 76.
2. Black, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 25.
3. Black, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 23.
4. Black, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 156.
5. Black, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 67.
6. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 1961), 151.
7. Edwin Black, *Rhetorical Questions: Studies of Public Discourse* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 45.
8. Black, *Rhetorical Questions*, 190.
9. Lloyd F. Bitzer and Edwin Black, eds., *The Prospect of Rhetoric* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1971).
10. Black, *Rhetorical Questions*, 184.
11. Black, *Rhetorical Questions*, 16.