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Rhetorical Hermeneutics Revisited

STEVEN MAILLOUX

Rhetorical hermeneutics uses rhetoric to practice theory by doing history. To explain why and how this is so will be the primary goal of the following essay. Section I outlines the rhetorical context of academic disciplines and critical theory in the 1980s in order to explain why a rhetorical hermeneutics was proposed in the first place. Section II describes its major theoretical claims by responding to specific objections to its arguments. And Section III provides an abbreviated historical example of how rhetorical hermeneutics does its work.

WHY RHETORICAL HERMENEUTICS?

Rhetorical hermeneutics is the theoretical practice that results from the intersection between rhetorical pragmatism and the study of cultural rhetoric. Thus, one way of explaining rhetorical hermeneutics is to define the latter two modes of inquiry and then describe how the overlap between them constitutes a rhetorical approach to specific historical acts of cultural interpretation.

In the 1980s cultural studies became an influential outgrowth of several interdisciplinary projects in the human sciences. In his mid-decade essay "What Is Cultural Studies Anyway?" Richard Johnson began his answer, "Cultural studies is now a movement or a network. It has its own degrees in several colleges and universities and its own journals and meetings. It exercises a large influence on academic disciplines, especially on English studies, sociology, media and communication studies, linguistics and history." Johnson then went on to address the problems of institutionalization and definition, offering his own view of the interdisciplinary field: "For me cultural studies is about the historical forms of consciousness or subjectivity, or the subjective forms we live by, or, in a rather perilous compression, perhaps a reduction, the subjective side of social relations." Other quite different definitions of cultural studies also circulated in the eighties, but a certain consensus began to emerge. As Vincent Leitch commented near the end of the decade, "During the eighties, advocates of cultural studies influenced by poststructuralist thought advanced the argument that a pure pre-discursive, pre-cultural reality or socioeconomic infrastructure did not exist: cultural discourse constituted the ground of social existence as well as personal identity. Given this 'poetic,' the task of cultural studies was to study the conventions and representations fostered by the whole set of cultural discourses." Cultural studies as an academic movement had varying effects on disciplines in the humanities and social sciences. In English departments, for example, cultural studies helped expand the discipline's subject matter to include non-
literary as well as literary texts, cultural genres such as film and television, and social practices more generally. In the new English and Textual Studies major at Syracuse University, a predominantly cultural studies approach replaced the usual coverage model of literary historical periods. Instead of focusing exclusively on literature organized into periods such as Medieval, Renaissance, Victorian, and so on, the ETS major takes as its subject matter a variety of cultural texts and organizes their study through different modes of inquiry—historical, theoretical, and political. Courses offered during the first full year of the ETS curriculum (1990-91) included, in the history group, Introduction to Reception Aesthetics (Cases in American Culture), Introduction to Literary History—1700 to Contemporary (English Romantic Writers), and Studies in Periodization and Chronology (The American 1890s); in the theory group, Introduction to Semiotic Theories of Representation (Film Theory), Studies in Hermeneutics (Interpreting Law and Literature), Studies in Psychological Theories of Representation (Feminism and Psychoanalysis), Studies in Semiotics (Hearing and Textuality), Studies in Theory of Genre (Epistolarity and the Novel), and Studies in Cultural Theories of Representation (Eurocentrism, Postcoloniality, Revolution); and in the politics group, Introduction to Feminisms (Politics, Culture, Theory), Studies in Feminisms (Gender and the Culture of Television), and Studies in Sexualities (Power, Gender, and Shakespeare).

Most of these sample courses indicate the influence of recent cultural studies on the new Syracuse major and suggest some of the ways that an interdisciplinary cultural studies movement can change the shape of a traditional discipline.

A specifically rhetorical form of cultural studies begins by rethinking this contemporary interdisciplinary approach in terms of a rhetorical framework with a vocabulary of terms such as “cultural conversation,” “textual effects,” “tropes,” “arguments,” etc. In such a reconceptualization, “culture” gets defined as “the network of rhetorical practices that are extensions and manipulations of other practices—social, political, and economic.” Rhetoric is not simply an expression or reflection of “deeper” historical forces, whether psychological, social, political, or economic. Rather, rhetorical practices are (at least partly) constitutive of these other historical categories. A rhetorical cultural studies, then, attempts to describe and explain past and present configurations of rhetorical practices as they affect each other and as they extend and manipulate the social practices, political structures, and material circumstances in which they are embedded at particular historical moments.

A rhetorical cultural studies might, for example, interpret the function of a trope like “reading as eating” within a particular historical community during a specific historical period. How, for instance, was the trope tied to arguments about children reading fiction in the United States during the second half of the nineteenth century? How did the tropes and arguments about reading fiction relate to cultural narratives about “moral degeneracy” and “juvenile delinquency”? How did this cultural rhetoric of reading (its tropes, arguments, and narratives) circulate within different social institutions such as the family, the factory, the church, the primary school, the state reformatory, and the university and within different discourses such as literary texts, religious sermons, professional theories of child-rearing, newspaper editorials and literary
reviews, and political speeches about censorship? How did the figurative meaning of such tropes as “reading as eating” or “critical reading as mental discipline” get literalized in proposals to establish physical exercise classes alongside required courses in studying literature within state reformatories for juvenile delinquents in the 1880s? And how did this cultural rhetoric of reading get deployed differently according to gender in children’s literature and in reformatories for male and female adolescents? Questions of this kind focus most projects in rhetorical cultural studies and put into play such working definitions of rhetoric as “the political effectivity of trope and argument in culture.”

Rhetorical hermeneutics is a form of rhetorical cultural studies that takes as its topic specific historical acts of interpretation within their cultural contexts. But before expanding this description, I need to present rhetorical hermeneutics as a theoretical stance toward interpretation, a position related to rhetorical pragmatism. There are several ways of characterizing rhetorical pragmatism of the 1980s: a recent form of anti-foundationalist historicism; a poststructuralist instance of neo-sophistic rhetoric; a rhetoricized version of contemporary neo-pragmatism. The last of these descriptions is especially useful for my current purposes.

Perhaps the most influential neo-pragmatist during the eighties was Richard Rorty, whose Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature set the stage for a significant revival of North American pragmatism in philosophy and other related disciplines. Rather than describe at length Rorty’s version of neo-pragmatism, I will use one essay as a synecdoche for the rhetorical aspects of Rorty’s whole project.

To provide an initial rhetorical perspective on and from neo-pragmatism, we can start with a quotation from early in Rorty’s recent article, “Is Derrida a Transcendental Philosopher?”:

On my view, the only thing that can displace an intellectual world is another intellectual world—a new alternative, rather than an argument against an old alternative. The idea that there is some neutral ground on which to mount an argument against something as big as ‘logocentrism’ strikes me as one more logocentric hallucination. I do not think that demonstrations of ‘internal incoherence’ or of ‘presuppositional relationships’ ever do much to disabuse us of bad old ideas or institutions. Disabusing gets done, instead, by offering us sparkling new ideas, or utopian visions of glorious new institutions. The result of genuinely original thought, on my view, is not so much to refute or subvert our previous beliefs as to help us forget them by giving us a substitute for them.

This passage strikes me as an especially rich example of rhetorical pragmatism. Among the rhetorical points made are two on argumentation that Rorty makes again and again throughout his writings in the eighties. First is the anti-foundationalist point that there is no transcendental ground, no Archimedean standpoint beyond all argumentation, beyond all rhetoric, from which truth-claims can be adjudicated. And second is the nominalist, Wittgensteinian point that propositional argumentation does not bring about persuasion or conversion between two different paradigms or language games.

In developing the first, anti-foundationalist claim, Rorty rejects the “specifically transcendental project—a project of answering some question of the form ‘what are the conditions of the possibility of . . .’”—of, for example, experience, self-consciousness, language or philosophy itself.” Rorty admits “that asking and
answering that question is, indeed, the mark of a distinct genre”—foundationalist philosophy—but argues that “it is a thoroughly self-deceptive question. The habit of posing it—asking for noncausal, nonempirical, nonhistorical conditions—is the distinctive feature” of the Kantian tradition. “The trouble with the question is that it looks like a ‘scientific’ one, as if we knew how to debate the relative merits of alternative answers, just as we know how to debate alternative answers to questions about the conditions for the actuality of various things (e.g., political changes, quasars, psychoses). But it is not” (210).

Instead of continuing the Kantian foundationalist tradition in philosophy, Rorty wants to redescribe the rhetorical strategies and purposes of this philosophical genre, abandon some of its projects, and move philosophy in a different direction with new self-definitions. As traditionally viewed within the genre, transcendental projects are treated as if one could argue over their alternative proposals in some common vocabulary: “If one thinks of writers like Hegel, Heidegger, and Derrida as digging down to successively deeper levels of noncausal conditions—as scientists dig down to ever deeper levels of causal conditions (molecules behind tables, atoms behind molecules, quarks behind atoms . . .)—then the hapless and tedious metaphilosophical question ‘How can we tell when we have hit bottom?’ is bound to arise. More important, so will the question ‘Within what language are we to lay out arguments demonstrating (or even just making plausible) that we have correctly identified these conditions?’” When and how can the philosophical conversation end and how could we recognize the conclusion? “The latter question causes no great embarrassment for physicists, since they can say in advance what they want to get out of their theorizing. But it should embarrass people concerned with the question of what philosophical vocabulary to use, rather than with the question of what vocabulary will help us accomplish some specific purpose (e.g., splitting the atom, curing cancer, persuading the populace)” (212). Rorty argues that there is no transcendental ground with a common vocabulary from which to carry out a comparison between theories of ontological conditions of possibility and that we should be thinking of vocabularies as tools to accomplish rhetorical purposes instead of searching for the ultimate vocabulary beyond all others.

The point of foundationalist philosophy is to end all conversation by proposing the final argument, the all-encompassing system, the ground of grounds. Some think Derrida has found this with notions like “differance,” but Rorty sees such notions as “merely abbreviations for the familiar Peircean-Wittgensteinian anti-Cartesian thesis that meaning is a function of context, and that there is no theoretical barrier to an endless sequence of recontextualizations” (212). That is, foundationalist theory (or any other kind) cannot guarantee an end to the sequence of counter-arguments. There is always the possibility of arguing against, of proposing new tropes, of offering a conflicting story, of putting forward a different context. Though, we might add, there is not always the probability that a particular rhetorical move of this kind will occur or will work within historically-situated debates. Often a story becomes standard, an argument goes unchallenged, an ideology comes to dominate an historical community, and in those rhetorical contexts, the sequence of recontextualizations temporarily stops. Rorty’s point is that no foundationalist theory can ever
guarantee permanent closure to debate or ensure beforehand even a temporary consensus.

For Rorty, it would be better to redescribe transcendental philosophical projects not as making arguments that can be adjudicated in a common vocabulary but as proposing different worlds with different rhetorical structures. “For my purposes, the important place to draw a line is not between philosophy and non-philosophy but rather between topics which we know how to argue about and those we do not. It is the line between the attempt to be objective—to get a consensus on what we should believe—and a willingness to abandon consensus in the hope of transfiguration” (210). In distinguishing between “argumentative problem-solvers like Aristotle and Russell and oracular world-disclosers like Plato and Hegel” (211), Rorty seems to be making the rhetorical point that we should recognize a distinction between two uses of language: one use of language (problem-solving) that argues among different positions with a common or overlapping vocabulary within the same intellectual world; and another use of language (world-disclosing) that cannot argue across different worlds because there is not a common or significantly overlapping vocabulary and not enough shared argumentative criteria among the different (philosophical) positions, which themselves establish new vocabularies and criteria for problem-solving.

This leads to the second point concerning the passage quoted above, which addresses the question of refuting versus forgetting previous beliefs in displacing an intellectual world. Rorty draws a distinction between the suitability of argumentation within paradigms and the unsuitability of argumentation between paradigms. We know how to argue within a paradigm, he says, but we do not know how to argue across different paradigms; and, further, argumentation is completely irrelevant to changing position from one paradigm to another. I think Rorty here overstates the rhetorical case. The conversion to a new paradigm is often dependent upon the weakening of the old, and the weakening of the old paradigm includes refutation through propositional argumentation. Indeed, the combination of refutation within an old vocabulary and the offering of an attractive new vocabulary is exactly what Rorty himself is so good at. His rhetorical strategies include both maneuvers. Rorty at times seems to agree with this point, as when he writes: “Argumentation requires that the same vocabulary be used in premises and conclusions—that both be part of the same language-game. Hegelian Aufhebung is something quite different. It is what happens when we play elements of an old vocabulary off against each other in order to make us impatient for a new vocabulary. But that activity is quite different from playing old beliefs against other old beliefs in an attempt to see which survives. An existing language-game will provide ‘standard rules’ for the latter activity, but nothing could provide such rules for the former” (213). Rorty could be seen as describing here two kinds of propositional argumentation: one that argues for the self-contradiction, incoherence, or inadequacy of the old vocabulary (pushing us toward the new) and one that argues for one belief over the other within old vocabularies. It appears that Rorty wants to say that propositional argumentation only applies to the latter activity. But in both instances such argumenta-
tion is part of making a case: for a new world or an old belief. In each, argumentation is the means to a rhetorical end, not an end in itself.

Rorty could, I suppose, preserve his point by weakening his claim for a rigid distinction between the two rhetorical activities of problem-solving within an old vocabulary and problem-problematizing leading to a new vocabulary. That is, solving problems and disclosing a new world are two radically different rhetorical goals, but the means to achieve these goals can share rhetorical strategies, including propositional argumentation. But instead Rorty chooses to emphasize the rhetorical consequences of two very different kinds of philosophy: "We should . . . recognize that the writers usually identified as 'philosophers' include both argumentative problem-solvers like Aristotle and Russell and oracular world-disclosers like Plato and Hegel—both people good at rendering public accounts and people good at leaping in the dark" (211). And he goes on, "I object to the idea that one can be 'rigorous' if one's procedure [as world discloser] consists in inventing new words for what one is pleased to call 'conditions of possibility' rather than playing sentences using old words off against each other. The latter activity is what I take to constitute argumentation. Poetic world-disclosers like Hegel, Heidegger and Derrida have to pay a price, and part of that price is the inappropriateness to their work of notions like 'argumentation' and 'rigor' " (211). Rorty agrees with Habermas in a "nominalist, Wittgensteinian rejection of the idea that one can be nonpropositional and still be argumentative" (212). Perhaps this is true, but one can be nonpropositional and still be persuasive or rhetorical.

We can end this gloss on Rorty's essay with another of his rhetorical pragmatist points: "The practice of playing sentences off against one another in order to decide what to believe—the practice of argumentation—no more requires a 'ground' than the practice of using one stone to chip pieces off another stone in order to make a spear-point" (217, n. 16). Similarly, we might say that interpretive arguments over texts need no general hermeneutic foundations, no theoretical description of interpretation in general that provides ahistorical prescriptions for achieving correct meanings. Interpretive arguments get their work done within the historical clash of opinion. Even from this brief sketch of Rorty's views and their implications, it is easy to see why rhetoricians in speech communication, literary studies, and other disciplines have cited his neo-pragmatism as further evidence of the (latest) return of rhetoric to the humanities.12

Rhetorical hermeneutics is the intersection of rhetorical pragmatism and cultural rhetoric studies. Just as rhetorical pragmatism rejects the notion of foundationalist philosophy, rhetorical hermeneutics attempts to move critical theory from general theories about the interpretive process to rhetorical histories of specific interpretive acts.13 As hermeneutic theory becomes rhetorical history, the focus moves from pragmatist anti-foundationalism to studies of cultural rhetoric. But in rhetorical hermeneutics the claim is that a rhetorical analysis of a particular historical act of interpretation counts as a specific piece of rhetorically pragmatic theorizing about interpretation. Thus, rhetorical hermeneutics uses rhetoric to practice theory by doing history.

Such a project takes an historical act of interpretation—for example, the
Concord Library's banning of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* in March 1885—and does a rhetorical analysis of the cultural conversation in which that act participated. One might investigate why the issue of the “Negro Problem” played no role in the 1880s reception of Mark Twain's novel, a novel that twentieth-century readers have found deeply implicated in the cultural politics of race. How did Samuel Clemens’ public persona as a humorist affect interpretations and evaluations of *Huckleberry Finn*; that is, in what way is any 1885 reading of the novel more significant as an event in the evolving cultural reception of Mark Twain than as a part of some purely literary reception of *Huckleberry Finn* (whatever that would mean)? How was the Concord Library committee's reading of the novel connected to debates over the “Bad Boy Boom” of the mid-1880s, anxieties over gang juvenile delinquency and the negative effects of reading crime stories and dime novels? For rhetorical hermeneutics, this reception study provides an instance of interpretive theory as a form of rhetorical history. Unlike foundationalist theories, rhetorical hermeneutics focuses on the rhetorical histories of specific interpretive acts and makes no transcendental claims for the theoretical observations and historical narratives it tells about interpretation.

**OBJECTIONS TO RHETORICAL HERMENEUTICS**

Every theory is defined quite specifically by the tropes and arguments it uses to state and defend its claims. Rhetorical hermeneutics is no exception. In this section I would like to place the arguments of rhetorical hermeneutics in relation to those of its best critics as a way of further explaining its theoretical positions.

In “History, Epistemology, and the Example of *The Turn of the Screw,*” Paul Armstrong mounts a vigorous critique of rhetorical hermeneutics as part of his own proposed epistemology of interpretive conflict. Armstrong begins by presenting a fair summary of the rhetorical turn in hermeneutics: “Some contemporary critics have suggested that history offers a way out of the impasses of epistemology. . . . [I]f the inability of epistemology to legislate correctness means that different communities can regard different kinds of argumentation as persuasive, then perhaps we should study concretely the various rhetorical practices in which interpreters have engaged instead of attempting to define absolutely what a right reading must look like. This maneuver would turn epistemology into a historical issue by asking how ways of seeing are institutionalized in discursive practices” (*Conflict* 89). So far so good. But Armstrong adds that for such a theory “historical study seems to offer a means of avoiding irreconcilable epistemological disputes.” He then (rightly) asserts his strong opposition to any “hope” that historical study represents a guaranteed solution to interpretive disagreement (*Conflict* 89–90).

The problem here is that Armstrong has confused foundationalist theories of knowledge (called collectively “Epistemology”) and historical claims about how knowledges are generated, contested, revised, etc. (generalizations we can call “epistemologies”). That is, rhetorical hermeneutics does call into question the usefulness of disputes within “Epistemology” but then itself puts forward histories of conflicts among competing knowledge claims. Rhetorical herme-
neutics avoids Epistemological debates (e.g., between textual realism and readerly idealism) by setting their questions aside (e.g., refusing to ask "Does the text or the reader determine interpretation?"). It does not claim to avoid "irreconcilable epistemological disputes," as Armstrong asserts: rather, it takes such historical disputes as a rhetorical focus of study. Again: rhetorical hermeneutics rejects foundationalist theories of Epistemology which attempt to prescribe correct interpretations in general, but it does not eschew historical debates over particular textual interpretations.

Armstrong similarly confuses foundationalist Epistemology with historical epistemologies in his critique of Rorty's neo-pragmatism. Again he clearly summarizes his opponent's position: Rorty rejects philosophy as the "most basic" discipline whose responsibility it is to establish foundations for judging the knowledge-claims of other disciplines. In a multiple world of conflicting practices of thinking and speaking, it makes no sense to try to promulgate laws for how the mind should work, because to do so would be to propose only another manner of interpreting and talking about the world, not the way to end all ways. Consequently, Rorty advises, in order to come to grips with certain perpetually vexing philosophical problems, one should not try to develop an improved model of mind but should examine the historical record to see how they arose (Conflict 92). Defining "epistemology" as the "project of learning more about what we could know and how we might know it better by studying how our mind worked," Rorty advocates the abandonment of Epistemology as a philosophical project. Here Armstrong strongly disagrees, arguing that "Rorty's call for the demise of epistemology is self-contradictory because a theory of knowledge is implicit in his description of disciplines as diverse, changing conversations" (Conflict 92-93).

But again it is a question of what is meant by "epistemology" or "theories of knowledge." Rorty rejects foundationalist theory but not all reflection about knowledge claims. Indeed, as Armstrong points out, Rorty is constantly making rhetorical generalizations and telling conversational stories about how disciplines produce knowledge. Armstrong has simply missed Rorty's theoretical point. Another way of putting this: we can answer Armstrong's charge of self-contradiction against Rorty by using his own analysis of "theory," a term that has "a variety of meanings" (Conflict 91). Armstrong notes two current definitions: (1) "'theory' as the general activity of reflecting on the characteristics of literature and the implications of critical practice" and (2) "local 'theories' about the assumptions and aims that should guide interpretation" (Conflict 91). The first kind of theory gives us descriptions and the second prescriptions. What Armstrong does not mention is that foundationalist theory (including Epistemology) combines these two forms: it attempts to move from general descriptions to specific prescriptions—for example, from how the interpretive process works in general to how it should work in particular to produce correct interpretations. Rorty does not reject theory as reflection on practice, but he does advocate abandoning foundationalist theory in philosophy (Epistemology). Thus, Rorty's call for "the demise of [foundationalist] epistemology" does not contradict his
continuing concern with questions of knowledge production, his continuing theoretical reflection on the rhetorical practices of disciplines.

I should note, however, that for Rorty "reflection" is a problematic term for characterizing the kind of philosophy he advocates. He writes that "in its unobjectionable sense, 'theory' just means 'philosophy.' One can still have philosophy even after one stops arguing deductively and ceases to ask where the first principles are coming from..." That is, even when one rejects foundationalist theory—"the attempt to get outside practice and regulate it" from the ground of transcendental first principles—one can continue to do a form of theory. "I take 'literary theory,' as the term is currently used in America, to be a species of philosophy, an attempt to weave together some texts traditionally labeled 'philosophical' with other texts not so labeled," e.g., poems, novels, literary criticism. Rorty resists characterizing this as a reflective practice, arguing that this philosophical activity "is not exactly what Mailloux calls 'metapractice (practice about practice),' for that term suggests a vertical relationship, in which some practices are at higher levels than others." Indeed, I would argue (and would seem to agree more with Armstrong than Rorty here) that in certain rhetorical situations, particular practices are on a "higher level" both in the sense that the topic of one practice can be another practice (interpretive disputes as the topic for theoretical practices such as rhetorical hermeneutics and epistemologies of interpretive conflict) and in the sense that at particular historical moments certain practices are privileged over others. Perhaps this is just to argue that the trope of spatial levels is still useful in characterizing the rhetorical activity of theoretical practice despite its traditional associations with foundationalist theory.

But in Armstrong's critique there are theoretical issues at stake more significant than whether he understands Rorty's view of epistemology or whether he agrees with my characterization of theory as practice about practice. These issues involve what Armstrong takes to be the major failing of Rorty's neo-pragmatism and my rhetorical hermeneutics. One issue concerns his questions: "Are there no 'enduring constraints on what can count as knowledge' (Mirror 9), as [Rorty] argues, or are there transhistorical tests for validity? Is it sufficient to regard interpretive standards as totally internal to the community, or should we preserve some notion of otherness as the object to which interpreters are responsible and at which their various conversations aim, even if this otherness can vary radically according to how it is construed?" (Conflict 93).

To answer these questions, Armstrong does a reception history of Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*. This move from theory to history is exactly what a rhetorical hermeneutics advocates, but Armstrong somehow believes his study refutes rhetorical hermeneutics and rhetorical pragmatism more generally. There are several reasons for his conclusion. Armstrong seems to reject Rorty's attack on Epistemology at least partly because it entails a theoretical displacement of the confrontation model of subject and object with a conversation model of disputes among reading subjects. He agrees that "accurate representation" is not a useful model for describing understanding and relies instead on a notion of "variable conversations concerned with shifting, often incommensurable
problems” for explaining *The Turn of the Screw’s* reception. However, he argues that the “history of this work shows as well that the process of validation has certain constant forms across different communities and that validation cannot be collapsed into social agreement because it entails a *responsibility to otherness*” (*Conflict* 93, my emphasis). He implies that Rorty overemphasizes conversation and social agreement to such an extent that he loses all “transhistorical tests for validity” such as “a responsibility to otherness.”

But rhetorical pragmatism claims that interpretive disputes and social agreements (and disagreements) are *about* otherness—of texts, of disputants, of cultures. A rhetorical hermeneutics, for instance, argues that in most cases of literary reception, each of the disputants is holding the other responsible to the text; it is just that, as Armstrong himself admits, what counts as relevant or significant parts of the text is exactly what is under dispute. “Attempts to mediate or resolve such conflicts by pointing to what is really there in the text extend the debate instead of stopping it” (*Conflict* 94). But this rhetorical point can also be applied to the question of a text’s “otherness” or difference. That otherness cannot serve as a transhistorical test for interpretive validity when the make-up of the text, its identifiable otherness, and responsibility to that difference are all more or less at stake in particular historical debates over a text’s interpretation. It is not that rhetorical pragmatism denies the relevance of a text’s otherness to an interpretive debate; it is just that often otherness or difference is exactly what the debate is about and thus it cannot be a “transhistorical test” of a particular side’s interpretive claims. This is not to say that charging your opponent with failing to respect the text’s otherness might not be a very effective rhetorical strategy. It is to say that such a charge must be made to stick in a particular rhetorical context. Respecting difference is an historically-specific activity quite relevant to interpretive disputes over texts today, and thus any rhetorical analysis of how contemporary textual interpretation functions must take such a factor into account.

Armstrong provides some insightful comments on the rhetoric of interpretive disputes in his reception analysis of *The Turn of the Screw*. He notes how “If, as Rorty claims, different partners in a discussion may not see eye to eye because they are concerned about different problems, such divergences occur because the interpreters have conflicting beliefs about what the object is and how best to engage it” (*Conflict* 95). In another place he observes that “An antagonist in hermeneutic conflict not only has the option of questioning the opposing community’s assumptions and procedures but also may attempt to create embarrassing anomalies for it by pointing to textual details that its readings have not yet accounted for. On the other hand, however, these details are not simply empirical facts, for an interpreter may defend the validity of his or her reading by assimilating anomalous evidence through ingenious hypotheses that the opponent refuses to accept” (*Conflict* 99). Armstrong makes these and other useful theoretical/historical observations in the course of his reception study of *The Turn of the Screw*, and thus he provides a skillful example of using rhetoric to practice theory by doing history; that is, his study is a convincing instance of rhetorical hermeneutics.

Yet Armstrong takes his history and commentary to be a refutation, not a
confirmation, of rhetorical hermeneutics. Why? Again the problem is partly a matter of definition: Armstrong takes my agreement with Rorty to mean an abandonment of all historical, epistemological questions rather than a plea for setting aside the foundationalist questions of Epistemology. But our differences (misunderstandings?) go deeper than assumed definitions. As Armstrong notes, a rhetorical hermeneutics proposes that “the way to answer the realist/idealist question ‘Is meaning created by the text or by the reader or by both?’ is simply not to ask it.” Against this view, Armstrong argues, “The dispute about The Turn of the Screw suggests that the ‘realist/idealist question’ cannot be bypassed in the history of reception but turns up there again when critics with incompatible beliefs give incommensurable readings to ‘the facts of the text’” (Conflict 101). However, again, Armstrong has missed my point if he thinks I disagree with him. I am certainly not saying that “realist” and “idealist” theories of interpretation might not play a role in specific historical debates over texts (they do), nor am I saying that as an historian I won’t be pointing to texts and assumptions as a way of telling a story about a text’s reception and the debates that make it up. It is just that talking about a critic who appeals to foundationalist theories is not an instance of doing foundationalist theory. And to argue a specific history for a text’s reception or to suggest tips on how to do such histories is not to put forward a realist or idealist Epistemology. A rhetorician has no problem with arguing about facts and for heuristics, as long as “facts” are not taken to be non-interpretive givens and as long as “rules” are only seen as proposals to “try doing it this way.” To bypass the “realist/idealist question” means simply to refrain from doing foundationalist epistemology.

But in doing historical reception studies, does rhetorical hermeneutics claim to escape the historical problem of its own rhetorical situation? Is rhetorical hermeneutics guilty of ignoring its own history and rhetoric when it describes a particular example of interpretive conflict over a particular text? This seems to be what Armstrong suggests when he follows his description of rhetorical hermeneutics with objections that history “does not provide a neutral ground” and that history is itself a “hermeneutic construct,” never “disinterested, unbiased description” (Conflict 90). Is he implying that rhetorical hermeneutics denies these claims? But how could it? Rhetorical hermeneutics rejects foundationalist theory precisely because that theory attempts to place itself outside history and rhetoric in order to describe and prescribe interpretation in general. Any theoretical practice (including rhetorical hermeneutics) is within history as it reflects upon history, within rhetoric as it tropes and argues over interpretations and their histories. There is no ahistorical, nonrhetorical “neutral ground” from which historical arguments can be made. My history of Huckleberry Finn’s 1885 reception is an interpretive argument made within the rhetorical situation of the 1980s. It would be self-contradictory for a rhetorician to claim otherwise.

And this same rhetorical, historical embeddedness holds true for the therapeutic theoretical claims I am making as well. Another critic, Dieter Freundlieb, takes me to task when I propose that “textual realism” and “readerly idealism” have led to deadends in Epistemology and when I suggest that a rhetorical turn to history be taken instead. He writes: “Mailloux thinks he can simply describe the institutional history of literary criticism and explain why realism and idealism
seemed attractive to those who subscribed to them without himself engaging in any questions of epistemological validity. The philosophical naivety of Mail­loux's move is astounding. He believes that normative questions of historical accuracy and interpretive validity can be dealt with adequately by adopting the position of the epistemologically disengaged historian who can discuss these issues as purely rhetorical moves in a sequence of factual events." Astounding or not, the claim of rhetorical hermeneutics is that there are no standards for "epistemological validity" available if by "standards" one means the ahistorical criteria proposed by various realisms and idealisms throughout the history of Epistemology. There are, of course, historically specific "standards" (traditions for argumentative appeal) accepted within particular communities, disciplines, discourses, and so on, but these are local, contingent, rhetorical constructs, which have all the force of such constructs, which is all the force needed for interpretive debate and knowledge production to take place.

But, again, the claim here is not that rhetorical hermeneutics assumes an "epistemologically disengaged historian" even when the rhetorical historian is telling an institutional story about literary criticism and its relevant hermeneutic theories. Such stories are always told by an "engaged" historian—that is, an historian embedded, in this case, in the very history he or she is attempting to articulate. The only "disengagement" is with the foundationalist questions of Epistemology, not with the history of interpretive disputes, conflicting theoretical arguments, and changing epistemological assumptions. Thus, rhetorical historians must take all of these into account even as they realize (and at certain moments foreground) their own rhetorical situations in writing the histories they write. Freundlieb is correct in his speculation that I assume my own institutional story of the old New Criticism is "nothing but further rhetoric" (Freundlieb 838). But for a practitioner of rhetorical hermeneutics to accept this characterization (without the derogatory "nothing but") is not the fatal admission Freundlieb takes it to be. Rather it is the simple conclusion that follows from taking seriously that there is no escape from rhetoric and history into some transcendental realm from which the past can be heard speaking itself through a chronicler beyond all rhetoric.

**DOING RHETORICAL HERMENEUTICS**

There is not the space here to give a full-blown example of rhetorical hermeneutics at work, but I would like to present at least an abbreviated version of using rhetoric to practice theory by doing history. The Christian Bible provides an excellent topic for rhetorical hermeneutics, not only because of the long history of its reception but also because that reception has been so tied to the tradition of hermeneutic theory out of which this rhetorical version emerged. In the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself* (1845), Douglass describes an episode of biblical exegesis that starkly illustrates the politics of interpretation:

I have said my master found religious sanction for his cruelty. As an example, I will state one of many facts going to prove the charge. I have seen him tie up a lame young woman, and whip her with a heavy cowhide upon her naked shoulders, causing the warm red blood to drip; and, in justification of the bloody deed, he would quote this
passage of Scripture—"He that knoweth his master's will, and doeth it not, shall be beaten with many stripes."24

A study in rhetorical hermeneutics might take this act of interpreting Luke 12:47 and place it within the ideological rhetoric of pro-slavery arguments and their interested readings of Scripture. Such appropriations of biblical authority became a common response to Northern attacks on the South's "peculiar institution," attacks which used anti-slavery interpretations of the Bible to support condemnations of slavery as a moral evil.

Douglass' Narrative, of course, played an active role in abolitionist polemics within the anti-slavery movement, which itself was engaged in pro- and anti-abolitionist arguments over immediate emancipation of slaves and over political and religious association with slaveholders. A rhetorical hermeneutics could take another interpretive act—such as Margaret Fuller's 1845 review of Douglass' Narrative in the New-York Daily Tribune—and place it within the cultural rhetoric of the various strands of the slavery debate and its all-pervasive "Bible Politics."25 Here I simply want to supplement such a study in rhetorical hermeneutics with some brief comments about how conflicting interpretations of the Bible were closely connected to theoretical disputes over biblical hermeneutics in the antebellum United States.

Pro- and anti-slavery readings of Scripture produced theoretical arguments over the proper way to interpret the Old and New Testaments. In the 1830s abolitionists aimed their anti-slavery rhetoric at all citizens of the world but focused especially on the Christian churches of the Northern United States. Here, they thought, was their greatest opportunity to extend their anti-slavery cause, and here, by the 1840s, they found their greatest disappointment, perhaps their greatest failure in moral suasion.

Abolitionists and their opponents both assumed an interactive relation between the general public and the Christian clergy. Anti-slavery polemics often targeted public opinion by addressing the clergy who were seen as rhetorically shaping that opinion. In his 1843 pamphlet A Brotherhood of Thieves, Stephen Foster justified his abolitionist attack on Christian churches with this analysis of the rhetorical situation: "The will of the people for the time being is the supreme law of the land.... Hence the power which controls public opinion does, in fact, give laws to our country, and is, therefore, preeminently responsible for the vices which are sanctioned by those laws. That power in this case, is the priesthood, backed up and supported by the church. They are the manufacturers of our public sentiment; and, consequently, they hold in their hand the key to the great prison-house of Southern despotism."26 In contrast, some defenders of slavery saw the rhetorical power running in the opposite direction, from a small group of anti-slavery fanatics to a larger general public, then into Christian congregations.

Reverend William Graham began his 1844 attack on abolitionism:

Public opinion is now regarded as the great instrument of moral and social reform. Its power in a Government like ours cannot be questioned, but we may doubt whether its use is beneficial to the community. The public opinion of modern times is the opinion of a few, diffused with great effort through the multitude; it is manufactured with reference to a specific result; and in most cases can hardly be distinguished from
highly excited party feeling. This method of reform, with its varied means of agitation, has been introduced into the Church, and Christians have felt themselves constrained to employ it, almost to the rending of the Church.77

The abolitionist and the pro-slavery apologist had rather similar views of the general populace. Both saw public opinion as rhetorically "manufactured" by small groups of manipulators—either hypocritical clergyman or fanatical abolitionists. And both agreed that the way to combat this manipulation was to make a case for or against slavery by arguing a particular reading of Scripture. Like Douglass' master, the interpreters appropriated the meaning of the Christian Bible to serve their political ends. But this way of putting the rhetorical situation is somewhat misleading. It would be more useful to say that their opposed views of domestic slavery and its Scriptural sanction were part of their general ideological (which is to say, rhetorical) positions within 1840s discourses, institutions, and other material circumstances.

Those positions included the tropes, arguments, and narratives—the cultural rhetoric—placing abolitionists and defenders of slavery within the cultural conversation of antebellum America. Part of that conversation involved not only readings of the Bible but also theories for reading it. We can conclude our brief look at the rhetoric of "Bible Politics" by quoting again from Graham's The Contrast; or, The Bible and Abolitionism: an exegetical argument:

Abolitionism assumes to demonstrate . . . that the relation of master and slave is a gross sin—a violation of the laws of our being. From this, it follows by necessary consequence that no book authorizing this relation can come from God. The Christian Abolitionist denies that this relation is authorized by the Bible and adopts a system of exegetical rules that make the Scriptures teach according to his theory. (39–40)

Instead of using "the strict laws of interpretation" (40), abolitionists adopt a hermeneutic theory to suit their political theory, and in so doing they reject the obvious meanings of the Bible. For these biased readers, Scriptural evidence supporting slavery is interpreted out of existence. For them,

Abraham's "servants, bought with his money," are religious converts, and ever and doulos, instead of meaning slave, mean in fact only hired servant. The effect of such a mode of interpreting the Scriptures is obvious. Men learn to believe that the Bible is an unintelligible book. It ceases to speak to the heart and conscience with divine authority. The writing upon the wall may be from God, but the impression is according to their confidence in the interpreter. (40)

Having the wrong hermeneutic theory leads to relativism and interpretive distortion, according to Graham. But from the perspective of rhetorical hermeneutics, what counts as the right theory, the legitimate "laws of interpretation," is not independent of one's ideological position in the political and religious debates. That is, the biblical interpretation and its hermeneutic justification are part of the same rhetorical configuration. Indeed, a hermeneutic theory provides no guarantees for correctly interpreting Scripture or any other text, though it does provide additional argumentative strategies for making one's case.29 Doing rhetorical hermeneutics means writing rhetorical histories of such interpretive debates, focusing on the use of theory in rhetorical practice and on the practice of theory in doing history.
ENDNOTES


7Mailloux, Rhetorical Power, xi.


"Rorty, "Is Derrida a Transcendental Philosopher?" Yale Journal of Criticism 2 (Spring 1989): 208-209; further references to this essay will be given in parentheses in the main text.


"I will not here try to analyze in detail the historical connections between epistemology (theories of knowledge) and hermeneutics (theories of interpretation), but only say that the two enterprises have traditionally figured their projects in structurally-similar ways and have developed analogous arguments within their theoretical debates. For example, both enterprises ask theoretical questions about a relation between subjects and objects (knower and world, reader and text), have proposed variations on realist and idealist answers to these questions, and have framed those answers in similar vocabularies of conditions or constraints (in terms, for example, of what counts as true knowledge about reality or what counts as a correct interpretation of a text). For hermeneutic treatments of the relation between knowledge and interpretation, see Hans-Georg Gadamer, Truth and Method, 2nd rev. ed., trans. rev. by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 220-24, 291-300, 324-41; and Hirsch, Aims, 146-58. Also see recent debates in epistemic rhetoric: Robert L. Scott, "On Viewing Rhetoric as Epistemic: Ten Years Later," Central States Speech Journal 27 (Winter 1978): 258-66; Michael C. Leff, "In Search of Ariadne's Thread: Review of the Recent Literature on Rhetorical Theory," Central States Speech Journal 29 (Summer 1978): 73-91; and Richard A. Chernwitz and James W. Hikins, Communication and Knowledge: An Investigation in Rhetorical Epistemology (Columbia: U of South Carolina P., 1986).


"Rorty, Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature, 132.

"Rorty, Mirror, 157, quoted by Armstrong, Conflict, 92.


"This is, of course, the rhetorical lesson many reackrs take from Thomas S. Kuhn, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, 2nd ed. (Chicago: U of Chicago P., 1970).


"William Graham, The Contrasts: or, The Bible and Abolitionism: an exegetical argument (Cincinnati: Daily Cincinnati Atlas, 1844). 1. Further citations of this pamphlet will be given in parentheses in the main text.

"See Mailloux, Rhetorical Power, "Conclusion: The ABM Treaty Interpretation Dispute."