Troping and Arguing

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The essays in *The Rhetoric of Interpretation and the Interpretation of Rhetoric* skillfully engage three of the most important topics in recent critical theory: interpretation, rhetoric, and ideology. Paul Hernadi, the editor, provides a useful introduction to the whole, succinctly describing the arguments of the essays and pointing out the collection's underlying premise: "Interpretation takes place for a particular audience and within a specific historical horizon. Searching questions about interpretation thus elicit no less searching questions about rhetoric and ideology as well" (vii). The essays, previously published in *Poetics Today*, do indeed pay off on Hernadi's promise as they pose an abundance of searching questions and not a few theoretical, critical, and researched answers.

The first section, "The Rhetoric of Interpretation," begins with an essay of the same title by Hayden White. Known for his theoretical work on the tropics of historical narrative, White turns his attention to the rhetoric of literary interpretation. Taking rhetoric "less as a theory of persuasive speech than as the theory of the tropological bases of speech, discourse, and textuality" (2), White marks out for the reader the two notions of rhetoric interwoven throughout the whole collection: rhetoric as the study of figurative language and rhetoric as the study of persuasive argument. What his essay presents is an intricate performance of troping as critical argumentation.

White's tropological rhetoric provides an interpretive strategy for reading the Proustian text by repeating the figures of that rhetoric in ever-expanding concentric circles. White reads a scene, then a series of

scenes, then Proust's view of interpretation, and finally interpretation in general through a repetition of the four master tropes: metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony. Beginning with a passage from the volume *Sodome et Gomorrhe* of *À la recherche du temps perdu*, White uses the four tropes to name the four stages of interpretation in the scene where Marcel approaches and describes Hubert Robert's fountain. Then, by structural homology, the four stages within the fountain episode become the model for the relation among four successive scenes of interpretation, of which the fountain scene is the ironic culmination. After declaring that the repeated four-trope series is “a condensed model of Proustian interpretation in general” (7), White finally expands the scope of the model, now through a structural homology reaching outside Proust's text, into a paradigm for “the process of linguistic figuration itself” (19), a four-trope figuration that, according to White, constitutes the rhetorical essence of all interpretation.

White is an interpretive master of the master tropes, ingeniously deploying them on texts, interpretations, and theories. It is this repetition of the same figures, this strategy of troping tropes, that makes his interpretation more rhetorically heuristic than theoretically persuasive, more suggestive about what can be done through tropological practice in a specific interpretive case than convincing about what always can or does happen in interpretation in general. Ironically (and thus appropriately), though he does not fully demonstrate the applicability of his master trope model to all interpretations, White convincingly argues for the pervasiveness of the tropological aspect of interpretive discourse. He does not quite clinch his case for a specific archetypal tropology of interpretation, but he certainly creates a strong presumption against the rhetorical innocence of any interpretive act.

Jonathan Culler's “Interpretations: Data or Goals” continues White's inquiry into the function of tropes within interpretive rhetoric, but the former reverses the direction of the latter: whereas White begins with a tropological reading of a text and moves outward to a general hermeneutics, Culler starts with a general theoretical project and moves inward to the dynamics of tropes in a specific text. It is not that Culler provides a theory that is then applied. Indeed, this is exactly what he argues against: critical interpretations of individual texts should not be the goal of literary study; rather, they should be its data, its object of study. We should not try to argue for still another interpretation of a canonized text; we should attempt to analyze rhetorically how specific interpretations have taken and continue to take place. He asks the question, “Can one interpret a poem without making interpreta-
tion the overriding goal?” (27), and then demonstrates an affirmative answer.

Culler presents a rhetorical reading of Baudelaire's poem “Correspondances” and its past interpretations. He analyzes, for example, how critics make a case for their interpretations by establishing an intertextual relation between the poem and its sources or between the poem and Baudelaire's prose statements. This rhetorical use of intertextuality specifies particular tropological moves in the literary text, and some of these same moves are then used by critical texts in challenging past interpretations. That is, the rhetoric of criticism establishes tropes as part of the poem's meaning, and later critical rhetoric tropes these tropes in an ongoing interpretive agon. Culler himself argues for an interpretation that ironizes past readings of the poem's first stanza and then repeats past thematizations of tropes in the final tercets. His point is not to establish a new meaning for “Correspondances” but to demonstrate how interpretation consists of a complex interweaving of trope and argument, a rhetorical process that should become the new focus of critical attention.

Another way to play the White and Culler essays off each other is to say that White emphasizes the tropes within plausible readings—figuration in persuasion—while Culler emphasizes the plausibility of readings using tropes—persuasion as figuration. The two essays together illustrate how tropes and arguments are two sides of the same rhetorical coin of interpretation. In “Of Ants and Grasshoppers: Two Ways (or More) to Link Texts and Power,” Edward Pechter attends only to the arguments of interpretation and places those arguments on the level of explanatory theory rather than applied criticism. He is interested not in critical interpretation of literary texts but in hermeneutic positions about how literary interpretation does and should work. Unconcerned in this essay with the tropes of either literature or criticism, Pechter very deliberately makes theoretical use of tropes in figuring two conflicting views of power and interpretation. In the view of the hermeneutic “ants,” “interpretation is understood to be a tightly controlled activity, governed by the powerful institutions of collective life; and as serious, responsible critics we should be focusing on these institutions, seeing how they work, how they work on us, how we can change them.” In contrast, the hermeneutic “grasshoppers” argue that “interpretation is located in the power of the text or rather in a random responsiveness that allows texts to turn into experiences of energy, freedom, and pleasure” (41). Pechter proclaims himself one of the grasshoppers, but his rhetorical analyses later in the
essay show that he can do a pretty fine impersonation of an ant as well.

The typical ant would certainly have many questions about Pechter's grasshoppers: about their unexplained notion of "the power of the text," about their view of power's relation to the pleasures of reading, about how their way of interpreting "is the best source of power to enable social change" (51). Pechter does not, I believe, address these questions persuasively. What he does do is demonstrate considerable skill at rhetorically analyzing the arguments and potential counterarguments within the theoretical disputes between ants and grasshoppers. And he ends by calling for the disputants to transcend the oppositional structure of the theoretical debate, to find some way of being neither ant nor grasshopper, though Pechter himself never seems to go beyond "grasshopper advocacy" (52).

Or does he? Late in the essay, Pechter provides a reading of the original audience's probable response to *The Duchess of Malfi*, which, he argues, represented Webster's "pre-invention of the Nuclear Family," "a mode of existence that was more productive than the residues of an exhausted post-feudalism." I take it that Pechter sees this reading as grasshopperish (since he contrasts it with the antish interpretations of traditional literary history and of new historicism [50]). If this is the intention behind the example, however, it is difficult to see how it works. Pechter claims that only a grasshopper audience would be open to Webster's "pre-invention," for no ant audiences could "follow the performance's energies outside of their own consciously understood ideological agendas." But how could any audience, grasshopper or not, recognize the "pre-invention of the Nuclear Family" without some antish narrative about changing social conditions and "specific power relations" (50)? Pechter seems to realize this problem when he twice remarks that grasshopper audiences would only recognize the significance of the play "if they knew how to look" for it (50, 51). Knowing how to look for it means having some emergent sense of an antish story about the rise of the nuclear family. The lesson of his example, then, is not that "grasshoppers make the best ants" (51), but that, at least in this case, ants make the best grasshoppers. More generally, what Pechter's examples seem to demonstrate is that aesthetic pleasure and interpretive openness are politically conditioned and that antish reception studies can account for grasshopperish experience.

But Pechter has anticipated my antish rhetorical move here. In a persuasive description of how theoretical argument works, he suggests how such a move is a rhetorical act of containment, a kind of theoretical one-upmanship: any card you play I can trump by explain-
ing in my framework both your counterexample and your explanation. Pechter provides several of these rhetorical insights into theoretical argumentation (see, for example, his note 3). Still, my antish skepticism leaves me with many questions about Pechter's hermeneutics: Has Pechter confused different levels or sites of interpretive, rhetorical activity? Does he see any differences among the following interpretive experiences and rhetorical contexts: seeing a play with my wife and talking to her about it; watching a film with my students and discussing it in a college classroom; reading a novel and delivering a conference paper on it; listening to a song and writing a critical essay about it? Does a grasshopper's view of interpretation better “explain” the experience in one of these contexts and the antish view do better with another? Or would Pechter have a stronger case if he left the theoretical problem of explanation behind altogether and shifted to a very different issue? Is he really worried, not about two different hermeneutic accounts, but rather about two different attitudes toward interpretive experience, what Louise Rosenblatt calls efferent (antish) reading and aesthetic (grasshopperish) reading? Ants read efferently in the sense that they are looking to get something out of reading texts, looking to explain texts and reading experiences within, say, a political framework. When grasshoppers read, they don't care about explanations; they “simply” want to read a literary text “for itself,” aesthetically, “in a condition of random responsiveness to the incoherent variety of cultural phenomena that constitute us” (51). In this view, grasshoppers necessarily become fellow travelers of ants when they move from their true element of experiencing art to the different rhetorical context in which ants argue over explanations of that experiencing.

Essays in the next section, “Interpretation, Rhetoric, Ideology,” take up the most important question raised by Pechter: What is the relation of politics to theories and practices of interpretive rhetoric? For example, in “The Ideology of the Aesthetic,” Terry Eagleton argues that philosophies of aesthetics and the “aestheticizing of social practices” (77) have functioned rhetorically to guarantee willing submission to ruling-class ideology. “Structures of power must become structures of feeling and the name for this mediation from property to propriety is the aesthetic. If politics and aesthetics are deeply at one, it is because pleasurable conduct is the true index of successful social

1Louise M. Rosenblatt, *The Reader, the Text, the Poem* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1978), chapter 3.
hegemony, self-delight the very mark of social submission” (78). Bourgeois ideology not only constructs subjects and thus their interpretations of the social world; it also constitutes their experiences, their structures of feeling, as part of their subject positions. And this ideological process works through the rhetorical mechanisms of bourgeois aesthetics, as theory and social practice, which function “in consensual rather than coercive terms” (77), through hegemonic persuasion rather than brute force. Eagleton adds an ironic twist to his antithesis story of bourgeois aesthetics. That aesthetics advocates a bracketing of the interpreter’s own partisan concerns, a shift to a disinterested stance, and this bracketing provides the basis for a critique of “bourgeois possessive individualism and appetitive egoism” (85). For Eagleton, then, the aesthetic is contradictorily produced in bourgeois culture as simultaneously ideological and utopian, as persuasively hegemonic and subversively critical.

The relation between ideology and critique is more explicitly addressed in the essays by Houston Baker and Dominick LaCapra. Baker is concerned with constructing a position from which critique can take place within American practices of canon formation, whereas LaCapra is concerned with theorizing the relationship between ideology and critique more generally. Rhetoric, as trope and argument, plays a central role in both of their essays.

In “The Promised Body: Reflections on Canon in an Afro-American Context,” Baker argues for going beyond talk of “dismantling” or “replacing” the traditional canonized body of texts and advocates a more radical intervention that proposes “the African body as canonical promise” (102). Baker notes how texts of the Founding Fathers use “slavery as a trope for revolutionary arguments for freedom,” how they metaphorize the African body as an “unnatural” state of bondage—slavery—that the white colonists are attempting to escape. “Words of freedom are tropologically energized, that is, by deeds of slavery” (90). Baker’s rhetorical reading of several African-American narratives shows how those texts refigure the “natural”: “the African body becomes natural ground and grounding for the American body politic. As a first instance . . . of unnaturalness [in the tropes of the Founding Fathers], the African body returns, through African narrative embodiment, to disrupt a systematic complacency of traditional American historical and literary historical discourse” (97). Baker then literalizes the trope of the African body and uses it as the basis for a more socially pervasive, more politically insistent kind of canon reformation, one that involves far-reaching questions of “binding con-
tractual cultural texts, the production and reproduction of culture, and cultural axiology” (88). Proposing to redefine “canon” in terms of the Eucharistic prayer of the Mass (“This is my body . . .”), Baker uses this “canonical announcement of a promised body” to re-present the “promised African body” not as part of a dismantling or replacement of an academic canon but as an “emergence through suppressing forms and exclusionary rhetorics of that which is, in the truest possible sense, ‘emergent’: Viz. ‘demanding immediate action’” (102). Most concretely, Baker points to the bodies of African-American students at our colleges and observes, “The demanded canonical action today . . . —that which most effectively writes a new promise of a truly different academic and social order— is one in which a traditional canonization of polite theoretical and ideologically racist and sexist discourse gives way to pedagogical, historical, and personal attention to the fate of the African body on campuses where we work” (102). Though I disagree with Baker’s overgeneralized portrayal of contemporary theory as antihistorical (86–87), I can think of few essays that so unequivocally demonstrate the progressive possibilities of combining rhetorical reading with political critique.

In “Culture and Ideology: From Geertz to Marx,” Dominick LaCapra presents a theoretical framework for analyzing the workings of ideology in modern societies. He first distinguishes, defines, and explains a number of “aspects or levels” of “modern cultural systems”: official culture, political culture, high or elite culture, mass culture, and popular culture. His discussion of Western mass culture as commodified becomes especially instructive when it is read in conjunction with the preceding essay, Richard Ohmann’s “History and Literary History: The Case of Mass Culture,” which carefully reads the rhetorical designs of an 1895 Quaker Oats ad and magazine short story within the historical context of nineteenth-century monopoly capitalism. But the major contribution of LaCapra to the present collection is the intersection of his taxonomy of cultural levels with his brief analysis of the relation of ideology and critique. His description of ideology could usefully be supplemented by recent post-Althusserian theories of ideology and subject construction, especially attempts by Robert Wess, Eagleton, and others to give that theory a rhetorical turn. Still, LaCapra’s five-point description of a Marxist view of ideology provides one starting place for developing a more rhetorical view of ideology critique. I find especially useful his all-too-brief comments on a theoretical framework that “situates critique in a discursive and argumentative context which itself has no absolute or ultimate
grounds.” This antifoundationalist rhetoricizing of ideology critique, which “does not pretend to any transcendental or fully systematic (or totalized') perspective” (140), offers suggestive possibilities for a politicized theory of rhetorical pragmatism (despite the fact that LaCapra himself unaccountably refuses the label “pragmatic” for the “discursive and argumentative context” of critique).

Leading off the final section, “Interpreting Rhetoric,” is Susan Handelman’s “Parodic Play and Prophetic Reason: Two Interpretations of Interpretation.” The essay is primarily an interpretive outline of some key ideas in the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, an inspiring and challenging thinker whose work has significantly affected Sartre, Derrida, and other major French philosophers. Rather than summarize her summary here, I will simply read a part of it to tease out some implications for an ethical (and ultimately more political) view of rhetoric. Again we have the tension between rhetoric as trope and as persuasion. Handelman invokes the distinction when she criticizes Paul de Man’s mode of deconstruction: “Rhetoric became the ‘other’ of philosophy for de Man but lost its classical sense of language as an action or effect on a public audience.” Instead, de Man defined rhetoric primarily as trope and viewed rhetorical tropes as “negative epistemological challenges to grammar and logic” that “must be separated from ‘performative speech acts’ and the ‘pragmatic banality’ of psychology” (167). In contrast, Levinas begins with a view of language as an action or effect on an other. Language “coordinates me with another to whom I speak,” writes Levinas; “it signifies from the face of its other,” and thus, Handelman adds, language “calls me to responsibility” (167). Quoting Levinas again—language “offers things which are mine to the other. To speak is to make the world common”—Handelman explains that Levinas is pointing to the often unrecognized potential of language to be a gift, an offering, and welcome of the other. Language is “the relation between me and the other as interlocutor,” and that relation is “already ... necessary for a given even to appear as a sign” (155). And most important of all, the relation to the other is an ethical relation. Levinas: “Speech is not instituted in a homogenous or abstract medium, but in a world where it is necessary to aid and to give.” Handelman: Discourse is the “relation with the other demanding justice for all humanity” (157). For Levinas, ethics precedes not only ontology and metaphysics but politics as well. However, he recognizes the “ethical intent” and importance of political critiques like those of Marxism and supports the demand that, in his words, “theory be converted into concrete praxis of concern for others.” Certainly
Levinas's ethical view of language should be worked through by anyone interested in a more political view of rhetoric, and Handelman's helpful essay is one possible starting point for such a rhetorical and political rereading of Levinas's philosophy.

The remaining essays in the section do not promote similar reinterpretations of rhetoric per se but rather focus more narrowly on interpreting the rhetorics of specific genres: ethnography, history, and literature. In a sense, this final group of essays resembles an earlier contribution in the volume, Martin Jay's "The Rise of Hermeneutics and the Crisis of Ocularcentrism." Jay reads the tropes of modern elite cultural discourse as a chapter in the ongoing conflict between metaphors of seeing and those of hearing and then partly explains the contemporary re-emergence of hermeneutics as resulting from the triumph of aural tropes over ocular ones. He argues that "our increasing interest in the truths of interpretation rather than the methods of observation bespeaks a renewed respect for the ear over the eye as the organ of greatest value" (57). Jay complicates this rhetorical narrative by pointing out the peculiarity of some hermeneutic texts and concludes by advocating a productive tension between the rhetorics of image and word.

Like Jay's rhetorical reading of intellectual discourse more generally, each of the final essays takes a rhetorical stance toward a specific text or genre of texts. Michael Holquist uses Bakhtin's dialogism to reread The Great Gatsby as a text governed by the trope of oxymoron and then uses this rhetorical interpretation to illustrate his claims about "the universality of stereotyping as a semiotic function" and the "particularity of its effects" (211). More provocative is Renato Rosaldo's attempt to analyze the rhetoric of anthropological study and to suggest what the rhetoric excludes in trying to describe the cultural practices and lived experiences of its subjects. He characterizes ethnographic analyses of culture as either "metaphoric," treating "cultural phenomena as highly condensed reflections of larger totalities," or "metonymic," treating rituals as "part of larger processes" and not as "self-contained" wholes. Rosaldo then argues persuasively for the metonymic view, which metaphorizes rituals as "busy intersections through which a number of different processes happen to pass" (180).

In "The Challenge of Poetics to (Normal) Historical Practice," Robert F. Berkhofer makes a revealing study of the theoretical assumptions and rhetorical strategies of traditional historians. He does an exceptional job of unpacking the theoretical baggage—contextualism, empiricism, realism—that the practitioners themselves see as neces-
sary for their historical excursions and as necessary for those excursions to result in accurate guidebooks to the past. Berkhofer then briefly explores how contemporary literary theory offers a "poetics of history" that challenges the basic paradigm of normal historical practice. This poetics calls into question traditional notions of referentiality, of historical facts independent of historical narratives, of a singular past with coercive force over its present representation. Berkhofer concludes by suggesting some ways that historical practice might change if historians were persuaded by this poetics of history.

Most essays in this volume treat rhetorical practices—troping and arguing—as embedded in and effective on institutional complexes of cultural practices. And the most useful pieces suggest ways of understanding all these practices within the intersection of hermeneutics and politics. One might, for example, find in this collection substantial support for redefining "rhetoric" as the political effectivity of trope and argument in culture and then use that definition as a way of developing a more politically effective notion of interpretation as a thoroughly rhetorical act. In any case, especially for critical theorists and practitioners of cultural studies, this collection offers a unique opportunity to reconceptualize rhetoric as both a hermeneutic position and a tool of political analysis. The Rhetoric of Interpretation and the Interpretation of Rhetoric is an invaluable resource for thinking through the most significant theoretical issues facing the human sciences today.

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