

Review
Essay

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The Language of Scholarship

Rhetorical Perspectives on Academic Discourse and the Modern University

John S. Nelson, Allan Megill, and Donald N. McCloskey, eds. *The Rhetoric of the Human Sciences: Language and Argument in Scholarship and Public Affairs*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987, 445 pp.

Herbert W. Simons, ed. *The Rhetorical Turn: Invention and Persuasion in the Conduct of Inquiry*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990, 388 pp.

Many people outside the university community (and even some of our colleagues) have a rather naive perception of academics as a search for "pure" facts uncluttered by infighting, intrigue, or other political concerns. While most people in university faculty or administrative positions have outgrown these idealistic images and have become used to the "political" side of university life, we often cling to an "ivory tower" image of the scholarly side of academics. Frequently confronted with sensitive political issues and disputes in faculty or administrative meetings, we rarely connect these discussions to our more scholarly pursuits. Simultaneously amused and frustrated by the behavior of our colleagues in these endless debates and contentious meetings, we usually shrug off such foolishness and go back to our laboratories, classrooms, and administrative offices to pursue "truth" or "facts" in the protective purity of the academy's "ivory tower." Content to laugh at the bombast that characterizes the political side of the university, many of us continue to maintain a clear division between the pursuit of knowledge and such "mere rhetoric."

The two books reviewed here suggest that this division and the accompanying disdain for the rhetorical elements of academic life are not such good ideas. The central lessons of John S. Nelson, Allan Megill, and Donald N. McCloskey's *The Rhetoric of the Human Sciences* and Herbert W. Simons's *The Rhetorical Turn* are that there is no such thing as "mere" rhetoric and that rhetorical activity is at the heart of the scholarly search for truth. The essays in these volumes demonstrate

that, far from being immune to the pernicious grip of rhetoric, the practice of academics is replete with examples of rhetorical discourse. Furthermore, the collective voice of these essays urges us to *embrace* that rhetorical dimension of our vocations. While some will undoubtedly wish to deny these insights, the soul-searching called for by these books can help open doors to productive new understandings of both the nature of academic discourse and the role of the university in the larger civic arena. These books argue that, by understanding academic practice as a "reason-giving" activity rooted in language use and persuasion (i.e., a fundamentally *rhetorical* process), we can both improve that practice and, perhaps more importantly, better fulfill the important role of the university in society.

It is this second benefit of the rhetorical perspective on academic practice that makes these books especially relevant to this journal. Metropolitan universities have traditionally served a dual role, attempting to balance both scholarly pursuits and community responsibilities. This balancing act has not been easy, as recent anguished debates over the *mission* of such universities attest. Often thought of as "second class" by flagship university colleagues, faculty and administrators from more "service"-oriented universities have struggled with questions of image and purpose. Are such institutions more than glorified high schools? If so, how are we to define the essential nature of these universities? While Simons's and Nelson, Megill, and McCloskey's volumes do not pretend to offer easy answers to these questions, the views of rhetoric and scholarly activity presented in these books suggest that the marriage between scholarly practice and concern for civic affairs found in metropolitan universities may be closer to the ideal "academy" than the isolationist "ivory tower" mentality of many research institutions. Through an examination of the nature of both rhetoric and science, the authors repeatedly reveal the close relationship between science and society that is an inevitable product of the rhetorical character of academic practice.

Rhetoric has been viewed with suspicion ever since the time of Plato, who characterized its goal as "flattery." For many contemporary scholars, rhetoric is either a derogatory label for meaningless, vacuous speech (i.e., "mere" rhetoric) or else it is a simple tool for transmitting ideas arrived at through a process independent of rhetorical activity (this second perspective is based on what is often referred to as a "conduit" metaphor of communication). Both of these perspectives reject any significant role for rhetoric in the "objective" process of scientific discovery. Simons makes his objections to this "split between inquiry and advocacy" very clear in the introductory essay to his volume. Re-conceived as the "art of arraying and comparing ideas," rhetoric inherently involves an intimate connection between form and content. Short of those rare situations where conclusions are self-evident, all attempts to "prove" ideas involve the arrangement of evidence and claims and are thus attempts at "symbolic influence" or persuasion. It is this process of constructing convincing proof for ideas that lies at the heart of rhetorical action: all attempts to persuade an audience (whether that audience is an apathetic electorate or a journal referee) involve rhetoric.

This view of rhetoric expands its applicability considerably beyond the political arena, and it is the intent of these volumes to demonstrate the range and ubiquity of rhetoric in that great bastion of objectivity, academics. Following a line of reasoning used by other scholars who have argued for a strong *epistemic* role for language, Simons denies the notion of strict "objectivity" in science and contends that science is first and foremost a social activity that relies more on consensus than absolute proof. Arguing that "no logic is self-validating," Simons notes that systems of rationality and method are always dependent on some degree of agreement within a field. Science is thus "dependent on communal judgement," and what are normally thought of as *facts* and *logic* are symbolically mediated and determined as scientists attempt to persuade other scientists. Thus, persuasion is central to all scholarship and it is in this sense that "virtually all scholarly discourse is rhetorical."

This central insight is the key to the value of these books, for, by seeing academics as rhetorical, our attention is drawn to the connections between scholars and between the scholarly community and the larger culture. Rhetoric is the medium of those connections and by better understanding the role of rhetoric in scientific discovery and the publication of scholarly findings, we can better understand our practices as scholars and also gain a clearer sense of our roles as scholars, members of the academy, and, ultimately, as an important element of society. The self-reflection invited by the perspective of these books has much to offer those of us concerned about the role of the university in society, and I recommend them highly to readers of this journal.

Both books are collections of essays presented at conferences on the rhetoric of science and are attempts, in the words of Nelson, Megill, and McCloskey, to define "a new field . . . of interdisciplinary research on the rhetoric of inquiry" whose goal is to better understand the current rhetorical practices of research communities. As described by the editors, this field "explores how reason is rhetorical and how recognizing that fact should alter research." *The Rhetoric of the Human Sciences* is the earlier of the two books (arising from a 1984 University of Iowa Humanities Symposium on the Rhetoric of the Human Sciences) and focuses on defining and illustrating the utility of the rhetorical perspective on science. Three theoretical essays by the editors, Michael Leff, and Richard Rorty set the stage by laying the conceptual foundation of the approach. The most interesting of these essays is Rorty's, who objects to the tendency in modern science to overemphasize "objectivity" in science at the expense of values. He attacks current conceptualizations of rationality that equate reason with formal logic and argues that reason is best thought of as "sane," "reasonable," and "civilized" thought. This reconceptualization erases the barriers between science and the humanities and suggests that there is little utility in sharp divisions between *matters of fact* and *matters of opinion*. Rorty's intent is not to completely eliminate any rationale for scholarship with this argument. Rather, he argues for a "civil" notion of reason that highlights the social nature of science. Having established this theme, the rest of the volume is devoted to case studies of the rhetorical dimension of science

and presents an impressively broad array of illustrations, with examples drawn from the fields of mathematics, evolutionary biology, anthropology, experimental psychology, economics, theology, law, political science, and feminist studies. The editors' concluding article (by Nelson) is, disappointingly, rather more a compilation than a synthesis, but there is a provocative summary essay by Michael Leff and John Lyne that deserves careful attention for its discussion of some of the dangers of an excessive focus on the rhetorical dimension of science.

The Simons volume (*The Rhetorical Turn*) is also the product of a conference (at Temple University in 1986) and follows a similar format to the Nelson, Megill, and McCloskey book. However, this book exhibits the additional maturity and self-reflection one would expect from a later work in a new field. Simons defines his purpose as a move from deconstruction of science to a reconstruction of inquiry in light of the rhetorical character of scholarship. Noting that "even if reason is rhetorical, some reasons are better than others," Simons argues that the goals of the rhetoric-of-inquiry movement are to adjudicate between competing rationalities by discovering the better reasons and helping the better reasons *appear* better.

Like the Nelson et al. volume, the bulk of the book is devoted to the examination of case studies in the rhetoric of inquiry. These essays serve to describe the various roles of rhetoric in the construction of academic discourse in a wide variety of fields, including biology, evolutionary taxonomy, psychoanalysis, and conversational analysis. Of particular interest is the attempt in some of the essays to examine works that are not strictly scientific but lay claim to being academic and factual (Susan Wells's essay on a fact-finding commission's report on the Philadelphia MOVE tragedy, Carolyn Miller's examination of "decision science," and John Lyne's article on sociobiology are all excellent).

The final section of Simons's volume contains four essays that reflect on the utility and dangers of a rhetorical approach to scholarship. In one way or another they all address a central question: does a conception of science as rhetoric inevitably "dismantle" science by undermining the validity of scientific claims? Is the perspective inevitably destructive, ensuring that "all that has passed for knowledge in western culture is rendered suspect?" Dilip Gaonkar points out that there is considerable resistance to a rhetorical perspective on science, since rhetoric is often "seen as a nomadic discipline that threatens the integrity of the republic of knowledge itself." While no clear answer to these important questions emerges in this section, the final two essays (by Brown and Gaonkar) argue strongly that, far from being a *replacement* for science, rhetoric is a "service industry" whose task is to supplement scientific practice by simultaneously "seek[ing] a warrant for both scientific and ethical judgements" and providing a bridge between science and society. It is this notion of rhetoric's role as a connective between academics and the larger ethical/moral dimension of civic life that seems to make these books especially relevant to members of the metropolitan university community.

Aside from these sometimes heavy theoretical issues about the nature and impact of the new "rhetoric of science" field of inquiry,

there are a variety of more simple lessons about the role of rhetoric in scholarship to be found in the case study essays contained in both volumes. In particular, three of these simple lessons stand out and deserve mention in this review. One of the most striking points made repeatedly in these case studies is that, far from being a solitary pursuit of knowledge, academics is an intensely social activity. Finding formal notions of “proof” wanting, Rorty’s introductory essay in *The Rhetoric of the Human Sciences* defines “unforced agreement” as the end of academic persuasion and, in so doing, draws our attention to the “institutional” nature of academic fields and how those fields construct, formalize, and maintain standards of “proof.” This institutional focus is echoed throughout the Nelson et al. volume in essays by Nelson on the political nature of science, Campbell on Darwin’s attempt to develop an acceptable case for natural selection, and Davis and Hersh on the role of the audience in constructing mathematical proofs. Of particular note is James Boyd White’s essay on the role of rhetoric in constructing a “community” of legal scholars. White’s point is simple but profound: the way academic disciplines (or any rhetors) choose to speak or write serves to “constitute” a community united in values and standards that often go unrecognized and unchallenged. This sense of rhetoric is far more than a vehicle for transmission of ideas; indeed, White’s point suggests that we define our very culture and beliefs through our rhetoric. This conclusion lends new importance to ongoing discussions about the mission of universities: White is suggesting that through such debates we have the ability to constitute a new kind of academic community. We should take this notion seriously and seize the opportunity.

A second key lesson from these case studies is that the “form” or “style” of scientific discourse has a significant impact on substance. Far from being a mere matter of “packaging” or “decoration,” the style of an academic article constructs a narrative of data and claims that shapes the conclusion in significant respects. Misia Landau’s article (in Nelson et al.) on paleoanthropological treatments of our ancestor’s move from life in the trees to life on the ground shows how the same data can be used to construct radically different narratives on the evolutionary process. In a similar fashion, Campbell’s essay in the Simons volume, Gross’s examination of the MOVE report (also in Simons), and Rosaldo’s article on standards of objectivity in anthropological essays (in Nelson, Megill, and McCloskey) also demonstrate the power of form in constructing scientific proof. Perhaps most striking is the essay by Charles Bazerman (in Nelson, Megill, and McCloskey) on the well-known *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* in which he offers an outstanding account of how this popular “model of scientific writing embeds rhetorical assumptions.” Tracing the history of the style manual and the APA journals, Bazerman argues that the increasing detail of the manual has subordinated individual creativity and insight to a group program of “incremental encyclopedism” and has established limiting standards for what counts as “proof” and “data.” In short, the program of behaviorism has been built into the manual and psychology “has not escaped rhetoric, but has merely chosen one rhetoric and excluded alternatives.” These restrictions obviously shape the knowledge pro-

duced in such reports. As authors of articles, books, reports, memos, and presentations we should recognize this important role of form. How we say something is often as important as what it is we are trying to say.

Finally, the inevitable but often unacknowledged role of values in academics is highlighted by a number of these articles. One artifact of the "ivory tower" mentality so prevalent in academia is that the moral implications of research have no influence on scholarship and, indeed, need not be considered by the researcher. Several of these essays demonstrate the invalidity of both of these points. First, the case studies presented in both volumes are replete with examples of where social or moral agendas exert a strong influence on the process and products of research. Elshtain's fine essay (in Nelson et al.) on the ways in which feminist political agendas have confounded feminist studies is one excellent example. Another good illustration of the influence of social pressures and moral agendas is found in Campbell's essay (in Simons) on Darwin's effort to adapt his theories to the "aesthetic and theological" concerns of his age. Second, these two collections of essays call loudly for greater attention to the moral implications of scholarship. Several of the essays clearly demonstrate that scholarly conclusions carry moral implications. John Lyne's article on sociobiology (in Simons) and Misia Landau's essay on paleoanthropology (in Nelson et al.) are two clear examples of this "moralizing" in science. Lyne argues that "discourses of knowledge harbor moral and aesthetic lessons of all sorts" that are often ignored because they are "logically unclean" and difficult to address in an "objective" fashion. The result is that these complex and important issues are often completely avoided and scholars pretend that they do not exist or are someone else's problem. The result is that teleological arguments are often hidden in the guise of theoretical statements. While many scholars may prefer to avoid these issues, the clear implication of these volumes is that moral issues are an unavoidable component of the rhetorical dimension of scholarship.

It is easy to come away from many of these essays with a sense that their goal is to expose science and academia as a fraud, cloaked in claims of objectivity but, in reality, "mere" rhetoric. However, to draw that conclusion is to miss the real value of these books. To be sure, the range of case studies does much to debunk scientific myths and pretensions, but the overriding message is that the rhetorical dimension of scholarship, if embraced, complements the strengths of rigorous scientific methods by providing a way to deal with "logically unclean" issues of moral and social implications. Science excels at collecting data and proposing explanations for patterns in that data; rhetoric is necessary for constructing arguments from that data and, more importantly, is essential for "engaging in and adjudicating disputes concerning incommensurable values" (Eugene Garver, in Simons). In short, a recognition of the role and value of rhetoric in academic practice will allow scholars and universities to combine discussions of scientific and ethical issues.

If we take James Boyd White's point on "constituting" ourselves through our language and actions seriously and evaluate the scholarly

culture that academic practice has constructed in light of these volumes, we must conclude that the culture is woefully incomplete. By choosing to ignore the rhetorical element of our practice we have hidden the role of language and persuasion from ourselves and from others. Our understanding of scholarship is partial and myopic. This lack of understanding is, in itself, a cause for some concern. However, a greater loss is the opportunity for full participation in civic life that we are passing by in favor of our "ivory tower" seclusion. By recognizing and embracing rhetoric as an inevitable and valuable element of academic practice we can both pursue greater understanding and play a stronger positive role in society. The real value of these two books is that they are an important first step towards reconstituting an academic culture that pursues both truth and persuasion, that combines the search for facts with social leadership. The goal of these volumes is no less than a reconceptualization of academic practice.

While these books will certainly be of interest to rhetorical scholars and philosophers of science, the implications of their perspective should not be lost on those members of the academic community more concerned with issues of administration and the university's mission. Since the birth of rhetorical theory in the Golden Age of Greece, the social role of the rhetor as an ethical actor has been a prominent concern. When we assume the role of "advocate" in constructing persuasive messages, we are no longer isolated from the rest of society. Not only should we shoulder widely recognized ethical responsibilities to remain truthful to our data and avoid deception, but we should also exhibit a real concern for the social effect and utility of our ideas. We are first and foremost social actors, not merely autonomous "fact finders." Simultaneously influencing and influenced by society, academics has an inescapable role in civic life.

While neither I nor the authors of the essays in these volumes claim to have a sure-fire prescription for how to best fulfill this role, it seems to me that the more "service"-oriented universities addressed by this journal stand in an ideal position to maximize this conversation between society and the academy. The debates over the metropolitan university's *mission* that often find their way into these pages can be usefully conceived as a way to achieve that goal. By recognizing the central role of rhetoric in academic practice we can begin to build bridges between "ivory tower" academics and society as a whole. Such a connection can only be a step in the right direction. These books invite us to begin that journey by embracing the fundamentally rhetorical nature of our practice.