Politics & Rhetoric

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Politics & Rhetoric
Coming to Terms with Terms

George E. Yoos

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POLITICS & RHETORIC

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To the memory of Arthur E. Berndtson,

1913–1997

Previous philosophers have almost always directed their attention to the answers given in reply to philosophical questions. Their disputes were all concerned with these answers, their truth or falsity, their truth or refutation. The new point of view [linguistic philosophy] differs from all the others in that, from the start, it ignores the answers and directs all its attention towards questions. . . . The great mistake of philosophers up to now, which has led to so many misunderstandings, is that they have produced answers before seeing clearly the nature of the questions they have been asking.

F. Waismann, Late Reader in the Philosophy of Science, University of Oxford

There is no limit to language games, because there is no limit to language. Language, it has often been said, makes infinite use of finite means. There are only so many sounds, letters, words, and grammatical constructions in English. But they can be combined in an extraordinary number of ways—ways that are to all intents and purposes unlimited, for the simple reason that each day the language changes, offering new possibilities of ludic expression. Each turn of the road, indeed, can provide a fresh source of language play.

David Crystal, *By Hook or by Crook*

Der Ursprung und die primitive Form des Sprachspiels ist eine Reaktion; erst auf dieser können die kompliziertesten Formen wachsen. Die Sprache—will ich sagen—ist eine Verfeinerung, im Anfang war die Tat.—Goethe, *Faust I*.
The origin and primitive form of a language-game is a reaction; only from this can more complicated forms develop. Language—I want to say—is a refinement: “In the beginning was the deed.” Goethe, *Faust I*.

Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*

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A Preface on Rhetorical Studies

What I propose to do is to reframe the whole focus of the discussion of interpretation and definition by putting these modes of discourse into new rhetorical frames. They are frames that will give us a restructured and a radical reinterpretation of what we most often are doing in the name of interpretation and definition. Instead of looking at human communication from theoretical and conceptual frames derived from linguistics, formal semantics, formal theories of syntax, cognitive science, cognitive psychology, brain science, or neurophysiology, I prefer to look at these scientific perspectives on language use from outside the technical frames and the technical vocabulary of these disciplines.

I propose to look at interpretation and definition in terms of terms found in our ordinary discourse whereby we interpret the implications of their use for any discussion of communication and rhetoric. I want to discuss the issues about interpretation and definition from rhetorical frames by using terms found in our ordinary ways of speaking about clarification and meaning. I especially want to reframe rhetorical frames to probe issues about the arts of creating, making, and discovering meaning whereby we identify and communicate with each other. Although I am in one way looking at interpretation and definition from the view that it is our social politics that shapes meaning, much in the spirit of some current authors such as Edward Schiappa and Barry Brummett, I do not see meaning essentially as simply socially constructed in the manner that they describe. Rather I want to look at the shaping of meaning as a personal affair, as language play, as a refinement of usage. It is from such creative language sources—where authors, even scientists and humanists, try to say something original—that language can be found that can be assimilated politically and functionally into practice much in the way that social constructivist theorists of meaning describe.

To be able to do this reframing of the discussion of the issues surrounding interpretation and definition, I start from personal political perspectives on meaning that look at the processes and functions of the use of language spoken in the pragmatic applications and dynamics of human interaction. I especially see it in play in the terms that now shape our politics. Such language adapts to

complexities by making refinements of the things we do when we communicate in particular and especially in unique and unconventional situations.

And the refinement and increased capacity of language to adapt to the complexities of life through communication is dramatically and exponentially increased by the increased power of written language to enhance the power of practical thought through new language creation. I. A. Richards aptly described a book as a tool to think with (I. A. Richards 1965). But it is also a tool to think differently. And this creativity is equally true of visual and mathematical schemata. Creation of meaning in such visual schemes has equally exponentially increased the power of our coming to terms with terms especially in the sciences and in the continuing explorations in the humanities.

For clarity and better understanding of the communication modes of written language we need to reframe the discussion about the clarification of meaning in the uses of terms to come to terms. And in using ordinary terms to talk about the clarification of meaning we find that when interpretation and definition are considered as rhetorical modes, it best helps us to come to terms with the terms of our language, and in our special case the English language. Interpretation and definition as I propose to come to terms with them are the two important rhetorical modes that shape best terms that we use to talk about both our social and cognitive actions. They are the modes we use to best analyze and create the language that we count on and whereby we can best guide, advance, and improve upon the values that we define as key to our civilization. And that judgment about the value of words is a matter for our social politics, as many writers presently would agree.

The rhetorical frames that I propose to discuss and use in talking about interpretation and definition are frames that I have developed out of my own readings and writing about what has been going on in rhetorical studies in the last forty to fifty years. By reframing my conception of rhetoric in newly defined rhetorical modes, as I have recently done in a recent work on politics, I hope to show that our conception of what it is to interpret and to define takes on new meaning within these newly, revised rhetorical frames (Yoos 2007).

Many specialists in rhetoric conceive of rhetoric as a separate branch of study independent of communications and composition. And if this proposal were accepted, would there not be, then, three distinct and separate arts, the art of speech, the art of writing, and the art of rhetoric? And if so, how should we draw the lines between these seemingly three important separate arts? There are some very practical difficulties raised when we try to teach speech and writing independent of the other. Speech communications and written composition from a rhetorical perspective are both about language use and usage. Should they then

not be pedagogically inseparable, as we find with those who combine all the language arts into language arts programs, as they do in elementary education?

Speech communications and written composition tend to be arts overlapping with each other. Each needs to connect speech to written scripts and to connect writing styles to the tonalities, phrasings, and rhythms of plain speech. It is difficult to master speaking and writing skills independent of one another, especially as today more and more oral rhetoric, as we see it prepared today, is first scripted for the speaker so as to create a written text for an oral interpretation in the speaker's presentation. It was for this same reason that some people think speech and writing ought to be taught together on the college level in the same academic departments. Could it be that "rhetoric" should be the compromise name for this new focus, this conjunction of skills, as some rhetoricians have thought? But the Berkeley experiment with this sort of integration within its Rhetoric Department has not been repeated in higher education with the same success on the same scale elsewhere outside the University of California, Berkeley.

There is a great deal of academic departmental politics being fought over names. And there is a great deal of academic quest for status among those having different sorts of specialties in communication studies. In English departments there are turf battles being fought between those who teach English literature and those who are composition specialists. The literary people seem usually to win out in this battle. Comparably, there are similar turf issues that traditional speech departments face, especially given that communications departments are now large alliances between all sorts of communications and performance studies, specializing as they do with their different media studies, studies of group formats, and studies of different communications platforms with their different social interactions and performance functions. The National Communication Association (formerly the Speech Communication Association) bridges across many humanistic scholarly specialties, such as performance studies, public address, argumentation and forensics, public sphere studies and public policy studies, rhetorical theory, history of rhetoric, ethics in communication, critical and cultural studies, discourse studies, and now, lastly and importantly, mass media studies.

And historically, self-proclaimed rhetoricians and academically trained rhetoricians have struggled in their alienation within their departments with the diverse communication specialists for academic recognition, power, and professional status. A great deal of this struggle is over the allocation of grant money and fiscal resources for developing and expanding rhetoric as a specialty on the graduate level. This is especially true among those who are engaged in the teaching of reading, writing, and speech pedagogy, together with all those who

promote advanced forms of literacy that is so much needed for academic success and for achievement in the workaday world that requires communication competencies.

But rhetoricians trained in the classical traditions of rhetoric in the late nineteenth century lost this fiscal game over status and fiscal resources in English departments to literary scholars. And in that loss of academic turf, theoretical and applied rhetoric were both exorcised from departments dedicated to the study of English literature. Rhetoric, then, in these literature departments was reduced to the minimal adjunct status of simply a name for written composition. Nominally, then writing skills as taught after the demise of rhetoric in literature departments was mislabeled “Rhetoric and Composition.”

And ironically English composition until recently was taught with little attention, if any, to traditional rhetoric. And now with the new resurgence of interest in the teaching of rhetoric since the late 1960s in English departments, rhetoricians again are starting to reintroduce the teaching of rhetorical competencies into composition courses with much more emphasis on such rhetorical elements as invention, argument, and arrangement.

The only significant place that classical theoretical and applied rhetoric retained any past status as a subject matter in academia after the nineteenth-century demise of rhetoric was in conjunction with the teaching of public address and argumentation in speech and communications departments. And then, in the late 1960s, when there was a resurgence of interest in rhetoric among English composition specialists, it was to the speech traditions of scholarship and their work in historical studies about rhetoric that English scholars turned.

It was in this reaching out and as a result of the initiatives by compositional specialists in English in the guise of a new rhetoric that the Rhetoric Society of America was born in 1968. As a philosopher and as an early editor of the newsletters of the society, and later as editor of the *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, I acted pretty much as a go-between in those early days between speech and English, bringing the two sides together about matters of common rhetorical interest.

But there is another ancillary and back-door way rhetoric has been finding its way back into other fields and disciplines in academia. It was my job as editor of the *Quarterly* to canvas these interests in rhetoric outside speech and English. Not only has the history of rhetoric played a part in the intellectual and cultural history of Western society, but many of the writing, reading, speaking, and listening skills taught historically in rhetoric are comparable to the teaching of analytic and interpretive skills found in other disciplines both in the humanities and in the social sciences.

Noteworthy too after the 1960s there was a renewed interest in rhetorical criticism, not only in speech communications and in literature departments but

in many other academic fields, especially among those disciplines interested in politics and in the study of the diverse patterns of culture. And this type of criticism spilled over into newly developing programs in cultural and ethnic studies. Especially noteworthy is that rhetorical issues and topics found their way into women's studies, religious studies, and other ethnic and minority programs.

And about the same time there developed within analytic philosophy a parallel focus on critical analysis and argument critique. This linguistic turn in philosophy found its way into the course work in informal logic, which developed out of the introductory philosophy courses that were once the legacy courses in traditional Aristotelian logic (Yoos 1995). Much of this effort in informal logic later fell under the rubric of critical thinking, with its special concerns for such topics as public relations, propaganda analysis, and unmasking logical fallacies, the deceptions of advertising, and the ploys and ruses in politics. Many of these efforts came to fruition in the informal logic movement that came together and has been centered in the University of Windsor in Canada with the founding of the journal *Informal Logic: Reasoning, Argumentation Theory and Practice* (Johnson 1996).

The works of Chaim Perelman (1968) and Stephen Toulmin (1958, 1984) are exemplary examples of work in the new rhetoric by philosophers in the new types of rhetorical critique of argumentation and the critique of everyday reasoning that has always interested classical rhetoricians. And again in English studies there was the work of I. A. Richards (1965) and Kenneth Burke (1966) that helped lay the foundations for new ways of thinking about shaping meaning and fashioning rhetoric. Together these authors propelled rhetoricians in new directions and into revised conceptions about rhetoric that have given impetus to the renewed interests in rhetorical studies.

And beginning in the 1970s critical thinking began to achieve interdisciplinary status across academia and among educational proponents. And along with it there was another somewhat parallel, national interdisciplinary movement, "writing across the curriculum." Its specific purpose as a movement was the introduction of writing along with critical thinking into the classrooms across the curriculum. Critical thinking especially became a part of many new developing academic programs, not only in the humanities but in the social sciences, and even in the sciences, and even in such disparate fields as psychology, education, engineering, and philosophy.

And too it needs to be remembered that like the new rhetoric, classical rhetoric too had been all about problem solving, invention, discovery, arrangement, and especially the limitations of memory in communicating. Rhetoric as a discipline has traditionally dealt with what now are considered many of the contemporary topics of interest in the new rhetoric. Classical rhetoric had been

about methods of inquiry into the processes of communication—about such modern concerns as modeling, framing, organizing subject matters, types of genre, and using appropriate tones and types of appeal in writing and speaking styles.

All these new ways of looking at rhetoric and communications were the same as the traditional classical rhetorical concerns about invention, strategic planning, and the value of heuristics for finding things to say about various subject matters. All these issues had been historically entertained by traditional modes of rhetoric so as to make writing and speaking relatively persuasive and interesting, in addition to making writing readable and clear to different types of audiences.

Traditional rhetoric in that it had focused on the skills for designing effective strategies for communicating, for the composing of speeches, and for the compilation and organization of written texts, once was considered an architectonic rhetoric. Much the same has been true of the developments in the new rhetoric. It too like traditional rhetoric has focused on the wide-sweeping compass of rhetoric in the curriculum. The new rhetoric as a movement proposes a reconsideration of the overall aims and goals of rhetoric in the college curriculum.

But there is a certain abstract emptiness in such wide surveying and theoretical talk about what rhetoric is and about what its uses are. Understandably, there are those who are dissatisfied with global talkers and prefer to work with the concrete and the specific details of rhetoric in action. Thus there has emerged a controversy within rhetoric itself over the range and scope of rhetoric that is now labeled or characterized as *big rhetoric* versus *little rhetoric*. (See Gaonkar 1993; Mailloux 2000; McCloskey 1997; Petraglia 2003; and Schiappa 2003.)

I have found comparable parallels of division in other disciplines. For example, I was astounded to find that phenomenologists seemed to want to talk about phenomenology rather than do phenomenology. There is the same parallel in the natural sciences. There are those who want to talk about it, its history and its methods, and there are those who simply want to do science and not talk about it. But this is true of many disciplines. And I find this also to be true in philosophy. There are the doers and the talkers about it.

Traditionally, classical rhetoric, then, was “big time rhetoric.” It was conceived as an overarching discipline of many disciplines. Very much like architecture it was thought to be an architectonic art. Philosophy and history too have traditionally have had this proclaimed status. Just as we can have a history and a philosophy about just any discipline, so the same claim can be made for rhetoric. Just as there can be a history of philosophy and a history of rhetoric, there can be a philosophy of history and a philosophy of rhetoric. Equally, there can be a rhetoric of philosophy, a rhetoric of history, and equally there can be a rhetoric of all the lesser arts and disciplines. Now there is a rhetoric of

architecture, of painting, of music, of religion, of science, of politics as well as of economics.

At the present time we find that rhetoric is in an object of public ridicule, opprobrium, derision, and derogation for all of its past asinities and its alleged pretentious misdeeds in promoting high-toned propriety, elegance, and pomposity. Rhetoric is thought to be dedicated to bombast and charming talk, dirty tricks, and now politics and propaganda. Right now rhetoric is popularly thought to be about verbal emptiness that flimflams the unsophisticated much in the spirit of advertising and public relations specialists who with their marketing skills are producing all the contemporary deceptive spin about pharmaceuticals and politics. People now talk mainly about studying rhetoric to expose such duplicity. And as a result rhetoric is being justified by the desperate advocates of change as a proper course of study for self-defense against some of its own alleged tricks and verbal misdeeds. Some now want to teach it as an antidote to counter its own sins much in the spirit of Aristotle's *On Sophistical Refutations* (1941) written to counter sophisms.

But this limited application of rhetoric to rhetorical criticism reduces its role and function in academia. In that role of making dirty tricks transparent it will always be adjunct to those concerned with social critique. But importantly, such critique is the business of "small rhetoric." Small rhetoric is by its own definition becomes an adjunct interest. It is an interest with limited aims. It is an art with specific critical skills that address circumscribed issues in communications studies such as style, eloquence, and persuasion. And small rhetoric is the major type of research and scholarship that we see going on at the present time in diverse communications specialties where uses of argument and the study of modes of persuasion are auxiliary. But nevertheless small rhetoric is pervasive in studies of practical concerns in all the different sorts of communication specialties. It is at the heart of all language and cultural critique. One cannot deny the importance of such activities for social and cultural critiques especially in politics.

It is not much of a confession for me to say that my heart has been with big rhetoric because I came to rhetoric from philosophy, from Informal Logic, and critical thinking (CT) where the big issues about language and pragmatics are at the forefront of interest in practical logic. And as such you will find that this book is about big rhetoric. I see it as an interdisciplinary discipline that seems to be a confusing oxymoron in categorizing any specialty. But interdisciplinary or not, it is within the frame of big rhetoric that I want to begin my lengthy analysis of what I consider to be two fundamental and significant rhetorical modes, interpretation and definition.

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November 2008