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ABSTRACT

If the idea is true that a theory is an abstract model that explains an objective phenomenon, where objective means anything that exists independent of individual human volition, then the best known example of such a rhetorical theory would be Lloyd Bitzer's famous rhetorical situation. Bitzer has argued that a rhetorical act comes into being when people respond in words to objectively recognizable structures which he calls exigencies. Exigencies are the critical moments in civic life when something needs to be said in order to do something that needs to be done. Bitzer, in effect, offers a rhetorical theory that is based on a stipulative definition of rhetoric. Thus, there is a secure definition of rhetoric and therefore a secure rhetorical theory. Bitzer invoked the long-standing presumption of the division between theory and practice which can be traced to Aristotle and Cicero. Plato left rhetoricians with the impression that if they are going to teach something, they have to break it down into first principles, because rational discourse needs valid definition. However, despite what tradition has taught, rhetorical theory cannot be separated from rhetorical practice, and the situation (institutionalized theorization) that brings rhetorical theory about is the rhetorical tradition itself. Thus, Bitzer's theory is a part of a rhetorical situation from the start. Therefore, the hope of a rhetorical theory in the sense of a disinterested description needs to be abandoned. (CR)

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Beyond Rhetorical Theory

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The title of this talk, beyond rhetorical theory, sounds embarrassingly reminiscent of reactionary articles written in the late 70's and throughout the 80's by literary critics who were struggling to defend the American and British institutions of literary criticism against the immigration of Continental Philosophy. The gist of these arguments was that theory is impossible because the god's eye view that theory supposedly requires is humanly impossible. Although I am about to say something that sounds a bit like that, I rarely consider myself a reactionary and I have nothing against Continental Philosophy. In fact, the anti-platonic strain of Continental Philosophy that makes many of the anti-theory arguments seem ignorant of what they reject informs what I am going to say.

If we begin by accepting the idea that a theory is an abstract model that explains an objective phenomenon, where objective means anything that exists independent of individual human volition, then the best known recent example of such a rhetorical theory would probably be Lloyd Bitzer's deservedly famous rhetorical situation.

Bitzer has argued on several occasions that a rhetorical act comes into being when people respond in words to objectively recognizable structures which he called exigencies. Exigencies are the critical moments in civic life when something needs to be said in order to do something that needs to get done. The concept of an exigence provides a rational foundation for rhetorical criticism because with it we can *know* with certainty that a particular discursive situation is in fact a rhetorical situation, and therefore we will not be fooled by situations that only appear rhetorical; because we know with certainty that a particular situation is a rhetorical situation, we also

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therefore know with certainty that the act in question is a rhetorical act, and not something else. Therefore we will also know that the speaker responded to the rhetorical situation correctly or failed to respond correctly, or misunderstood the circumstances, and so reacted inappropriately. All of these certainties derive from the fact that we have an objective description of the "situation which calls the discourse into existence" (2). Thus in effect Bitzer offers a rhetorical theory that is based on a stipulative definition of rhetoric. If each of the conditions is met by a specific discursive act, then by definition that act is a rhetorical act, and it ceases to be a rhetorical act whenever any one of the conditions ceases to exist. Thus we have a secure definition of rhetoric, and therefore a secure rhetorical theory. With this theory of the rhetorical situation firmly in place, it is possible to predict when a rhetorical act will take place, or at least when the conditions are right for a rhetorical event to occur. The rhetorical situation also provides an apparently rational basis for rhetorical criticism. What it does not do is offer any advice about how to perform rhetorical acts. Indeed, as others have pointed out, its stress on rhetoric's being a phenomenon which is called into being by objective structures, practically renders performance irrelevant; utility is the price it pays for its theoretical salience.

In the process of theorizing rhetoric, Bitzer inevitably invoked a long-standing presumption, the division between theory and practice. By long-standing I mean, of course, something we can trace back to our twin devils *Phaedrus* and *Gorgias*.

Plato left us with the impression that if you are going to teach something, you have to break it down into first principles because that is the only way to provide the absolutely valid definitions upon which rational discourse depends. In his case the definitions required were types of soul, types of speech, and the ways in which each speech effects each type of soul. When

Aristotle elaborated on these first principles, and so gave the "art" of rhetoric a rational account that could be practiced, he claimed that rhetoric was the study of the available means of persuasion, not the act of persuasion itself. He was practicing dialectic in order to provide a theory of rhetoric; he was not, as far as the tradition is concerned, practicing rhetoric itself--a caveat that rescues this highly unreadable text from certain kinds of derision. Thus rhetorical theory was not rhetorical practice and therefore it was superior to what the sophists were said to have offered, just as the cobbler's art is more valuable than access to the biggest shoe store. By the time Cicero tried to reunite philosophy and rhetoric, in *de Orator*, the separation of rhetorical practice and rhetorical theory was apparently irreconcilable. Cicero has Marcus Antonius complain that if those rhetoricians who have no experience of the forum and "so much leisure," rhetorical theorists, in other words, were really going to provide a general theory of rhetoric, "they might have distinguished the general natures of cases, and explained them a little more accurately" (2 32). Antonius has no desire to provide this improved description of the general nature of cases because of course he fancies himself a practitioner rather than a theorist. But after refusing to theorize, he indicates the greatest problem of operating rhetorically in the absence of knowledge about cases in general. If rhetorical facility can only be obtained on a case by case basis, that is from each specific situation in which rhetoric occurs, then "the multitude of causes is to be dreaded" (2 32). In other words, in order to function effectively from situation to situation, a rhetor must have a general theory of rhetoric, but the more general the theory, the more removed it is from the spheres of actual practice; the better the theory, the less useful it is.

Bitzer, too, relies on a separation of theory and practice in order to assert the validity of his rhetorical theory. In 1980 he worte, when "I seek to express my views on the nature of

rhetoric; my verbal representation of my thoughts does not need to engage a mediating audience" (27). Thinking about rhetoric is therefore not a rhetorical activity, and, by extension, neither is rhetorical theory itself. Rhetorical theory becomes rhetorical action only when the theorist "seek[s] to remove objections and misunderstanding in the mind's of critics and to win the agreement of . . . colleagues toward a perspective I believe correct and useful" (27).
For a rhetorical theory to be justifiable as a theory, it has to be something other than an act of rhetoric itself.

My claim, such as it is, is that Rhetoric cannot entirely extricate itself from itself in order to theorize about itself in a completely disinterested fashion, and thus that Plato and Aristotle and Bitzer's nonrhetorical theories of rhetoric are in fact thoroughly rhetorical. The y are useful and meaningful only from within the tradition which they form and of which they are a formative part. That Plato was a rhetor who abhorred rhetoric is probably a point most rhet/comp folk would grant without argument. That Aristotle's dialectical theory of rhetoric is actually rhetorical is a more difficult point, so I'm grateful to the organizers of this conference for denying me the time to hang myself thoroughly on this point. But one could say that if the expert's premise is the hallmark of dialectic, while the maxim is the hallmark of rhetoric, then Aristotle's sententious assertions from which he draws the principles of rhetoric suggest that the whole production is more rhetorical than he wanted us to suspect, especially because it carries with it a social agenda that ratifies the elite males' possession of power through possession of speech characteristics only elite men could practice.

That Bitzer's rhetorical situation is a function of rhetorical tradition is clearly evident in the preoccupations which constructed it, the need for a theory in the first place, the emphasis on

absolute definitions, universal conditions and the division of rhetorical theory from rhetorical practice. In other words, the phenomenon that drives the theory is not an object independent of human volition because that phenomenon is the history of rhetoric, a narrative that we tell each other and our students over and over again. True, we modify the cannon and offer new readings, but fundamentally what we prescribe really only makes fluent sense within the tradition. Why do we need a theory that justifies practice instead of practice that justifies itself through success? Because Plato is used to construct the primary narrative of all rhetorical activity. So even though theorists would describe their efforts as fundamental to rhetoric, and therefore prior to or apart from rhetoric itself, they are in fact imbedded in the rhetorical acts which are the tradition of rhetoric.

Despite what the tradition has taught, rhetorical theory cannot be separated from rhetorical practice, and the situation (institutionalized theorization) that brings rhetorical theory about is the rhetorical tradition itself. So Bitzer's theory is a part of a rhetorical situation from the start. No rhetorical theory could be otherwise, and therefore the fond hope of a rhetorical theory, in the sense of a disinterested description needs to be abandoned or at least revised to include a great deal of self reflective inclusivity.

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