READING RHETORICAL THEORY

BARRY BRUMMETT

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University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee

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PREFACE

In his book, *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, the great twentieth-century critic and rhetorical theorist Kenneth Burke invites us to "imagine that you enter a parlor. You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion, a discussion too heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. . . . You listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar" (p. 110). This famous passage describes the ongoing conversation about important issues that runs throughout history. That conversation takes place in many "parlors" of different disciplines and discourses, and all of us move from one parlor to another from time to time. The book you are holding is about what people have said in the parlor of rhetoric, one of the oldest discussions in recorded human history.

Rhetoric is the study of persuasion, of how humans influence one another, and in influencing each other, how we order our lives together. Since the ability to move others and to be moved by them through communication is fundamental to being human, we can learn much about ourselves by studying the centuries-long "conversation" that great thinkers and communicators have had about rhetoric. This "parlor" lies at the heart of the house of knowledge, if we may extend that metaphor.

Reading Rhetorical Theory invites you into that parlor to read a sample of what has been written for 2500 years and more about the experience of rhetoric. Yes, a "sample"! Weighty as this book may be, it is really only a representation of a very rich, complex, and diverse conversation about rhetoric. Furthermore, it is largely grounded in the European tradition; conversations about influence and persuasion have existed in one form or another in cultures around the world for centuries as well.

It might be easy to find the prospect of entering into this noisy parlor a little daunting. So many voices are waiting to be heard! Let us assure you that rhetoric is a subject that will repay careful study. While it may not become entirely clear from the start, slowly you, too, will form an opinion about what is being said and, who knows, may even put your own "oar" into the conversation!

The historical conversation about rhetoric into which you are about to enter is organized historically into some clear eras, defined in terms of social and cultural conditions and by the development of rhetorical theory in response to those conditions. The subject of rhetoric and some conceptual schemes for understanding it are introduced in the first editor's essay; then each historical

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period and each selection is in turn introduced by brief essays. In this book we have chosen to rely on original texts, or samples from original texts, as much as possible. Introductory essays are meant to help the reader put the texts into perspective and to develop thoughtful reactions to them. We hope you are enriched and rewarded by the conversation you are about to enter!

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Introduction

Human beings do many different things during the course of a day. One thing that we have the most in common is that we try to influence each other: We politely ask for coffee at breakfast, we urge a spouse to request a raise at work, we choose clothing that will create just the right impression for today's meeting, we discourage conversation by avoiding eye contact on the bus, or we complain about a bad product. Furthermore, we are constantly exposed to the efforts of other people to influence us: A lecturer tries to interest us in a subject, a political candidate pleads for our votes, an advertisement in the newspaper announces a one-day-only sale, and a brother asks to borrow our sweaters.

This business of influencing and being influenced has gone by many names ranging from *persuasion* to *marketing* to *relationship building*. But one term that has most consistently been used throughout history to mean "influence" is the word *rhetoric*. The study of rhetoric is ancient, dating at least to the sixth century B.C.E. in Greece and perhaps even earlier in Asia and Africa. Nearly every society has thought seriously about what it means to be rhetorical. The reason for this is that rhetoric is so much a part of our everyday lives. In fact, one can study what it means to be human by thinking about what it means to be rhetorical.

The purpose of this book is the study of rhetoric in the human experience. Beginning with the writings of some public speaking professors in ancient Greece, you will be reading what people throughout history have thought about rhetoric, the business of influencing one another, and how being rhetorical affects our personal, social, and political lives. Beginning with rhetoric, we will branch out to think about important issues such as what it means to have knowledge, to teach and to learn, and to live responsibly in a democratic society. To keep the focus of this study within bounds, we will be looking at some of the writers and thinkers in Europe, North Africa, and America who were the direct heirs of those early Greek rhetoricians.

Besides *rhetoric*, the other key term in this book is *theory*. What does it mean to theorize or to have a theory? A quick definition might be that a theory is the assertion of regular, systematic relationships among actions, objects, and events in the world. We make theories about those things that we can reliably generalize about.

The purpose of this introduction is to prepare you for this journey through a range of rhetorical theory. The introduction consists of two parts: *Thinking About Rhetoric* and *Thinking About Theory*. In the first part, you will learn some definitions and some key concepts that will help to organize the many different writers you will encounter along the way. In the second part, we will look at the varied ways of thinking and writing that can be called *rhetorical theory*. Not all the writings in this book are on the same level, nor do they all try to do the same thing.

Later, after the introduction, shorter essays will introduce the major historical periods and writers. For now, we begin thinking about rhetoric. Let's begin with a logical beginning, that of *definitions*.

THINKING ABOUT RHETORIC

DEFINITIONS OF RHETORIC

Nearly every way of understanding *rhetoric* has centered around the idea of *influence*: the ways we use verbal and nonverbal signs to affect other people. But definitions have differed on two dimensions: *emphasis* and *weighting*. To understand what this means, let us consider just a few of the many definitions you will find stated or implied in this book.

Emphasis

For the ancient Sophists of Greece, such as Gorgias, the traveling teachers who first began talking and thinking about rhetoric, it simply meant the ability to plan and deliver effective public speaking. Plato, the philosophical adversary of the Sophists, saw rhetoric instead as flattery or pandering: saying to an audience whatever it wanted to hear so as to win its favor. For Aristotle, the first great systematizer of rhetorical theory, rhetoric meant the ability to discover the available means of persuasion in any situation. The Roman statesman Cicero thought of rhetoric as an important tool of statesmanship. One hundred years later, the Roman Quintilian used rhetoric mainly as a pedagogical device to teach young people. In the Renaissance, Peter Ramus thought of rhetoric as verbal embellishment and style. I. A. Richards, in the twentieth century, argued that rhetoric is the study of misunderstanding and its remedies. Kenneth Burke, the greatest rhetorical theorist of the twentieth century, defined rhetoric as inducing cooperation in people.

First, let's notice that each definition places a different *emphasis* on some aspect or dimension of influence. Cicero stressed influence in political struggles; Quintilian in educational contexts. Ramus emphasized the ability of rhetoric to make language beautiful; Richards stressed the importance of making language understandable. The Sophists saw rhetoric largely as public speaking, whereas Burke did not emphasize any type of communication so much as a function: specifically, that of creating cooperation. When we influence or are influenced, sometimes the language we use will be more important. Sometimes the logical reasoning we use is primary. Sometimes the context, whether political or interpersonal or religious, is the most important dimension of influence. A definition of rhetoric will emphasize what is most important to the theorist, for reasons having to do with the culture or politics of the era.

Weighting

Second, notice that each definition places a different weighting on being rhetorical—a weighting that predisposes people favorably or unfavorably toward the very thing being defined: influencing others. Clearly, Ramus's definition has a somewhat unfavorable weighting; he thought that persuasive influence was mere stylistic embellishment rather than substantive argument. Aristotle's definition is more neutral; rhetoric is depicted as a "faculty" or an ability to discover the means of persuasion. Whether that is good or bad, says Aristotle, depends on the discoverer's "moral purpose," not on rhetoric itself. Burke's and Richards's definitions seem to weight rhetoric favorably: Who can object to a remedy for misunderstanding or to an activity that increases cooperation? As with the dimension of emphasis, weighting occurs because of what is important to a theorist and because of the personal, social, or philosophical goals to which that writer is committed.

When any activity or object has historically been defined in many different ways, we know that it must be something both central to human life and central to the distribution of power. Were power not involved in how we think about (and in what we do about) influence, nobody would fuss much over how it is defined. A pencil is not defined in very many ways. Why? Because little is at stake in how it is defined. But when it comes to how we influence each other rhetorically, what is emphasized and how that activity is weighted will have a lot to do with how power is managed in any society. Think, for example, of the fact that an activity like rhetoric, which is central to our everyday lives, has been defined in so many ways precisely because of these possibilities of emphasis and weighting. So as you read this book, understand the variety of definitions of rhetoric as concealing a subtext of struggle over power. Instead, ask yourself who is being empowered or disempowered and whose interests are being served by defining rhetoric in this way or that.

We have briefly considered the idea that rhetoric is inseparable from our everyday lives and from power management. Why is this, and what is the connection between rhetoric and how we live and think? As we study the history of rhetorical theory, four central issues will run throughout every reading: discourse, knowledge, media, and power. Once you understand what is meant by these terms, you will be in a better position to compare theories and to track the development of some important issues through time. So let us turn to those four key terms to find out what they mean, what they have to do with influence, and how they interrelate with one another.

DISCOURSE

To understand our first central issue fully, we will need to "sneak up" on it gradually, since it is a rather complicated idea. Let us start with a parable of sorts: Imagine that it is many thousands of years ago and that you and some other people are living in caves on one side of a hill. You and the others hardly ever go out except to grab food and water and scurry back to shelter. You have very little contact with the others. Each one is isolated, each cave a city and a law unto itself. Now imagine that on the other side of the hill lives a tribe of people who mix freely with one another, who are organized, and who have designs on the food and water on *your* side of the hill. Who is in the better position here? Clearly, the people on the other side of the hill! In fact, you and your fellow hermits are in serious trouble, and you had better do something about it.

What will you do? Perhaps have a meeting? Talk it over down at the water hole? Form a committee? Maybe later. The *first* thing you must do is to lay the groundwork for all of the above. And the groundwork is that you must have *a way to communicate*. You must have some system of words and gestures and a way to understand what they mean. In short, you need a language and some understanding of how to use it. Without that, you will remain isolated in your caves, and woe betide you when that other tribe marches over the hill.

So you establish a language. But you soon discover that this is not sufficient. You find out that you cannot talk to each other when organizing for war in the same way that you talk to each other when organizing for harvest. The ways of communicating that seem to work well during courtship are likely to fail you when it comes time to join together in religious observances. So you need to diversify and devise different ways of communicating for different purposes, contexts, and occasions. In fact, it would not be too far-fetched to say that the way of communicating must constitute the activity itself. Specifically, you are not going to organize for war until you have an organizing-for-war vocabulary and set of rules and understandings for how to use it. How you talk therefore becomes foundational for how you interact.

Two Meanings of "Discourse"

The word *discourse* has two meanings. The first meaning is exactly what we've been talking about in the parable. Discourse means, in the first place, a set of rules, understandings, and practices for how language is used to constitute a human activity. For example, from time to time you may go to a classroom and hear a "college lecture." There is a set of rules, understandings, and practices for how language is used by both students and teachers to *create* the experience of the "college lecture." It is expected that the teacher will be the initiator of talk and will probably do most of the talking. It is understood that the talk will be scholarly and generally serious, and that it will relate to the subject matter being studied. It is the practice that students will follow the directions of the teacher and will communicate under terms generally set by her. Having those rules and expectations is what *makes* it a college lecture. If the professor came in to the classroom with three other people and proceeded to sing harmonious songs during the whole period, one could rightfully claim that the pattern of communication exhibited here did not constitute a college lecture, and that a college lecture had simply not been "done."

We move through the day going from one activity to another that is constituted by discourse in this first sense. You wake up and are *doing* the "family gathers around the breakfast table thing" *because* you are *communicating* in a certain way: You are employing the "family gathers around the breakfast table" discourse. You go to work, and you must use a different discourse so as to be able to do what you do at work. And so this goes on through the day.

A second, more limited sense of *discourse* is that it is a *particular* message or utterance. We form the specific things we want to say to people in the here and now by putting together messages that follow the parameters set by the first meaning of discourse (rules, understandings, and practices). If a professor is lecturing on the causes of the First World War, he is producing a discourse in this second sense of a specific utterance. But the utter-

ance is being produced within the parameters of the first sense of discourse as a set of rules, understandings, and practices; otherwise, it may well be that a college lecture is simply not what is being done.

An analogy to games might help. The game of baseball exists in sort of an abstract sense as a set of rules, understandings, and practices: Each batter gets up to three strikes or four balls and then, if the batter has not placed a hit, must either walk or be out; each side gets three outs to an inning; if a batter is hit by a pitched ball, the batter gets a walk; and so forth. This is "baseball" that parallels the first sense of discourse; we can think of that meaning of discourse as if it were a game, in the abstract. Then, when the Brewers and the Twins take to the field on a particular Tuesday evening, they enact a baseball game within the parameters set by "baseball" in the abstract sense. And this second kind of baseball, a particular game, parallels the second sense of discourse as a specific message.

Discourse and Rhetoric

The relevance of this discussion of *discourse* to our study of rhetoric is this: What kind of discourse is rhetoric? The theorists you will study are going to argue about that question in several ways.

One issue will be: What sort of human activity is constituted by rhetoric? Here we will see arguments for different definitions, with their different emphases and weightings. When we use rhetoric, are we merely pandering to one another? Are we doing politics? Are we displaying linguistic skill and technique, i.e., entertaining each other?

A closely related issue is: Does rhetorical discourse constitute a distinct human activity? This question arises because when we influence someone, we are always influencing them *about* some other issue that has its own governing discourses. For instance, if legislators debate a tax increase, they are speaking about economic issues—yet economics has its own governing discourses. So should we say that the legislators are speaking and doing rhetoric or speaking and doing economics? The reason this question matters is that if rhetoric is not a distinct discourse constituting a distinct activity, then we might want to say that people should pay much more attention to other discourses than to rhetoric. In other words, would we be better off if legislators studied economics more than they studied rhetoric? This doubt can always be raised about rhetoric because we rarely or never simply "persuade" others, we always persuade them *about* some matter for which there are separate constituting discourses.

But the question might also be raised from the other direction: Can we engage in any other discourse without also engaging in rhetoric? The economist who is learning the discourse of her profession could also be said to be learning a way to persuade other economists, to influence the public to accept economic policy, and to be persuaded herself of the value of economic discourse. Can she "get away from" rhetoric? Can the physician employ the discourse of medicine to speak to his patients and colleagues without also employing the discourse of rhetoric to influence them to respect and agree with him?

As we will see throughout the book, there are other questions that will be asked about the discourse that is rhetoric. Some of those questions are best previewed in relation to our three other key issues. Let us turn now to the second of them, knowledge.

KNOWLEDGE

Knowledge is a good thing to have. There are few more damaging insults hurled, if true, than "You don't have a clue!" You can win a job or get fired because of how much knowledge you have or do not have. To anticipate our fourth central issue, we often hear it said that "knowledge is power." We have a sense that some people have more knowledge than others, and they usually find that to be to their advantage.

What Is Knowledge?

People who are thought to "have more knowledge" do not necessarily walk around with more thoughts in their heads than do others. If you are awake you are thinking, whether it be thoughts about trigonometry or thoughts about the taste of your bubble gum. Whether you are thinking up a cure for AIDS or wondering whether that "Full House" rerun is worth watching, your head is full of thoughts. So to say that we have knowledge is not to say that we have more thoughts than others. The question of knowledge is a question of the status of thoughts. Some thoughts are given higher status than others; these thoughts are sanctioned as being knowledge. If someone has the thought that nothing can exceed the speed of light, that thought has been "approved" as knowledge. Another person's thoughts may be equally occupied with the conviction that Elvis is alive and working in a donut shop in Kalamazoo, but few will say that such a person has knowledge.

To get the "seal of approval" as knowledge, specific ideas or bits of information in our heads must meet standards set by the cultures or societies in which we live. What counts as knowledge and how to get it will therefore vary from one culture to another. A religious vision of angels in the clouds may be certified as knowledge by one society and as hallucination by another. Your uncle's friends may agree that he knows that the lump in his side is cancer, whereas his physician may insist that he knows no such thing and that only a medical doctor can have such knowledge about his condition. Furthermore, some kinds of knowledge are counted as more valuable than others. Your neighbor has knowledge of how to fix your car, while your nephew has knowledge of how to solve the highest levels of a video game; which knowledge is considered more valuable?

In Western cultures, what have been some of the kinds of standards we set for what counts as knowledge and for what sorts of knowledge are more valuable than others? It will help us understand the standards that we hold for certifying knowledge if we focus on the issue of teaching. Throughout history, thinkers have usually argued that the best knowledge is that which is teachable. In general, theorists have thought that those ideas that can be passed on by a teacher to a student are most securely worthy of being called "knowledge."

What Is Teachable?

To understand this, let us think about what it means to say that something is teachable. We can identify four standards of teachability: language, principles, commodification, and a priesthood. That which is teachable tends to be that which can be articulated in language. Think of the difficulty we have in explaining to someone else a hunch, intuition, or gut reaction. We cannot put it into words—you have to experience those feelings yourself. For that very reason, we hesitate to call such hunches and intuition "knowledge." If someone says, "I don't know how I know, I just know," we will not value what they "know" as much as the knowledge that someone can pass on to us by fully articulating and explaining it.

To say that something is teachable means that a teacher can and must devise systematic principles that organize and sum up that which is taught. Compare "knowledge" of nuclear physics with "knowledge" of how to ride a bicycle. Nuclear physics must be taught through systematic principles. But it is difficult to learn how to ride a bike "in principle." You have to get on and do it! We would therefore say that knowledge of physics is of much higher status than is knowledge of how to ride a bike; we might even call the latter only a "knack" gained from experience rather than knowledge.

If something is teachable, then it becomes a sort of exclusive commodity that some may have but others may not until the latter are taught. That which is truly teachable is something that can be kept hidden and hoarded. It is therefore a controllable commodity, like gold. Medical science is teachable, and that knowledge is only handed out under strict and rigorous conditions such as medical school. A medical education is a commodity bought and sold at great price. Medical schools then become great and important institutions. In fact, every society has sanctioning institutions that are empowered to say what is knowledge and what is not. On the other hand, hardly anybody bothers to teach others how to climb a tree. Like the "knack" of riding a bike, knowledge of how to climb a tree seems to be open to any who try it; it doesn't need to be taught. It is not, therefore, valued nearly as much as is medicine.

And finally, that which is teachable must be taught by an *elite priesthood* of those who already possess and control the commodity of knowledge. That which is an exclusive commodity must be carefully protected by overseers. And when they claim to be able to teach, they lay a claim to their own advanced skills and status, as well. To learn accounting, one must go to business school and study with just the right sort of professors. Control over knowledge of accounting then enriches those who possess it with wealth and power. Nobody, however, goes to school to learn how to watch television, and therefore that sort of knowledge is hardly prized or even considered to be knowledge at all.

Knowledge and Rhetoric

The connection between *rhetoric* and *knowledge* may be the most highly debated, vigorously contested question addressed throughout the readings in this book. Three major issues about that relationship arise.

The first major issue follows from the discussion just above: *Is rhetoric teachable?* We will see that Plato gave a firm "No!" in response to that question, calling it a "knack" or something picked up from habit. The Sophists and Aristotle, however, did think it was teachable. We will find theorists disagreeing on how systematic those rhetorical principles need to be. They will disagree as to who ought to be the priesthood of rhetorical professors; Plato thought that if anyone even tried to teach rhetoric it should be philosophers, whereas Quintilian was himself a professor of rhetoric with a large, successful school.