

## Object and Method in Rhetorical Criticism: From Wichelns to Leff and McGee

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THE ESSAYS by Michael Leff (coauthored with Andrew Sachs) and Michael McGee offered in this volume, ostensibly as illustrations of two competing approaches to rhetorical criticism, display greater anxiety about the critical object than about the critical method. This is somewhat perplexing, because the names of Leff and McGee are associated with two different ways of conducting practical criticism: textual and ideological. In this special issue devoted to the interplay of those two methods, we find their chief proponents less concerned with rearticulating their methodological commitments and strategies than with totalizing the critical object as "iconic" or as "fragmentary." Our perplexity is also heightened by the fact that since the publication of Edwin Black's *Rhetorical Criticism: A Study in Method* (1965) there has been greater excitement and anxiety, partly intensified by the innovations of Leff and McGee, over the preferred "method" than over the privileged "object."

I regard this unexpected anxiety about the object as significant and deserving analysis. It could hardly be a simple coincidence that two of our leading critics, known for their grasp of disciplinary concerns, should both elect on this occasion to problematize the character of the critical object. Moreover, Leff and McGee represent two dominant contemporary strategies for conceptualizing rhetoric—either as a constitutive "process" or as a constructed "product." Thus, the consequences of problematizing the object, as Leff and McGee do, extend well beyond what is immediately at issue in the two essays.

For McGee, rhetoric is a globally pervasive constitutive agency. According to this view, rhetoric is a material social process that constitutes (or generates) a wide range of objects—beliefs, attitudes, actions, events, texts, selves, and even communities. In his essay "The Fall of Wellington" (1977), for instance, McGee tries to show how rhetoric is an

autonomous and constitutive force in history.<sup>1</sup> He argues that rhetoric is not a "supplement" or an "epiphenomenon" to other causative agencies in history, be they "political," "social," or "economic." Rather, rhetorical process is "inherent" in historical episodes such as the fall of Wellington. By contrast, Leff measures rhetoric primarily through its exemplary discursive manifestations. For Leff (and Sachs), a well wrought rhetorical artifact represents "a field of action unified into a functional and locally stable product" (p. 255). It is not so much that Leff denies the ubiquitous presence of rhetoric in everyday life, but rather that he elects to examine its exemplary manifestations so as to decipher the possibilities of rhetoric as an art. For instance, in his essay on Lincoln's "House Divided" speech, Leff explores the connection between rhetoric and temporality—a topic of abiding interest from Gorgias to Paul de Man—through a "close reading" of an oratorical masterpiece.<sup>2</sup>

These alternative conceptualizations involve specific methodological choices. For McGee, rhetoric as a process is ontologically prior to its products. He regards the products, especially the speech texts privileged by Leff, as residues of a bygone rhetorical process/event. Methodologically, McGee seeks to "reconstruct" the original rhetorical process from its documentary traces. For McGee, interpretive understanding moves from product to process by means of a reconstruction. When we combine this methodological strategy with McGee's pragmatic view of rhetoric as an agency for facilitating "meaningful change" in everyday life, we find that rhetorical criticism is progressively drawn into the orbit of critical social theory. Leff, on the other hand, shows little interest in reconstructing the "originary" rhetorical process in its totality from its surviving material trace, be it a speech text or something else. Rather, Leff wants to understand the rhetorical discourse itself in terms of its effectivity (how it works), its artistry (how it is wrought), and its responsiveness to situation (how it is inscribed). By holding that one can fully understand a practical/productive art such as rhetoric only through its exemplary discursive manifestations, Leff tends to push rhetorical criticism increasingly into the orbit of hermeneutics.

These are some of the basic differences in the critical projects promulgated by Leff and McGee in their previous published work. In the essays before us, they remain committed to the positions I have ascribed to them. However, one important innovation is their meditations on the character of the critical object. And in the course of these meditations, Leff and McGee give us diametrically opposed readings of our disciplinary history. To begin with, neither Leff nor McGee appears sanguine about the current critical scene. While Leff bemoans the practice of what I have described elsewhere as "the deferral of the text," McGee announces the dissolution of rhetoric itself. The practice of "deferral" refers to the persistent tendency among our critics to shy away from a focussed reading of the speech text even when they explicitly regard it as the privileged object of study.<sup>3</sup> By the "dissolution of rhetoric,"

McGee refers to the tendency to marginalize the study of everyday rhetorical practices due to a mistaken notion of criticism "as an *object* of study rather than a *vehicle* of study" (p. 275). Both Leff and McGee diagnose the current difficulties as arising from patterns of error deeply rooted in our critical tradition. While for McGee the hegemony of the "product model" is an abiding source of idealist confusions, Leff finds in the hegemony of the "process model" an inclination to defer the text. Thus, they find in each other's critical program the very source of error they wish to sublimate (*Aufheben*), if not suppress.

In order to evaluate these two diametrically opposed readings of our disciplinary history, I have found it necessary selectively to reexamine the career of the critical object from Wichelns to the present. But it is not possible to examine the object without attending to its dialectical counterpart, the method. So what follows is a study of the fluctuating dialectic between object and method in three parts. I begin with a detailed reading of Wichelns' founding essay - "The Literary Criticism of Oratory." I argue that Wichelns sets into motion a particular dialectic between object and method that later critics have had to negotiate. In the second part, I examine three influential responses to this dialectic by Wrage, Becker, and Black. Here I describe how these responses attenuate and finally disrupt the connection between object and method. In the third part, I examine the attempts by Leff and McGee to reconnect object and method. Here I describe how the attempt to reconnect them becomes an occasion for recounting disciplinary history and for legitimating disciplinary autonomy.

## I

### ON READING AND MISREADING WICHELNS

The career of neo-Aristotelian paradigm has been variously recounted. Leading critics in our field, especially those who have gone on to propose alternative approaches to rhetorical criticism, have found a suitable occasion to comment on their neo-Aristotelian heritage. It is a sort of disciplinary ritual required of a new generation of critics to come to terms with and propitiate the dead. The general impression these accounts (or rather "ritual misreadings") impart is that with the neo-Aristotelians "method mastered the object."<sup>4</sup> Take, for instance, Walter Fisher's reading of Wichelns' essay. After citing Wichelns' often cited remark about "effect,"<sup>5</sup> Fisher proceeds to paraphrase the final paragraph of section seven where Wichelns literally lays out a set of procedural injunctions on how to conduct oratorical criticism. These injunctions direct the critic's attention to elements such as the speaker's personality, his public character, his leading ideas, his motivational appeals, his style (diction and sentence movement), his mode of expression and delivery, his habits of preparation, a description of his audience, the relation between the surviving text to what was actually uttered,

and finally the effect of discourse on its immediate audience. On the basis of the paraphrase, Fisher justifiably concludes that Wichelns' utterances when appropriately combined constitute an identifiable method that was "followed by the vast majority of rhetorical critics in our field."<sup>6</sup>

Fisher recognizes the implicit dialectic between object and method in the essay when he says that "by emphasizing the defining characteristics of rhetorical criticism . . . he (Wichelns) engendered the inference that a discussion of method in rhetorical criticism is also a discussion of the proper province of rhetorical studies."<sup>7</sup> And Fisher concludes that Wichelns let the method master the object. This is, in Fisher's view, the fatal weakness of the founding text and the tradition that was erected on it. He writes (as if he were correcting an error): "The most crucial question in rhetorical criticism is not, in my judgment, what method is most appropriate and useful in the analysis and evaluation of speeches, but what is our concept of speech as an object of criticism."<sup>8</sup>

But Fisher misreads Wichelns' essay. In fact, it is a common misreading that gives us some insight into how this founding essay has been negotiated by a series of aspiring, to borrow Bloom's vocabulary, "strong" critics.<sup>9</sup> Although Wichelns' essay consists of eight sections, later commentaries generally dwell on the last two sections, especially section seven. This is understandable because the bulk of the essay, sections two to six, consists of a "casual" historical survey of how previous critics, mostly literary critics, have treated oratorical phenomena/discourse. This makes the essay primarily an exercise in metacriticism. Wichelns divides the previous treatments of oratory into various categories and sub-categories and finds affinity with those critics who are aware of "the speech as a literary form—or if not as a literary form, then as a form of power; they tend accordingly to deal with the orator's work as limited by the conditions of the platform and the occasion, and to summon history to aid of criticism."<sup>10</sup> The avowed objective of the survey is an analysis and evaluation of the "method" used by these various groups of critics: "What interests us is the method: his standards, his categories of judgment, what he regards as important. These will show, not so much what he thinks of a great and ancient literary type, as how he thinks in dealing with that type. The chief aim is to know how critics have spoken of orators."<sup>11</sup> After examining nearly twenty eminent writers, Wichelns sums up his findings: What the critics under review have in common irrespective of their particular orientations is their view of literature as the repository of what is "permanent and beautiful" in a culture and their habit of interpreting and evaluating oratory against those literary values. Wichelns regards the use of those standards as a systemic error that has disfigured whatever little exists of "the literary criticism of oratory." It is at the conclusion of this line of reasoning that Wichelns declares that rhetorical criticism is concerned with neither permanence nor beauty, but with effect. And that statement has been read by succeeding generations of critics as a clear and

distinct methodological injunction. This is understandable. If you combine the announced purpose of the essay, the passage on "effect," and the final paragraph in section seven, one might be severely tempted to conclude, as many have, that with Wichelns method masters the object.

But another reading is possible. If we read the details of Wichelns' metacriticism in sections two to six and carefully attend to what follows the "effect" passage to the end of the essay, it becomes evident that Wichelns' "method" is determined by his prefiguration of the object domain of oratory. Once we unpack the structure of that prefiguration, it can be shown that the object determines method and not the opposite. Moreover, I believe an alternative reading along these lines will show how Wichelns' prefiguration of oratory is not only intensely ideological but structured in antithetical form. Such a reading requires attending to certain features of Wichelns' essay: First, Wichelns' metacritical narrative is cunning. It moves progressively, a movement signifying discovery and totalization, from critics oblivious or indifferent to the distinctive character of oratory to critics who show greatest sensitivity to its specificity. The tale comes to an end when Wichelns lights on a passage from Morley's chapter on Cobden as an agitator and writes with seeming relief: "These passages are written in the spirit of the critic of public speaking. They have the point of view that is but faintly suggested in Elton and Grierson, that Saintsbury recognizes but does not use, and Hazlitt uses but does not recognize, and that Whipple, however irregularly, both understands and employs."<sup>12</sup> The moral of the tale is obvious. A superior critic (be it Hazlitt or Saintsbury), despite his strengths, will fail to understand oratory insofar as he remains indifferent to its essential character. Whereas a lesser critic (say, Whipple), despite his limitations, will bring light if he recognizes what is distinctively oratorical. As we move through the narrative we are repeatedly told what is distinctively oratorical and with each iteration the formulation becomes refined and finally the essence of oratory is distilled: "But we have arrived at a different attitude towards the orator: his function is recognized for what it is: the art of influencing men in some concrete situation. Neither the personal nor the literary evaluation is the primary object. The critic speaks of the orator as a public man whose function is to exert his influence by speech."<sup>13</sup>

The point at issue here is not whether Wichelns properly characterizes oratory, which given its Ciceronian stress on orator as a "culture hero" is manifestly ideological, but whether, as I claim, his prefiguration of the object domain commits him to the method that he recommends. The essay contains a dispersed but coherent set of statements that characterize the object domain in a manner so insistent that one could say that they constitute a rather primitive version of what Hariman, following Valesio, calls the "regional ontology of rhetorical discourse."<sup>14</sup> The prefigurative strategy is manifest at two different levels. First, there are simple assertions that announce the nature of

oratory—its fragility and temporality, its connection to power, its location in the public sphere, and its preoccupation with leadership—which, we are told, requires a historical-critical method (what later ossified into neo-Aristotelianism): “Oratory is intimately associated with statecraft; it is bound up with the things of the moment; its occasion, its terms, its background, can often be understood only by the careful student of history. . . . Rhetorical criticism lies at the boundary of politics (in the broadest sense) and literature; its atmosphere is that of the public life, its tools are those of literature, its concern is with the ideas of the people as influenced by their leaders.”<sup>15</sup>

Second, Wichelns’ metacritical statements also reveal how he prefigures oratory. In fact, these embedded statements are more ideologically charged than the direct assertions. I have assembled the following statements from Wichelns’ comments on three different critics’ treatment of Edmund Burke’s oratory:

Yet, all told, Grierson realizes better than the others that Burke’s task was not merely to express his thoughts and his feelings in distinguished prose, but to communicate his thoughts and feelings effectively. It is hardly true, however, that Grierson has in mind the actual audience of Burke; the audience of Grierson’s vision seems to be universalized, to consist of the judicious listeners or readers of any age. Those judicious listeners have no practical interest in the situation; they have only philosophical and aesthetic interest. . . . In Hazlitt we find a sense of style as an instrument of communication; that sense is no stronger in dealing with Burke’s speeches than in dealing with his pamphlets, but it gives to Hazlitt’s criticism a reality not often found. What is lacking is a clear sense of Burke’s communicative impulse, of his persuasive purpose, as operating in a concrete situation. . . . that historical imagination has led Lecky to regard Burke as primarily speaker, both limited and formed by the conditions of his platform. . . . The requirements of the historian’s art have fused the character sketch and literary criticism; the fusing agent has been the conception of Burke as a public man, and of his work as public address. Both Lecky’s biographical interpretation and his literary criticism are less subtle than that of Grierson; but Lecky is more definitely guided in his treatment of Burke by the conception of oratory as a special form of the literature of power and as a form always molded by the pressure of the time.<sup>16</sup>

Several points deserve attention here. First, the remarkable confidence that Wichelns displays in judging Grierson, Hazlitt and Lecky is derived from a seemingly unshakable conviction that he knows what oratory is in its essence. And his recommendation of the historical-critical method simply follows from that conviction. Thus, the inflexible point of reference from which Wichelns judges past critics and advises future critics is his prefigured notion of oratory.

Second, Wichelns’ direct assertions about the nature of oratory reveal his ideological propensities. Wichelns assigns the orator a certain role in history (a “maker” rather than a vassal); he conceives of power as constituted by discursive mediation between a leader and his people rather than through brute force; and, he celebrates public life held hostage by evanescent time that accounts for both error and the art of oratory. Whether these observations add up to a coherent ideology—some belated version of Ciceronian republicanism, for instance—is not

something we have to decide here. We simply have to take note of the ideological dimension.

This ideological dimension is even more cunningly inscribed in the metacritical narrative, especially through Wichelns' choice of Edmund Burke, arguably the greatest orator in the Anglo-American tradition, as the primary subject to illustrate the deficiencies of existing critical discourse. Here we are presented with a spectacle in which we find a series of eminent critics, in one striking passage after another, struggling to comprehend the phenomenon of an oratorical genius trying to master an intoxicated parliament, an indifferent public, and, alas, those recalcitrant historical forces sheerly through the power of his eloquence. We may resist the Ciceronian idea of the orator as a culture hero when it is simply asserted, but we are likely to assent to it when led through the intricacies of Burkeian criticism that, despite its alleged deficiencies, celebrates a certain version of public life and man. That Burke failed more often than he succeeded is of no consequence.

Finally, if there is any lingering doubt about the ideological character of Wichelns' prefiguration of oratory, one need but attend to his concluding remarks where he refers to "the few and uncertain movements of that Leviathan, the public mind" and places the orator among that class of men "who tame Leviathan to the end that he shall not threaten civilization."<sup>17</sup>

We must now turn to an analysis of the figural structure of this prefigurative strategy to further substantiate my initial claim that with Wichelns object determines the method. The title itself hints at the opposition between the literary and the oratorical that is systematically exploited throughout the essay. The single line of argument that runs through the metacritical narrative concerns the error of evaluating oratorical discourse by literary standards. The antithetical argumentative structure implicit in the metacritical narrative becomes explicit after the "effect" passage, where Wichelns, following Hudson and Baldwin, reiterates the traditional distinction between rhetoric and poetry. Here the strategy of discrediting an approach by privileging the object is replaced by an attempt to describe two object domains, rhetoric and poetry, in antithetical terms. Wichelns examines several opposed pairs—communication and expression, intellect and imagination, prose and verse, argument and representation—traditionally used to characterize rhetoric and poetry respectively. He finds Hudson's famous formulation based on the opposition between expression and communication a bit exaggerated but nevertheless compelling: "The writer in pure literature has his eye on his subject; . . . his task is expression; his form and style are organic with his subject. The writer of rhetorical discourse has his eye upon the audience and occasion; his task is persuasion; his form and style are organic with the occasion."<sup>18</sup> Finally, correcting and modifying one of Saintsbury's ideas, Wichelns comes up with his own formulation: "For poetry always is free to fulfil its own law, but the writer of rhetorical discourse is, in a sense, perpetually in bondage to the

occasion and the audience; and in that fact we find the line of cleavage between rhetoric and poetry."<sup>19</sup> This nearly symmetrical description of rhetoric and poetry is yet another attempt to specify and privilege the object over the method. An understanding of the orator's predicament—"bondage to the occasion and the audience"—must precede and determine the choice of method. In fact, the paragraph containing the methodological injunctions paraphrased by Fisher immediately follows the section on the distinction between rhetoric and poetry.

## II

### RESPONSES TO THE FOUNDING TEXT

Wichelns' founding essay thus set in motion a particular dialectic between object and method that later critics have had to negotiate. I will not here recount how a systematic misreading of that dialectic led to the alleged "methodism" of neo-Aristotelians in subsequent years. That tale has been told too many times with fervor unmatched in our discipline. Instead I will examine two influential responses to Wichelns by those who succeeded in breaking away from the neo-Aristotelian paradigm. I will call these two responses the Wrage/McGee version and the Black/Leff version respectively. The first version accepts the system of privilege (object over method) inaugurated by Wichelns but attempts to subvert it by a systematic diminution of the object that has finally led McGee to characterize it as "fragmentary." The second version resists that system of privilege and tries to make the method (and by implication the critical act) autonomous but it succeeds in doing so only by revalorizing the object, as Leff does, as "iconic."

### WRAGE AND THE DIMINUTION OF THE OBJECT

Wrage's short essay, "Public Address: A Study in Social and Intellectual History" (1947), often regarded as the first substantive challenge to neo-Aristotelianism, can be read as the logical extension of Wichelns' parting remarks. In the final paragraph, Wichelns invites us to conceive of rhetoric as the art of popularization that humanizes knowledge and to recognize that "the history of the thought of the people is at least as potent a factor in the progress of the race" as the more elevated intellectual histories that center on achievements in science, philosophy and art.<sup>20</sup> Wrage's essay opens with virtually the same idea, if couched in warlike imagery drawn from by Max Learner's book, *Ideas Are Weapons*. Wrage asserts that a study of public address can enhance our understanding of the history of ideas, since an intellectual history exclusively devoted to "monumental works" and to tracing the influence of ideas from one major thinker to the next is "hopelessly inadequate as a way of discovering and assessing those ideas which find expression in the market place."<sup>21</sup> The social life of ideas is best understood by attending to what Wrage calls "fugitive literature," of which oratory is an important species.



With Wrage, as with Wichelns, the object domain ("public address") conceived as a species of "fugitive literature," determines the so-called "history of ideas" approach that he recommends. But there are significant differences. The focus shifts from the orator held captive by time to orations held captive by ideas at war. In Wrage's universe, ideas are relatively autonomous but in a state of perpetual decay. One way ideas can be preserved is by inscribing them in the public mind, and oration is a vehicle for this purpose. Wrage takes a functionalist view of public address and privileges the ideational content of speeches: "Public address does not exist for its own sake . . . its value is instrumental . . . It is a vehicle for the conveyance of ideas."<sup>22</sup>

Thus, Wrage compromises the autonomy of oratory as an enunciative modality – it is not formally self-grounded but functionally constrained from outside. Wichelns had already intimated this difficulty when he said that oratory, unlike poetry, is not "free to fulfill its own law." But he had exalted the difficulty. For Wichelns, the orator is a tragic-heroic figure held in bondage by occasion and audience, but that bondage generates the essential tension between the general and the particular, as illustrated in the case of Edmund Burke, that makes eloquence (linguistic transcendence) possible. But Wrage decenters the orator to install the new protagonist, ideas. What Wichelns had gloriously described as the discourse of power becomes, with Wrage, a species of "fugitive literature" utterly unremarkable except as an ideational data for understanding the popular mind.<sup>23</sup>

Wrage's devaluation of orations as fugitive spaces fleetingly occupied by ideas suggests a hermeneutic possibility that could reverse the dialectic between object and method. If one could interpret the struggle of ideas to master the public mind by attending to the internal dynamics of the oratorical text, then one could conceive of the critical act of reading not as a paraphrase but a refiguration of the text. This is precisely the strategy used by Leff, Stephen Lucas, Karlyn Campbell and other textual critics who have maintained a disciplined distance from the excessive formalism characteristic of "new criticism" and its contemporary variants in literary studies. But Wrage and later Baskerville failed to explore this possibility because they had prefigured the oratorical text as a passive receptacle, something so transparent that it inspired little or no methodological self-reflexiveness. This prefigurative stance is evident in Wrage's repeated use of the mirror metaphor to characterize oratory. Thus, when Wrage recommends the "history of ideas" approach he does not see it as a conscious and disruptive methodological choice made by the critic over against the object. For Wrage, as for Wichelns, the choice of method flows naturally from the object itself. The cunning of the oratorical text that Leff later celebrates altogether escapes Wrage and Baskerville. It is rather ironic that a devaluation of the object does not reverse the dialectic between object and method, but perpetuates it: the devalued object calls for a method that further devalues it until

the study of public address, stripped of its distinctiveness as an enunciative modality (a distinctiveness that cannot be exhausted by regarding it simply as a vehicle for ferrying ideas to the popular mind) becomes a supplement to intellectual history.

### BECKER AND THE GLOBALIZATION OF THE OBJECT

The nearly three decades that separate Wraga's essay (1947) and the emergence of Leff and McGee as influential figures in the late 1970s is a period of considerable anxiety and revision in the theory and practice of rhetorical criticism. While it is not possible here to summarize the achievements of this period, we need to put into perspective certain critical moments as they relate to the evolving dialectic between object and method. Such a perspective, in fact, is essential to understand the motive and direction of theoretical moves and critical commitments that Leff and McGee make and promote. I will examine two key publications by Becker and Black respectively in the intervening period. My objective is to show how the collapse of the neo-Aristotelian paradigm as enshrined in the first two volumes of *A History and Criticism of Public Address* (1943) and in Thonssen and Baird's *Speech Criticism* (1948) had fractured, once and for all, the harmonious dialectic between object and method set in motion by Wichelns. The impact was immediate on both fronts, object and method.<sup>24</sup>

There were several attempts to refigure the object domain. The nomenclature changed. The term "oratorical" was gradually pushed into the margins by its global cousin, "rhetorical." Similarly, in characterizing the object domain phrases such as "public discourse," "public argumentation," and "political rhetoric," came to replace the dowdy locution, "public address." This shift in vocabulary signaled the decentering of the oratorical text. Virtually every metacritical essay of this period reiterates, as if this were ever in doubt, that the range of rhetoric extends well beyond the production of oratorical artifacts.

This position is forcefully stated by Samuel Becker in his essay, "Rhetorical Studies for the Contemporary World" (1971). Becker characterizes traditional criticism as "source-message centered" and finds two main faults with it: First, the public address critics tend to rely almost exclusively on a "persuasion model" and thereby ignore other important functions of communication. Second, they study message encounters originated by single speaker/writers as if they were discrete events with identifiable vectors of influence and thus fail to recognize that such encounters are only "a minute part of the communication environment." Alternatively, Becker proposes a "message-audience centered" approach guided by an equilibrium model that recognizes that communication occurs functionally in "longer chains" and complex loops rather than in discrete encounters.<sup>25</sup> Becker wishes to retain the traditional emphasis on the message, but invites us to "define message in a

more fruitful way, in a way that is more descriptive of what man as a receiver is exposed to, rather than what man as source creates."<sup>26</sup>

It is interesting to note that Becker, unlike Black, does not view traditional criticism as conceptually flawed. Instead he locates the failure of traditional criticism in its inability to adapt to the rapidly changing modern world. Becker catalogues a series of communication related changes in technology and society that have radically transformed the object domain of rhetoric leaving the traditional criticism obsolete.<sup>27</sup> This transformation is noticeable at two levels: message and audience. According to Becker, "the message to which a receiver is exposed is scattered in time and space, disorganized, has large gaps. . . ."<sup>28</sup> Becker, as if he were anticipating McGee two decades later, characterizes the message as fragmentary and notes that such fragmentation shifts the hermeneutic burden of making sense (or "text construction") upon the receiver.<sup>29</sup> As for Becker's conception of the receiver, there is a revealing passage:

This man lives in a veritable pressure cooker of communication; everyone and everything is pushing him. The media are pushing him to buy a car and cigarettes and to stop smoking; . . . His children are pushing him to play with them . . . . And his wife is telling him to mow the lawn and take it easy and fix his tie. . . . And those above him at the plant or office are pushing him to work harder, and those below him are pushing him to stop making them work so hard. And all this pushing is done through communication. . . . He cannot escape this barrage of communication, and his wife wonders why he is not more communicative in the evening when she demands, "Talk to me. Why don't you ever talk to me?"<sup>30</sup>

We need not here dwell over the ideological implications of the way in which Becker prefigures the message and the receiver. Whatever one might think of Becker's sympathy for the besieged patriarchy in the fragmented discursive space of late capitalism, we find that with Becker, as with Wichelns and Wrage, object determines method. Becker's alternative approach—"mosaic analogue"—follows directly from his prefiguration of the object domain as a "pressure cooker" with fragmentary messages and besieged receivers.

It is hardly surprising that such a globally attenuated notion of message and its reception effectively decenters the oratorical text. Wayne Brockriede, commenting enthusiastically on Becker's essay, views this decentering as a revolutionary break with the past. In a famous line he rejects as no longer tenable the traditional "idea that the most appropriate unit of rhetoric is the 'speech,' a one shot attempt at persuasion," whose boundaries are conveniently marked "by a speaker's introduction and his conclusion."<sup>31</sup> But a far more radical refiguration of the object domain is underway in Becker's essay than the decentering of the oratorical text that Brockreide hails as revolutionary. It concerns the competing claims of two strategies for conceptualizing rhetoric—as a process or as a product—each deriving its lineage from the unresolved tension in Aristotle's canonical view of rhetoric as a practical/productive art. Becker, despite his attention to the message, takes

a processual perspective. In fact, his notion of message is so attenuated that it has little of the ontological solidity that Leff ascribes to a speech text as a "constructed thing." For Becker, a message is no more than point of intersection in a complex web of communicative affiliations that can be understood only by recourse to a relatively abstract processual logic. In taking this perspective, Becker was anything but revolutionary. The processual perspective was already dominant in rhetorical theory, especially among such functionalists as Bryant and Bitzer.<sup>32</sup> But neither Bryant nor Bitzer consciously exploit the process/product dichotomy in their theoretical formulations. Becker is more conscious of the tension as he privileges process over product but he does not represent them as opposed theoretical choices.

But once the tension between these two concepts of rhetoric becomes explicit in critical practice, as is the case with both Leff and McGee and the generation they represent, it complicates the dialectic between object and method we are examining. On the surface, it seems that McGee's global view of rhetoric as a materially embedded social process is better suited than Leff's local view of rhetoric as an embodied product to set the stage for the emancipation of the method from the object. But as we shall see later such an easy resolution is not possible because the process/product dichotomy now has become the contested site both for recounting disciplinary history and for legitimating disciplinary autonomy.

## BLACK AND THE PLURALIST HIATUS

The main event on the methodological front during the years that separate Wraga from Leff and McGee is the publication of Black's *Rhetorical Criticism*. We need not dwell on the historical significance of Black's book that allegedly delivered a death blow to the long dominant and long decaying "neo-Aristotelian" paradigm. We are interested only in mapping how Black's intervention alters the dialectic between object and method put into play by Wichelns. Black finds the prevailing neo-Aristotelian conception of the object domain restrictive, especially the narrow view of "the rhetorical discourse as tactically designed to achieve certain results with a specific audience on a specific occasion."<sup>33</sup> As for the neo-Aristotelian method, Black finds it disabling. For instance, he explains how the decision to evaluate rhetorical discourse in its immediate context either by measuring effect (as with Wichelns) or by assessing the persuasive quality (as with Parrish) results in a severe truncation, if not a virtual abdication, of the judicial function of criticism. Black does not specify whether, with the neo-Aristotelians, the restricted view of rhetorical discourse leads to a faulty method or a faulty method leads to a restricted conception of rhetorical discourse. These are simply two features that he finds operating concurrently in the neo-Aristotelian critical practice. However, Black does insist repeatedly that the defects of neo-Aristotelian criticism cannot be accounted for by appealing to the nature of rhetorical discourse.

What Black finds most offensive about neo-Aristotelianism is not the abdication of the judicial function of criticism but that it renders the critic's own response, a pre-requisite for any sort of judicial evaluation, irrelevant. In Black's view, the critic has an obligation to engage discourse *qua* discourse. The term that Black repeatedly employs to characterize the relationship between critic and discourse is "disclosure." The critic acts as the interpreter/mediator between the discourse and his own audience. He "proceeds in part by translating the object of his criticism into terms of his audience and in part by educating his audience to the terms of the object." The critic's disclosures are pedagogically motivated, they are meant to enlighten. The Critic is an educator, says Black with Arnoldian certitude, "and insofar as he fails to educate, he fails his essential office."<sup>34</sup>

But, in Black's view, what the critic can translate and his audience can apprehend is only that which is alive in the discourse. That is why the neo-Aristotelian attempt to substitute historical reconstruction for re-creative criticism is doomed to fail:<sup>35</sup> "No matter how vividly the critic may make the past live in his pages, no matter with what incorruptible verisimilitude he may present it to us, it is still the past. The voices we hear speak from the grave. . . . Our assent is not being solicited; our conviction cannot be engaged. . . . When we read the speech of Henry Clay, we find it doctrinally archaic, and no critical mediation can restore its doctrinal vitality."<sup>36</sup> If a discourse is doctrinally dead, as most rhetorical discourses are with the passing of the context that gave them voice, what does a critic do? What does the critic disclose?

Here we can only suggest an answer: the critic who believes that some techniques of argument can have an effect independent of the substance of argument is able to experience an immediate response to discourse. If, in other words, a critic were to see any rhetorical discourse as working to make certain techniques conventional, to shape an audience's expectations for discourses that they will hear and read, to mold an audience's sensibilities to language, then that critic would be in position to respond with immediacy, even to doctrinal archaism. He will be able to do so because, we shall assume, rhetorical techniques do not become archaic in the way that doctrines and issues become archaic; a rhetorical technique will almost always stand as a live possibility at any point in history.<sup>37</sup>

This is a crucial passage for understanding Black's version of the dialectic between object and method. What is abiding in discourses, even in a rhetorical discourse that is generally "fragmentary outside its environment," is what it discloses about the persistence of rhetorical techniques, the formation of discursive conventions, and the evolution of linguistic sensibilities. If this were all that Black found abiding and intriguing (permanence and beauty), then we would be justified in thinking of him as a formalist. But there is a twist. In a key sentence, while discussing the practice of certain literary critics who decenter the content, Black notes that the aim of such decentering is not to privilege the linguistic form, but to prepare one "to discern the attitudes, the assumptions, the moral economy that lie below the level of ideology."<sup>38</sup> Black, thus, invites the critic to disclose, by attending/responding to the discursive

action within the text, the "moral economy" that informs it. Whatever one might think about the allegedly pre-ideological status of such symbolically mediated moral economies, surely the object can no longer master the method. The legacy of Wichelns is finally interrupted. Now the critic can be seen as freely attending/responding to the form as he discloses, and while disclosing constitutes, the moral economy of the discourse. Thus, the critic and the critical act are made autonomous in relation to the object.

By freeing the critic from the domination of the object, Black set the stage for the ensuing pluralist hiatus that persists to this day. Ironically, critical pluralism was to find its *rationale* in the apotheosis of the critical object. It was now seen as something so immensely rich and complex and co-extensive with humanity itself that only a flexible system of theoretical perspectives and critical procedures employed on an *ad hoc* basis could do justice to it. Therefore, while encouraging individual critics to pursue different and even conflicting theoretical perspectives, the critical community as a whole adopted a pluralist stance. For only such a stance, it was held, could generate the requisite conceptual innovation equal to the task of mastering and making intelligible the bewildering variety of objects that constitute rhetoric.<sup>39</sup>

The two dominant trends that I have identified—the globalization of the object (and the attendant privileging of process over product) and the pluralization of methods—taken together succeeded in radically disrupting the dialectic between object and method originally put into play by Wichelns. In fact, the connection between the two was snapped. There was nothing left to connect the two except the intervention of the critic.

The recent work of both Left and McGee can be read as an attempt to reconnect object and method in new and productive ways.

### III

#### McGEE AND THE OBJECTIFICATION OF RHETORIC

In his influential essay, "A Materialist's Conception of Rhetoric" (1982), McGee introduces a new variation on the dialectic between object and method. As opposed to the conventional strategy of specifying diverse items that make up the object domain of rhetoric, McGee invites us to conceive of rhetoric itself as an object. Such a conception of rhetoric, he believes, will bridge the gap between theory and practice that afflicts contemporary rhetorical studies. McGee does not explicitly speak of a critical method here as he does, for instance, in his essay on "ideographs." But it is not difficult to infer the status and function of an implied method, once we have understood his conception of rhetoric as an object.

The essay opens with an attack on "idealism" allegedly rampant in contemporary rhetorical studies. In McGee's view, the "idealist"

domination has generated a rhetorical theory and pedagogical technique ungrounded in human experience and utterly divorced from actual everyday practice. An idealist imagination finds satisfactions by excavating the great books tradition within rhetoric rather than in "creating precise descriptions and explanations of prevailing persuasive practices."<sup>40</sup> This divorce between theory and practice is most decisively articulated in a "product-conception" rhetoric which, according to McGee, is based on "a naive psychological model of the creative process" that moves in a linear fashion from invention to delivery.<sup>41</sup>

As an alternative, McGee's offers a "materialist" process model that begins with a Marxist axiom—"it is not consciousness that determines life, but life that determines consciousness." Or, to put it mundanely, practice precedes theory. McGee identifies the relevant practices that precede (and should regulate) theory simply as "the brute reality of persuasion as a daily social phenomenon."<sup>42</sup> The "process-model" is not something new. How could anyone totally ignore the vexatious facticity of rhetoric on a daily basis? So it is "inherent in all textbooks on rhetorical technique" but concealed by the idealist preceptive surface. Even Aristotle's insights, according to McGee, are derived from his daily observations of communicative practices in the Greek *polis*: "He observed individual advocates ('speaker') delivering a finished discourse ('speech') to a group of human beings ('audience') in a particular social context ('occasion') with the intention of using the collective power of the group to control some problematic element of the shared environment ('change')."<sup>43</sup> But, alas, Aristotle's "primitive attitude" toward what he had observed and his "primeval elitism" made him privilege one element of the phenomenon, namely "speaker," over the other four elements and eventually led him to subsume his genuinely empirical findings under an "idealist" product-model. McGee elaborates at some length on the process-model of rhetoric implicit in Aristotle and represents it in terms of its "molecular structure"—(s/s/a/o/c)—where none of the five elements is privileged over the other.

So what we have here is an opposition between a "psychologically naive" idealist product model that moves in a linear fashion from invention to delivery and a materialist process model that beholds a persuasive practice as a *gestalt* of relationships. But despite the starkness of the opposition and the generally polemical tone of the essay, none of this is truly controversial. Becker and Brockreide had already decentered the product-model as they moved in the direction of processual view. However, what is distinctive about McGee's "materialist" gloss on the process model is his notion of "rhetoric as an object." He invites us "to think of rhetoric as an object, as material and as omnipresent as air and water."<sup>44</sup> But he does not want us to confuse rhetoric with speech texts as "idealists" are prone to do. A speech text (a sheaf of paper with ink scratches) is as tangible as a rock, but it is not "rhetoric in and of itself." It is only a "residue of rhetoric." According to McGee:

"But the whole rhetoric is 'material' by measure of human experiencing of it, not by virtue of our ability to continue touching it after it is gone. Rhetoric is 'object' because of its pragmatic *presence*, our inability safely to ignore it at the moment of its impact."<sup>45</sup>

Thus for McGee, the materiality of rhetoric is an experientially "given" that we later apprehended schematically as a paradigm of relationships consisting of *s/s/a/o/c*. Now it is one thing to ground the "materiality" of rhetoric in human experience and quite another to show how it comes to be so grounded. A fully articulated theoretical account along those lines would require one to travel through the vicissitudes of constitutive phenomenology. But McGee, perhaps wisely, does not take such a route. Instead, McGee (in a strategy similar to the one adopted by Alfred Schutz in constructing a phenomenology of the social world) simply takes it for granted that the "materiality" of rhetoric is experientially given and that any descriptive claims regarding it can be made intersubjectively valid.<sup>46</sup> For McGee, rhetoric is a routine content of everyday life—something that is commonly perceived, commonly experienced, and commonly apprehended. Thus, rhetoric is autonomous. We need not hereafter exercise ourselves over Plato's haunting question—what is rhetoric?—that ensnares us into "idealist" totalizations about the nature and essence of rhetoric. Presupposing its recalcitrant "immediacy," McGee proceeds to describe the range of rhetorical experiences common to all human beings. It "exists on a continuum from the absolutely specific experience of being persuaded to the absolutely general experience of having been conditioned to a pattern of social and political opinion." Thus, rhetoric is also global. "There are," he adds, "as many nuances of rhetorical experience as there are points in a line."<sup>47</sup>

It is debatable whether McGee adequately grounds his notion of "rhetoric as an object" in either "intersubjective" social phenomenology or in what he calls "social materialism."<sup>48</sup> But such a grounding is not at the center of his project. Nor is McGee disturbed by the possibility that his prefiguration of rhetoric as "the brute reality of persuasion as a daily social phenomenon" might have already implicated him in a conspiracy of theory. But a materialist has certain privileges. What is central to McGee's project is a commitment to cut through the "idealist" maze of ungrounded theories and methods that obscure and defer the rhetorical object and to resecure its primacy by invoking the "felt quality" of its presence in everyday life.

By inviting us to view rhetoric as an object, McGee privileges object over method and thus sustains the original dialectic between the two set in motion by Wicelns. But the two ends of the dialectic have changed. The object has lost the specificity it had in Wicelns or even in Wrage. It has become, as anticipated by Becker, globalized and fragmented. With McGee, the globalization is stretched to the point when the object dissolves (even as it impinges on our consciousness)



into a "felt quality" of social life. As to the fate of the method, two terms stand out: description and reconstruction. The task of both theory construction and critical understanding must begin with a rigorous description of persuasive practices in everyday life. This is a fairly sensible injunction so long as we can cope with the problem of descriptive relativism. The idea of "reconstruction" has a more direct bearing on critical method. Insofar as McGee views speech texts *a la* Foucault as residues of a bygone rhetorical process/event, they become indispensable hermeneutic sites. Methodologically, this implicates him in the task of reconstructing the original rhetorical process from its documentary traces. This is reminiscent of the neo-Aristotelian desire to reconstruct the "originary" moment of discourse production by effacing the text in its historical context. But the parallel does not hold. McGee inhabits a post-Gadamerean universe no longer susceptible to the romantic urge to apprehend the origin, but conscious of its own historicity and the prejudiced character of understanding. McGee has attempted such a reconstruction by unpacking ideological inscriptions in speeches of Elizabeth Tudor, Peter Wentworth, and James Stuart in his essay, "The Origins of 'Liberty': A Feminization of Power," with highly controversial results. For our purpose, it is sufficient to note that with McGee, as with Wichelns, Wrage and Becker, the object retains a semblance of mastery over the reconstructive method, even as it recedes and is recast from the situated horizons of a critic.

For McGee's version of the fragmentation of the object, we now turn to his essay included in the present volume, "Text, Context, and the Fragmentation of Contemporary Culture." The essay is a meditation on two sets of changes: one in the real world of American culture and the other in the academic world of rhetorical criticism. It seems rhetorical criticism repeats the errors of rhetorical theory as it stands divorced from the cultural practices of our time. Just as the "product model" discloses the gap between theory and practice, the pluralist conception of the relationship between text and context discloses the divorce between culture and criticism. In the earlier essay, McGee sought to replace "idealism" with "materialism," now he wants to shift the focus from "rhetorical criticism" to "critical rhetoric." The tone of the essay is less polemical but the thesis is no less radical.

According to McGee, the American cultural landscape has radically changed in the last seventy years since the passage of the 19th Amendment. We now live in a culturally heterogeneous rather than a homogeneous world. The institutional and cultural formations in our society have been thoroughly "psychologized." We no longer presuppose the rationality of the audience in civic discourse. As a result of these and other changes, American culture is in a state of fragmentation and "contemporary discourse practices reflect this fragmentation" (p. 286).<sup>49</sup>

According to McGee, we no longer have anything resembling a "unified" or "finished" text (or at least a text that gives the illusion of unity and completion) characteristic of relatively homogeneous societies in which great orators such as Demosthenes, Cicero and Edmund Burke lived and spoke. The rhetor is no longer the master of situations, one who could impose his or her discursive will against the recalcitrant world. In the formation of discourse, the rhetor is no longer the seat of origin but a point of intersection. He or she is surrounded by a sea of fragments—bits and scraps of evidence, disembodied arguments, issues and visions—out of which is woven the rhetor's own fragment. Hence, the rhetor is preeminently an interpreter who attempts to make sense of the discursive surroundings in the manner of a bricoleur, a hermeneutic Indiana Jones who makes it up as he goes along. The authorial intention that once marked the boundaries of discourse has broken down in the face of our intertextual situation where the deep murmur of the unsaid always exceeds what can be said. So McGee concludes, we have no texts, only "*discursive fragments of context*" (p. 287). And yet McGee leaves open the possibility of totalization: "The only way to 'say it all' in our fractured culture is to provide readers/audiences with dense, truncated fragments which cue *them* to produce a finished discourse in their minds. In short, *text construction is now something done more by the consumers than by the producers of discourse*" (p. 288).

McGee elaborates at some length on a strategy for obtaining "a more developed picture of a whole 'text' by considering three structural relationships, between an apparently finished discourse and its sources," its presuppositions (culture), and its influence (pp. 12-20). Thus, a desire to "say it all," and if we cannot "say it all," at least to "put it all together" persists and McGee appears to endorse that desire. But insofar as one yields to such a desire, even though the site of desire has shifted from rhetor to audience with the willing complicity of the former, it seems to me, the hour of the post-modern "fragment" has not yet arrived. An authentically post-modern "fragment" (and I mean authentic in an ethical sense) will not only gesture its own incompleteness and insufficiency at the site of production but will resist any attempt to recuperate the plenitude of meaning at the site of reception/consumption. As McGee rightly notes, the critic's burden is more complex than that of an average listener. A discourse cannot simply be constructed in the critic's mind. The critic must produce a formal discourse in response to a rhetorical fragment that invites "text construction," or in McGee's words, the critic has to invent out of imagined fragments "*a text suitable for criticism*" (p. 288). This is a topic on which McGee promises to elaborate in a future essay. But its ethical implications are already upon us.

Is contemporary rhetorical criticism adequately prepared and poised to take measure of this new cultural terrain? McGee does not think so. In the last twenty-five years rhetorical criticism has moved in the wrong direction. The focus has shifted from "substance" (object) to "methods"

to such an extent that criticism has become "an *object* of study rather than a *vehicle* of study" (p. 275). The reorientation announced in Black's dictum—"criticism is what critics do"—has resulted in what Gronbeck calls the "death" of "public address." McGee, in fact, goes further than Gronbeck in claiming that rhetoric also has dissolved. As the locution "rhetorical criticism" itself exemplifies—"rhetoric shifted from noun to qualifier, and in its new adjectival state, it remains occluded by focus on 'criticism'" (p. 275). The focus on criticism dissolves rhetoric into literary theory. McGee argues at length that the dissolution of rhetoric into literary theory reduces it to mere interpretation, devalues its performative dimension by regarding it as an artifact, dilutes its affiliation with materiality or everydayness of practical discourse, and finally, in a gesture characteristic of both hermeneutics and deconstruction, privileges writing over speech. In other words, rhetorical criticism is always already implicated in the errant ways of the most advanced offerings of literary theory. McGee's alternative to all this is what McKerrow calls "critical rhetoric"<sup>50</sup>: "I believe that an assertion of critical rhetoric, a reappraisal of the way we associate the terms *criticism* and *rhetoric*, might lead to such strategies. . . . Instead of beginning with the claim that 'criticism is what critics do,' we might begin conceiving our academic practice by saying that *rhetoric is what rhetoricians do*" (pp. 278-279).

McGee's claim that a shift in scholarly focus from object to method in rhetorical criticism has dissolved rhetoric is a classic instance of a productive misreading of the tradition characteristic of "strong" critics. The dissolution of rhetoric, as I have shown in this essay, does not begin with a shift from object to method. Rather, it begins when Wrage gives up Wichelns' Ciceronian vision of orator as a culture hero and prefigures "public address" (object) as a species of "fugitive" literature, something that can serve as a supplement to the history of ideas. The dissolution continues with Becker as the object is globalized into a message fragment; and finally, with McGee the dissolution reaches a point where it is dialectically transformed into a "felt quality" of social life. From Wichelns to McGee, the object gradually recedes and finally disintegrates into fragments. But even as it recedes and disintegrates, object continues to hold the method captive. It is the fragmentation of the object that sets up the new equation between text and context and that leads, according to McGee, to the role reversal, "making *interpretation* the primary task of speakers and writers and *text construction* the primary task of audiences, readers, and critics" (p. 274). Thus, the shift from object to method is not a sudden and gratuitous act, but a movement necessitated by the slow erosion of the object itself. In the breach created by that erosion, we find the textualists offering to "save the speech" by an act of disciplined reading.

## LEFF AND THE RECOVERY OF THE OBJECT

Since the beginning of this decade Leff has been recounting and refining a diagnostic narrative on the state of rhetorical criticism. An abbreviated version of that narrative serves as an introduction to his essay (coauthored with Sachs) in this volume. The main theme of the narrative is the troubled and shifting equation between theory, method, and object in rhetorical criticism from Hudson and Wichelns to the present. The tension within the narrative springs from a phenomenon described earlier as "the deferral of the text."

W. Charles Redding (1957) was the first to take note of this problem of deferral. Redding's formulation of the problem was brilliant, his diagnosis simple but influential, and his prescription disastrous. Leff operates within Redding's formulation of the problem, but his diagnosis is complex and his prescription has captured the attention, if not the endorsement, of the critical community. Redding states the problem in a question: "Is it possible that rhetorical scholars have too often moved out of rather than more deeply into their own subject?"<sup>51</sup> For Redding, delving more deeply into the subject meant "getting into" or giving a "close reading" of an oratorical text. He finds among practical critics certain resistance to the text, a tendency to become so entangled with contextual details until when the text virtually disappears from critical vision. Redding's diagnosis, one generally upheld by later scholars, explains this resistance to the text as a direct consequence of a slavish adherence to a faulty theory and an equally faulty methodology (neo-Aristotelianism, of course). Redding's prescription, virtually ignored by the critical community, proposed the social scientific method of "content analysis" under a broader orientation—"intrinsic criticism."

Leff's diagnosis of the problem, of which we have several narrative versions, is far more complex.<sup>52</sup> It begins with an arresting insight into a fatal contradiction that marred the neo-Aristotelian critical project from the outset. For instance, Hudson's functional view of rhetoric as persuasion led him to view each rhetorical act as a "unique whole." On Leff's account, Hudson held (notwithstanding the authority of Aristotle) that "the means of persuasion available in a given case are particular to that case. Rhetoric . . . exists primarily as a product, as a discursive response to a particular occasion."<sup>53</sup> And yet Hudson's commitment to renovate the classical system of topical invention led him and the neo-Aristotelians who followed him to posit a form/content dichotomy that deflected attention from rhetorical discourse as a product with an integrity and ontological solidity of its own. The oratorical text instead became a site *par excellence* for exercising one's ingenuity in identifying and extracting underlying forms of argument. Thus, the text was simultaneously privileged and deferred. In the space created by that deferral, a view of "rhetoric as process" became unassailably fixed.

Leff examines several competing, and often overlapping, versions of rhetoric as process—the traditional view of rhetoric as argument

(Parrish) versus the modern stress on rhetoric as style (Fisher, Ivy, and Osborn); the neo-Aristotelian view of rhetoric as a thing contained ("an art domiciled within the territory of politics and domesticated by this confinement") versus the neo-sophistic view of rhetoric as container ("a power that ranges across the entire domain of human discourse, containing whatever matter it encounters").<sup>54</sup> This examination leads Leff to one overwhelming conclusion: Whatever the internal differentiation that might subsist among these competing versions they have in common a tendency "to weaken or sever the connection between" rhetorical action and production.<sup>55</sup> And their preoccupation with "act" invariably deflects attention from text. Thus, Leff and McGee give us opposed readings of our disciplinary history. While for McGee the hegemony of the "product model" occludes "the brute reality of persuasion as a daily social phenomenon," Leff finds in the hegemony of the "process model" an inclination to habitually defer the text.

While Leff's diagnosis is far more sophisticated than Redding's, they do share a common perspective. Leff, like Redding, explains the resistance to the text in terms of forces external to the text itself, be they the methodological monism of old guard or the excessive theoreticism of revisionists who succeeded them. The diagnosis in both cases is preoccupied with *the resistance to the text* rather than with *the resistance of the text*. But there is a key difference. Redding clearly does not consider, nor does he seem to be aware of the possibility, that the oratorical text itself repels and resists a "close reading." Leff is fully conscious of this possibility as adumbrated in the "transparency thesis" that runs from Wraga through Baskerville to Nilsen, but he does not seriously engage it.<sup>56</sup> Given Leff's tendency to accommodate and synthesize a wide range of conflicting perspectives, this exclusion seems something more than a mere accident of scholarly oversight or fatigue. In fact, Leff engages the "transparency thesis" in a double misreading. That is, the transparency thesis misreads the resistance of the text as having no resistance whatsoever, and Leff elects to respond to this misreading by showing that the oratorical text does, indeed, generate its own distinctive mode of resistance as a "constructed thing." But this move deflects our attention from a more radical notion of resistance that is implicit in McGee's notion of "fragment." Therefore, I will take this exclusion as deliberate and significant and seek an interpretation of Leff's critical project from the vantage point of this exclusion.

To begin with, to subsume Leff's critical project under the general rubric of "textual criticism" is misleading. What is intriguing and controversial about Leff's project is not that he privileges texts but rather the type of texts he privileges, i.e., the "oratorical masterpieces." Leff has repeatedly expressed his preference for what Black calls the "touchstone" system.<sup>57</sup> According to Black, an educated familiarity with exemplary instances of rhetorical excellence enables the critic to "hold certain expectations of what rhetorical discourse ought to do" and to

"achieve certain insights into what rhetorical discourse is capable of doing." It can further provide the putative critic "with that vague quality, *taste*, without which no set of explicit standards can be judiciously applied." Thus, Black locates the usefulness of the touchstone system primarily in "the training of the critic."<sup>58</sup>

But Leff places a much greater critical burden on the touchstone system. For Leff, the oratorical masterpiece is the privileged site for understanding the peculiar and incomplete art of rhetoric. Rhetoric is an incomplete art in that it cannot achieve theoretical formalization beyond a certain point. One cannot apprehend (or redescribe) rhetorical phenomena exclusively in the meta-language of theory. The peculiar nature of the rhetorical art can be understood only in and through its local discursive manifestations. In Leff's words, rhetoric is "a universal activity that finds its habitation only in the particular."<sup>59</sup> As a global process (conceived either as argument or as style), rhetoric is susceptible to theoretical abstraction and formalization. But to do so is impractical. Here Leff betrays the influence of Cicero.

In an essay on *De Oratore*, Leff examines Cicero's views on the competing claims of the Aristotelian generic theory (*tria genera causarum*) as against the Isocratean paradigmatic model in the education of the orator. For our purpose, the relevant point of interest is Leff's interpretation of Antonius' refusal to recognize panegyric as a separate genre. Antonius (the main interlocutor in the second book of *De Oratore*) admits that the range of oratory is unlimited, because eloquence can illuminate any subject that calls for embellished and impressive treatment. Rhetorical considerations impose themselves on a wide range of discursive practices from composing official dispatches to writing histories. This fact, however, does not warrant that one should laboriously classify various genres of persuasive discourse and systematize rules that govern them. Experience shows "that specific precepts are unnecessary for all the types of oratorical activity that rational analysis can uncover." In fact, even the third Aristotelian genre, panegyric, does not merit consideration as an independent genre because its precepts "flow from the same source that apply to all other forms of oratory, and the topics commonly associated with it lie open to common sense and do not require formulation as 'scholastic rudiments.'<sup>60</sup>

The rationale behind Antonius' position is quite simple: Whoever has mastered the most difficult part of an art can master the rest without specific instruction. Therefore, we need formalize only the most difficult parts—forensic and deliberative genres—and what remains can be taken care of by experience, practice and analogical imagination. Leff sums up this position:

An Orator who can sway an audience on topics of public concern is capable of speaking eloquently on all other topics without having to consider each one as a special type. In other words, oratorical eloquence has no delimited boundaries but its power is most completely expressed in the paradigm of civic discourse, that is, in the territory delimited by the Aristotelian *ars rhetorica*.<sup>61</sup>

Later when Antonius elevates forensic oratory alone to the paradigmatic status, Leff comments: "Mastery of one oratorical form implies mastery of the whole field. Forensic oratory, as the paradigm of eloquence, is complete within its own sphere of action and embraces all the principles of eloquence."<sup>62</sup>

There is a striking similarity between Antonius' program for oratorical education and Leff's program for rhetorical criticism. In Leff's scheme, masterpieces are the paradigmatic models, recognized as such by the interpretive community, that contain within them the secrets of eloquence. Thus the task of the rhetorical critic is twofold: simultaneously to make intelligible the object and the art informing it. In this fashion the understanding of the art and the object (theory and practice) become conjoined.

We must not misconstrue the essential similarity between the two programs. Leff aims to go beyond (as does Antonius, on Leff's account) the equivalent pedagogical maxim: Whoever has learnt how to critique an oratorical masterpiece can critique a less lofty artifact with ease. His rationale for privileging the touchstone system is more theoretical than pedagogical. For Leff, rhetorical criticism, like psychoanalysis, is an interpretive discipline that seeks to understand an incomplete and elusive art through its concrete manifestations. When properly interpreted, the oratorical masterpiece discloses better than any other type of rhetorical text the actual functioning of the art (not just a vague sense of its possibilities).

And to obtain such a disclosure that simultaneously illuminates the art and the object one has to engage in a close textual analysis. Leff describes the practice, if not the "method," of textual criticism:

[T]he enterprise begins with a severely empirical orientation; the critic must attend to the elements contained within the text itself. The empirical contents of a text, however, are in no way equivalent to the symbolic action that marks a work as rhetorical discourse. Texts simply do not yield up their own rhetorical interpretation. Critics must move from what is given in the text to something they themselves produce—an account of the rhetorical dynamics implicit within it. At a minimum, this act of interpretation requires a means to justify the identification of significant features in the text and to explain the interactions among these features.<sup>63</sup>

One can infer at least two negative ordinances from this passage: textual criticism is neither an engaging paraphrase of what is "said" nor a laborious cataloguing (troponomy) of formal features. The positive stress on the interpretive act suggests that "close reading" is actually a mode of critical writing that aspires to reconstitute the text. And such reconstitution is attempted and sometimes achieved through an interpretive act of making explicit "the rhetorical dynamics implicit within" the text. Thus, textual criticism is a species of grounded interpretation. In such an interpretive scheme, "theoretical precepts attain meaning only as they are vibrated against the particular case and are instantiated in an explanation of it."<sup>64</sup>

We can now turn to Leff's negotiations with the "transparency thesis" that serves as a foil against which he develops his main thesis—*Oratory is an art form*—that makes "close reading" possible. The transparency thesis contains within it the rudiments of a theory of textual resistance. By regarding the oratorical text as transparent (as contrasted with the figural density of poetic text or the ideational density of philosophical text) one paradoxically ascribes to it a form of resistance that obviates or repels "close reading." The oratorical text, thus prefigured, becomes a classic instance of what Barthes calls the "readerly" text that blocks precisely the sort of hermeneutic labor we associate with textual criticism.<sup>65</sup> According to Leff, the appeal of the transparency thesis, which is considerable, springs from a misreading that is taken in by the "referential" and "ideological" surface of the text that occludes its underlying rhetorical structure and strategy:

Unlike poetry and other "purer" forms of verbal art, the oration does not call attention to its own status as an art form. Oratory succeeds best when it appears to blend into the context of ordinary experience. It is a genre of discourse that effaces its own construction. Placed in the margins of art and ordinary experience, oratorical discourse strains simultaneously towards autonomous coherence and transparent reference to the world in which it appears. The referential dimension is the more obvious, and its prominence often blinds the observer to the embedded artistic strategy that makes its referential surface appear plausible and natural.<sup>66</sup>

Not only the referential but even the ideological surface seems transparent because rhetorical discourse is functionally implicated in manipulating *doxa*, the common sense knowledge rooted in the taken for granted character of everyday life. In either case, rhetorical discourse seems eminently susceptible to two modes of reductive understanding—paraphrase and debunking. But, for Leff, this seeming reducibility is precisely the work of rhetorical art. The cunning of the oratorical text consists in creating an illusion of referentiality and ideological plausibility. It adroitly traffics in the worldly and the obvious, the two main constituents of the pervasive ideology of the everyday.

Thus, Leff inverts the transparency thesis. Transparency becomes the hallmark of rhetorical artistry as exemplified, for instance, in the iconicity of the oratorical text. But the texture of the art embedded within is not transparent, but elusive. The moment the critic turns his attention to explicating what Leff calls "rhetorical artistry," the oratorical text loses its transparency and becomes dense and opaque like the poetic text. Now it begins to display the same sort of aesthetics of resistance that requires rather than repels a "close reading." In a series of close readings of oratorical masterpieces, Leff has been trying to develop his main thesis that "oratory is an art form." Thus far he has elaborated on at least three specific features of this art form—temporality, decorum, and now iconicity, as the principles of structuration in oratorical discourse—the details of which cannot be examined here.<sup>67</sup> But we must note one distinct feature of these exercises. By inverting the transparency thesis the way he does, Leff comes close to



pushing the oratorical text, despite his disciplined attention to its situated public character, into the literary and aesthetic orbit.

## CONCLUSION

Thus we have come a full circle. Leff recovers the object by ascribing to rhetorical discourse, or at least to its paradigmatic manifestations in political oratory, precisely those qualities of "permanence and beauty" the denial of which had set it on an inexorable course of disfiguration and impoverishment from Wichelns to McGee. Leff effects this rescue by abstaining from the prefigurative urge to totalize the object as "transparent," or as "fugitive," or as "fragmentary" and by refiguring it through a disciplined act of reading. Whether this amounts to a mastery of the method over object is less important for us to decide now than to take note of the continuing dialectic between the two, of which Leff and McGee constitute but two contemporary versions of opposition and elucidation. McGee's essay already hints at "a resistance of the third kind" characteristic of the post-modern public discourse. Here the resistance comes neither from its alleged "transparency" nor from its well wrought organic density but from its dispersal and fragmentation which commits the rhetor neither to mean what he says nor to say what he means. This makes the task of interpretation, to borrow de Man's formulation, "a Sysyphean task, a task without end and without progress, for the other is always free to make what he wants differ from what he says he wants."<sup>68</sup> Whether the "critical rhetoric" that McGee recommends would lead us out of this hermeneutic impasse remains to be seen. In the meantime, we can go on "reading lips" ever so closely.

## ENDNOTES

1. Michael Calvin McGee, "The Fall of Wellington: A Case Study of the Relationship Between Theory, Practice, and Rhetoric in History," *The Quarterly Journal of Speech* 63 (1977): 41; "Text, Context, and the Fragmentation of Culture," *Western Journal of Speech Communication* 54 (1990): 274-289.

2. Michael C. Leff, "Rhetorical Timing in Lincoln's 'House Divided' Speech," Published under separate cover as the first in the series of *Van Zelst Lecture in Communication* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University School of Speech, 1984).

3. Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar, "Epilogue: The Oratorical Text: The Enigma of Arrival," *Texts in Context: Critical Dialogues on Significant Episodes in American Political Rhetoric*, ed. Michael C. Leff and Fred J. Kauffeld (Davis, CA: Hermagoras Press, 1989) 255-275.

4. However, there are some clear exceptions. According to Stephen E. Lucas: "Wichelns' task was twofold: to differentiate rhetoric from literature, and to ground rhetorical criticism in the unique nature of rhetorical discourse." See his "The Schism in Rhetorical Scholarship," *The Quarterly Journal of Speech* 67 (1981): 1.

5. Herbert A. Wichelns, "The Literary Criticism of Oratory," *Studies in Rhetoric and Public Speaking in Honor of James Albert Winans* (NY: Century, 1962) 209. The famous remark reads: "It [rhetorical criticism] is not concerned with permanence, nor yet with beauty. It is concerned with effect. It regards speech as a communication to a specific audience, and holds its business to be the analysis and appreciation of the orator's method of imparting his ideas to his hearers."

6. Walter Fisher, "Method in Rhetorical Criticism," *The Southern Speech Journal* 35 (1969): 103.

7. Fisher 102.
8. Fisher 104-105.
9. Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1973).
10. Wichelns 199.
11. Wichelns 182.
12. Wichelns 207.
13. Wichelns 207-208.
14. Robert Hariman, "Status, Marginality, and Rhetorical Theory," *The Quarterly Journal of Speech* 72 (1986): 38-54.
15. Wichelns 182, 215.
16. Wichelns 190, 196, 201-202.
17. Wichelns 216.
18. Wichelns 210-211. For the primary source see Hoyt H. Hudson, "The Field of Rhetoric," *The Quarterly Journal of Speech* 9 (1923): 177.
19. Wichelns 212.
20. Wichelns 216.
21. Ernest J. Wrage, "Public Address: A Study in Social and Intellectual History," *The Quarterly Journal of Speech* 33 (1947): 453, 451.
22. Wrage 453.
23. Wrage 453.
24. William N. Brigance, ed., *A History and Criticism of American Public Address*, 2 vols. (NY: McGraw-Hill, 1943); Lester Thonssen and A. Craig Baird, *Speech Criticism* (NY: Ronald Press, 1948).
25. Samuel L. Becker, "Rhetorical Studies for the Contemporary World," *The Prospect of Rhetoric: Report of the National Development Project*, ed. Lloyd F. Bitzer and Edwin Black (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1971) 23-27.
26. Becker 31.
27. In a recent essay J. Michael Sproule takes a similar position. See his "The New Managerial Rhetoric and the Old Criticism," *The Quarterly Journal of Speech* 74 (1988): 468-486.
28. Becker 31.
29. Becker 40.
30. Becker 26.
31. Wayne Brockriede, "Trends in the Study of Rhetoric: Toward a Blending of Criticism and Science," *The Prospect of Rhetoric*, 125-126.
32. Donald C. Bryant, "Rhetoric: Its Functions and Its Scope," *The Quarterly Journal of Speech* 39 (1953): 401-424; and Lloyd F. Bitzer, "The Rhetorical Situation," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 1 (1968): 1-14.
33. Edwin Black, *Rhetorical Criticism: A Study in Method* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978, 1965) 33.
34. Black 6.
35. Black, following the tripartite scheme proposed by Theodore M. Greene, identifies the three constituents of criticism: the historical (that of determining the nature and expressive intent of rhetorical discourse in its historical context), the re-creative (that of apprehending imaginatively, through disciplined and sensitive reading, what rhetor actually succeeds in expressing in his discourse), and the judicial (that of evaluating a rhetorical discourse in relation to other discourses and other human values). See, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 36-37.
36. Black 52.
37. Black 56-57.
38. Black 59.
39. A number of leading scholars endorsed "critical pluralism." Karlyn Campbell, for instance, wrote: "The presence of many theoretical and methodological viewpoints is not a sign of chaotic instability but evidence of the health and maturity of our discipline which is becoming increasingly able to account for the many meanings of rhetorical and communicative acts." See her, "The Nature of Criticism in Rhetorical and Communicative Studies," *Central States Speech Journal* 30 (1979): 9.

40. Michael Calvin McGee, "A Materialist's Conception of Rhetoric," *Explorations in Rhetoric: Studies in Honor of Douglas Ehninger*, ed. R. E. McKerrow (Glenville, IL: Scott Foresman, 1982): 28.
41. McGee, "A Materialist's Conception of Rhetoric" 28.
42. McGee, "A Materialist's Conception of Rhetoric" 25.
43. McGee, "A Materialist's Conception of Rhetoric" 29.
44. McGee, "A Materialist's Conception of Rhetoric" 26.
45. McGee, "A Materialist's Conception of Rhetoric" 29.
46. Alfred Schutz, *The Phenomenology of the Social World*, tr. George Walsh and Frederick Lehnert (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1967).
47. McGee, "A Materialist's Conception of Rhetoric" 30-31.
48. McGee refers to "social materialism" in his "The Origins of 'Liberty': A Feminization of Power," *Communication Monographs* 47 (1980): 23-45.
49. Certain points merit attention. First, McGee presupposes rather than establishes the fragmentation of American culture and the reflection of that fragmentation in our discourse practices. Second, the distinction between the homogeneous and heterogeneous cultures is overdrawn. While anyone would concede that the cultural world inhabited by a Cicero or a Burke may have been considerably less fragmented than ours, it also may not have been as homogeneous as McGee assumes.
50. Raymie E. McKerrow, "Critical Rhetoric: Theory and Praxis," *Communication Monographs* 56 (1989): 91-111.
51. W. Charles Redding, "Extrinsic and Intrinsic Criticism," *Western Speech* 21 (1957): 100.
52. For different versions see, Michael C. Leff, "Interpretation and the Art of the Rhetorical Critic," *Western Journal of Speech Communication* 44 (1980): 337-349; (with M. O. Procario) "Rhetorical Theory in Speech Communication," *Speech Communication in the Twentieth Century*, ed. T. W. Benson (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985) 3-27; "The Habitation of Rhetoric," *Argument and Critical Practices*, ed. Joseph W. Wenzel (VA: SCA Publications, 1987) 1-8.
53. Leff and Procario, "Rhetorical Theory in Speech Communication" 8.
54. Leff, "The Habitation of Rhetoric" 1-2.
55. Leff, "The Habitation of Rhetoric" 2.
56. Michael C. Leff, "Textual Criticism: The Legacy of G. P. Mohrmann," *The Quarterly Journal of Speech* 72 (1986): 384.
57. Leff, "Textual Criticism" 383.
58. Black 67-68.
59. Leff, "The Habitation of Rhetoric" 7.
60. Michael C. Leff, "Genre and Paradigm in the Second Book of *De Oratore*," *Southern Speech Communication Journal* 51 (1986): 316-317.
61. Leff, "Genre and Paradigm" 318.
62. Leff, "Genre and Paradigm" 320.
63. Leff, "Textual Criticism" 378.
64. Leff, "Interpretation and the Art of the Rhetorical Critics" 347.
65. Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, tr. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974).
66. Leff, "Textual Criticism" 381.
67. For Leff's elaboration on temporality, decorum, and iconicity, see respectively: "Rhetorical Timing in Lincoln's 'House Divided' Speech"; "The Habitation of Rhetoric," 5-7; (with Andrew Sachs) "Words Most Like Things: Iconicity and the Rhetorical Text," *Western Journal of Speech Communication* 54 (1990): 252-273.
68. Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1971, 1973) 11.

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