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1

Ideology as rhetoric

When a bit of talking takes place, just what is doing the talking? Just where are the words coming from? . . . An "ideology" is like a spirit taking up its abode in a body: it makes that body hop around in certain ways; and that same body would have hopped around in different ways had a different ideology happened to inhabit it.
Burke, *LSA*

Rhetoric has assumed a prominence unimaginable a generation ago. True, it is still mentioned pejoratively in everyday conversation and the media. But among theorists one now sometimes runs across the opposite extreme. Stanley Fish, for instance, in *Doing What Comes Naturally*, tells us that its basic message is that "we live in a rhetorical world."[1] Normally not part of the training of contemporary theorists, rhetoric is instead something encountered on the terrain of contemporary discourse, where it sometimes is and sometimes is not recognized by name. Samuel Ijsseling finds appeals to rhetoric – "direct or indirect" – in strategies used to bring traditional philosophy into question in "Nietzsche, Marx and Freud, and . . . in Heidegger and the various French authors who have been inspired by these thinkers, e.g. J. Derrida, R. Barthes, M. Foucault, J. Lacan and L. Althusser."[2]

Fish writes in "Rhetoric," published for the first time in *Doing*, of some of the theorists responsible for the current rise of rhetoric, including "Kenneth Burke, whose 'dramatism' anticipates so much of what is considered avant-garde today."[3] Burke has, of course, been depicted as an anticipatory figure by others such as Wayne Booth, Fredric Jameson, Frank Lentricchia, Richard Macksey, and Edward

1 *Doing What Comes Naturally: Change, Rhetoric, and the Practice of Theory in Literary and Legal Studies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1989), p. 25.
2 *Rhetoric and Philosophy in Conflict: An Historical Survey* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1976), p. 5.
3 *Doing*, p. 500.

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Excerpt
More information

Said.[4] Lentricchia's *Criticism and Social Change*, moreover, takes a pathbreaking step in pitting Burke against Paul de Man that makes Burke a player in contemporary debate.[5] Whatever its differences with Lentricchia's reading of Burke, the present study follows his lead down this path as it stages interactions between Burke and contemporary theory. Nonetheless, it's still true, as Michael Sprinker recently observed, that Burke remains "generally unassimilated" in the field of literary and cultural studies.[6] Perhaps a more general assimilation will finally occur as a by-product of the revival of rhetoric.[7]

Evidence of this possibility appears in John Bender and David E. Wellbery's authoritative narrative of this revival, where Burke appears as their exemplary figure: "Burke's work presents an especially forceful illustration of our argument bearing on rhetoricality ... Although Burke himself named his method 'dramatism,' a term that signals his abiding concern for the place of language in human action and interaction, the rhetorical thrust of his wide-ranging inquiry is evident on every page."[8]

Rhetoric's antagonists in their narrative are the enlightenment and romanticism, conceived less as distinct epochs than as interlocked parts of a single discursive regime: "Perhaps we can grasp here the affinity between the Enlightenment and Romantic destructions of rhetoric. The cogito, the unshakable foundation of certainty, generates at once the impersonal or abstracted subject of science and the creative, self-forming subject of Romanticism. Once these subjective functions took command over the field of discourse and representation, rhetoric

4 Booth, "Burke's Way," p. 2; Jameson, pp. 507–08; Lentricchia, *passim*; Macksey, "Concluding Remarks," *The Structuralist Controversy: The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man*, eds. Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972), p. 320; Said, "Roads Taken and Not Taken in Contemporary Criticism," *Contemporary Literature* 17 (1976): 331.

5 Lentricchia's book may be contrasted to Samuel B. Southwell's. Both use Burke to attack deconstruction, Lentricchia from the left, Southwell from the right.

6 "The War against Theory," *the minnesota review* n.s. 39 (1992–93), p. 106.

7 Burke has been most fully assimilated in a field where rhetoric has always been central: speech communication. In it, his dramatistic method is a major critical approach (Brock, "Dramatistic"). Speech scholars organized the 1984 conference on Burke, where the Kenneth Burke Society was formed (Simons); subsequently, the Society met in 1990 and 1993 (Chesebro, *Extensions* vii, 342). At the annual conference of the Speech Communication Association, the Society organizes a number of Burke panels; at the 1993 conference, for example, there were seven. In contrast, at the annual conference of the Modern Language Association, panels on Burke have been scheduled only intermittently, and the Society has yet to establish itself there as it has in speech.

8 "Rhetoricality: On the Modernist Return of Rhetoric," *The Ends of Rhetoric: History, Theory, Practice*, eds. Bender and Wellbery (Stanford University Press, 1990), p. 36.

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Excerpt
More information

could no longer maintain its cultural predominance."[9] With these in place, language and verbal interaction – the realm of rhetoric – were marginalized to the wings, leaving the stage to enlightenment certainty and romantic authenticity.

Today, of course, objectivism in the sense of scientific neutrality and subjectivism in the sense of totally autonomous creation are routinely dismissed. Terry Eagleton depicts the drama of the subject and the object in a parodic tone that gives it the quality of an outmoded fashion that we can now look back at with smiling condescension: "the drama of subject and object, the fraught narrative of their couplings and splittings, matchings and misalliances... like the tale of two incompatible partners continually warring to gain an edge over each other, who nevertheless cannot relinquish their fatal fascination for one another and resolve yet again, after another painful separation, to make a go of it."[10] Richard Rorty seconds Eagleton in observing that one can easily compile a long list of figures who during the last century have contributed in varying ways "to set[ting] aside the subject-object, representationalist notions of knowledge."[11]

Rhetoric is imposing itself today, not because the classics from the rhetorical tradition have once again become directly influential, but because of a dramatic reversal in which language and verbal interaction have advanced from the wings to take over the stage. One can, for example, see this reversal occur in Fish as rhetoric appears in his text even *avant la lettre*. Consider his well-known "How to Recognize a Poem When You See One," which depicts students construing a list of names as a religious poem in a narrative Fish designs to show that meaning is neither the representation of an object nor the expression of a subject but the construction of an "interpretive community." The closer one looks, Fish concludes, the more one sees "how unhelpful the terms 'subjective' and 'objective' finally are."[12] Marginalizing subject and object on one hand and foregrounding verbal interaction on the other, Fish steps into the world he later, in "Rhetoric," identifies as rhetorical.

It's now commonplace to observe that "objects" and "subjects" are

9 "Rhetoricality," pp. 11–12.
10 *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), p. 70.
11 "Two Meanings of 'Logocentrism': A Reply to Norris," in *Redrawing the Lines: Analytic Philosophy, Deconstruction, and Literary Theory*, ed. Reed Way Dasenbrock (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), p. 207.
12 *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), p. 336.

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Excerpt
More information

in some sense constructs. Constructionist theorists may disagree sharply: some render constructions visible by historicizing them; others, by deconstructing them. But they come together in agreeing that there is a constructive ingredient in our "realities." It's as if rhetoric on the one hand and subject–object on the other are so related that the constructivist dismantling of the latter entails the revival of the former. In the old paradigm, subject and object interact, the interaction produces a discourse, and enlightenment or romantic criteria determine whether to place trust in the discourse. In the new, trust is placed in the interaction among discourses more than in single discourses, the basis of the trust being neither enlightenment certainty nor romantic authenticity but rhetorical sayability.

The constructionist argument is now widespread. Anything put forward as an essentialist representation that claims transparently to reveal some entity antecedent to language is certain to be exposed as in some way constructing what it purports to represent. Even with the term "nonverbal," one can say that "nonverbal" is itself a word, a word enmeshed, like any other, in relations with other words, relations that make it possible for "nonverbal" to mean. Hence, in the nonverbal there is an ingredient of verbal construction. Burke gives his own picture of a constructionist world in a well-known passage, written over three decades ago:

> [C]an we bring ourselves to realize . . . just how overwhelmingly much of what we mean by "reality" has been built up for us through nothing but our symbol systems? Take away our books, and what little do we know about history, biography, even something so "down to earth" as the relative position of seas and continents? . . . In school, as they go from class to class, students turn from one idiom to another. The various courses in the curriculum are in effect but so many different terminologies. And however important to us is the tiny sliver of reality each of us has experienced firsthand, the whole overall "picture" is but a *construct* of our symbol systems. To meditate on this fact until one sees its full implications is much like peering over the edge of things into an ultimate abyss. And doubtless that's one reason why, though man is typically the symbol-using animal, he clings to a kind of naive verbal realism that refuses to realize the full extent of the role played by symbolicity in his notions of reality. (DM 5, italics added; see also TS 48)

In *GM*, Burke's constructionism takes the form of a constitutionalism, the overlap between the two suggested by Jameson in his observation that "the concept of the 'text' . . . liberates us from the empirical object – whether institution, event, or individual work – by displacing our

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Excerpt
More information

attention to its *constitution* as an object . . ." (Jameson's italics).[13] *GM*'s dialectic of constitutions is the text that underwrites, in ways to be introduced in the present chapter, a rhetoric of the subject. From a bird's-eye viewpoint, our narrative of Burke's career charts his steps to this constitutional model and his later steps away from it, although a few years before his death in 1993 he may have contemplated returning to this model or a revised version of it.

In the constructionist theme in current theoretical discussion, one sees rhetoric transform itself upwards from the pejorative "mere rhetoric" into a discursive "worldview" with considerable power, one that a generation of theorists has put on the historical map. Even the sophists are today being rehabilitated.[14] Perhaps, however, the time has arrived to force constructionism to interrogate itself more rigorously. We take the constructionist argument for granted and will have occasion to reenact it. Discourse constructs, but what is the limit of its constructive power? Fish's "How to Recognize a Poem When You See One" seems to see none, but is that a defensible position? In short, on one level, we take the constructionist argument for granted and on another we ask it some questions: How can one determine the limits of constructive power? When do we encounter what can't be constructed and therefore what can't be reconstructed or transformed? Granted, we are always in some sense inside constructions, but how can we, however indirectly, determine their limits?

To sharpen the question, it may help to juxtapose two often-cited passages. First, Derrida: "*There is nothing outside of the text* [*il n'y a pas de hors-texte*]."[15] Second, Jameson: "history is *not* a text, not a narrative, master or otherwise, but . . . it is inaccessible to us except in textual form, and . . . our approach to it and to the Real itself necessarily passes through its prior textualization, its narrativization in the political unconscious."[16] Jameson makes a concession to Derrida insofar as he lets stand the premise of the primacy of language, but he insists that we are not dealing only with textual processes. He is in effect alerting us that as we focus our attention on the rhetorical processes of linguistic constructing – or constituting – we risk lapsing into absurdity if we forget that these processes have to be distinguished from God's verbal

13 *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), p. 297.
14 See, for example, Susan C. Jarratt, *Rereading the Sophists: Classical Rhetoric Refigured* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991).
15 *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), p. 158.
16 *Political Unconscious*, p. 35.

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Excerpt
More information

fiats in Genesis. We obviously don't construct quite in the way He does. In *PC*, Burke argues, "Stimuli do not possess an *absolute* meaning. Even a set of signs indicating the likelihood of death by torture has another meaning in the orientation of a comfort-loving skeptic than it would for the ascetic whose world-view promised eternal reward for martyrdom" (35). The point could even be made without the qualification of torture, since obviously death itself, in any form, is constructed one way in the skeptic's discourse, another in the ascetic's. But no construction can pencil out the materiality of death, not even constructions of immortality. However complex the problem of identifying the constraints that limit the constructive power of language, we avoid it at our peril. We have our differences with Jameson's solution.[17] But we applaud his foregrounding of the methodological problem.

Jameson's formulation, in sum, focuses our attention on the need for a distinction between rhetorical realism and rhetorical idealism. Rhetorical realism – which we'll find in Burke – is required to preserve the achievements of the constructionist argument.

It's necessary to add that while the customary reading of "there is nothing outside the text" exemplifies exactly what we mean by rhetorical idealism, Derrida is more complicated than this reading allows. He suffered in America the fate of being read through the eyes of a generation brought up by the New Criticism that saw only a textuality of words, filtering out a more complex textuality of existences. This latter textuality, we'll see in chapter 6, is compatible with rhetorical realism.[18]

Idealism is the temptation rhetoric must constantly guard against in protecting itself from the pejorative "mere rhetoric." Eagleton suggests as much in his brief narrative of the history of rhetoric, where at the hands of Nietzsche and deconstruction rhetoric suffers an "ultimate

17 See my "A New Hermeneutic in Old Clothes: Fredric Jameson's *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*," *Works and Days: Essays in the Socio-Historical Dimensions of Literature and the Arts* 2 (1984): 57–62; and the correction that puts paragraphs in the correct order: *Works and Days* 3 (1985): 94.

18 "What I call 'text,'" Derrida insists, "implies all the structures called 'real,' 'economic,' 'historical,' socio-institutional, in short: all possible referents. Another way of recalling once again that 'there is nothing outside the text.' That does not mean that all referents are suspended, denied, or enclosed in a book, as people have claimed, or have been naive enough to believe and to have accused me of believing. But it does mean that every referent, all reality has the structure of a differential trace, and that one cannot refer to this 'real' except in an interpretive experience" – *Limited Inc*, ed. Gerald Graff (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988), p. 148.

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Robert Wess
Excerpt
More information

reversal": "Born at the juncture of politics and discourse, rhetoric now had the Fool's function of unmasking all power as self-rationalization, all knowledge as a mere fumbling with metaphor."[19] Eagleton's narrative closes by proposing a restoration of the links between rhetoric and politics found in antiquity in order to enable contemporary theory to draw on rhetoric in analyzing ideological practices and their effects – in short, ideology as rhetoric.

"Ideology cannot be deduced from economic considerations alone. It also derives from man's nature as a 'symbol-using animal'" (*RM* 146) – so Burke wrote in 1950. Today, in the wake of post-Marxist texts such as Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, one would have to reverse Burke's formulation simply to repeat his point, so far have the scales tipped to the rhetorical side. The economistic Marxism that Burke writes against has largely disappeared, marginalized by contemporary Marxism itself. In the process, ideology has become rhetorical, a turn particularly apparent to rhetorically trained eyes, such as those in the field of speech. An example is an essay-review in the *Quarterly Journal of Speech* that exposes the rhetoricizing of ideology in a number of contemporary Marxist texts, including two that will receive attention here: Laclau's *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory*, which antedates his post-Marxism, and Göran Therborn's *The Ideology of Power and the Power of Ideology*.[20]

In Therborn, rhetoric is present as a conceptual structure, though the term "rhetoric" is absent, the word itself not appearing even in passing, if my memory is accurate. This structure is especially evident in his conceptualization of ideological struggle, as he simultaneously applies rhetorical principles blindly and writes insightfully within Althusser's conception of ideology as the interpellation of subjects (the principles are identified in the interpolations):

> [Ethos – persuasion based on the character of the speaker:] First, the speaker or "agitator" has to establish his or her right to speak to, and to be given a hearing by the subjects addressed, as being one of them or as having a

19 *Walter Benjamin; or Towards a Revolutionary Criticism* (London: Verso, 1981), p. 108. See also Eagleton's *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), pp. 205–07.

20 Ray E. McKerrow, "Marxism and a Rhetorical Conception of Ideology," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 69 (1983): 192–205. See also (1) my "Ideology as Rhetoric," rev. of *On Law and Ideology*, by Paul Hirst, *Praxis* 6 (1982): 181–82; and (2) the 1988 conference sponsored by the Rhetoric Society of America: *Rhetoric and Ideology: Compositions and Criticisms of Power*, eds. Charles W. Kneupper (Arlington: Rhetoric Society of America, 1989).

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Excerpt
More information

position and a kind of knowledge that somehow fits into their conception of what should command respect. [Epideictic or ceremonial rhetoric – praise or blame aiming to display what is worthy of honor or the reverse:] Second, he or she must assert the overriding relevance of a particular kind of identity, say that of "workers" as opposed to "Christians," "Englishman," or "football fans." This mode of interpellation therefore implies the assertion that certain features of the world are more important than others ... Third, interpellations of what is good and bad must be situated in relation to elements of the prevailing normative conceptions ... [Deliberative rhetoric – urging one to do or not do something:] Finally, the call to some kind of action implies that the proposed course is the only or the best possible way to achieve the normative goals.[21]

These principles can all be found in chapters two and three in the first part of Aristotle's *Rhetoric*.

Therborn's rhetoric may be contrasted to Georg Lukács's epistemology in *History and Class Consciousness*. What is decisive for Lukács is always a relationship between subject and object, the subject being a class position in a system of production and the object being the teleological shape of history. The proletariat distinguishes itself in history as the first and only subject destined to comprehend this object. In this fashion, as Jameson suggests, Lukács locates the solution to the problem of knowledge in historical narrative.[22] In Therborn, Lukács's privileging of subject–object as determinative gives way to a rhetorical interaction that forms the subject as rhetoric advances from the wings to take over the stage.

Therborn's conception of ideological struggle can be applied to Burke's "Revolutionary Symbolism in America" (RSA), a paper delivered in the midst of the Great Depression to a pro-communist audience at a congress of writers. Calling it "perhaps the most unusual paper delivered at the congress – at least it provoked [the] most dissent," Daniel Aaron defines Burke's ethos at the congress in describing him as "a controversial figure to the Communists, welcomed during this period as an influential ally, yet distrusted because of his ideologically dangerous fondness for paradox."[23] Lentricchia gives extensive coverage to the paper and the dissent it provoked (21–38)[24];

21 *The Ideology of Power and the Power of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1980), pp. 80–81.

22 *Marxism and Form* (Princeton University Press, 1971), pp. 189–90.

23 *Writers on the Left: Episodes in American Literary Communism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1961), p. 287.

24 Lentricchia's analysis, along with Burke's paper and the discussion of it at the congress, were reprinted together in 1989 (Simons 267–96). Lentricchia errs in placing the delivery of the paper at Madison Square Garden (21). The congress began with a plenary session at the

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Excerpt
More information

one can get the general picture if one imagines Therborn appearing before an audience that would prefer to hear Lukács. What provoked dissent was Burke's proposal that the left substitute "people" for "worker" as its revolutionary subject. Invoking epideictic criteria of prevailing norms, Burke contended that in America the worker is an object of sympathy, not an identity to which one aspires (89). Deliberating how best to achieve the goal of enlisting large numbers in the revolutionary movement, he insisted "that one cannot extend the doctrine of revolutionary thought among the lower middle class without using middle-class values" (89–90). His audience, in contrast, saw the worker as a revolutionary subject produced for its role by the process of history itself.

Laclau echoes Burke when, in *Politics and Ideology*, he adds "people" to the traditional Marxist picture of class struggle: "Every class struggles at the ideological level *simultaneously* as class and as the people, or rather, tries to give coherence to its ideological discourse by presenting its class objectives as the consummation of popular objectives."[25] Laclau thus identifies a rhetoric of the people that is relatively autonomous of the economic infrastructure.

Relative autonomy, as a principle in contemporary theory, derives from Althusser's seminal displacement of "expressive" in favor of "structural" causality. Economism is expressive, built on an economic base that is the centered cause of the superstructures that express it. Structural causality is centerless interaction among the different elements of a social formation, each of which is relatively autonomous in being both passive and active relative to the others.[26] This displacement produced, Jameson remarks, "powerful and challenging oppositional currents in a host of disciplines, from philosophy proper to political science, anthropology, legal studies, economics, and cultural studies."[27]

In Althusser's structural interaction, ideology's role is to transform bodies into relatively autonomous subjects. This ideological decentering of the subject dismantles not only the subjects of enlightenment certainty and romantic authenticity but also the Lukácsean proletarian subject of history, a narratively centered epistemological subject

Mecca Temple and held its subsequent sessions at the New School for Social Research (*The New Masses*, 7 May 1935, p. 7).

25 *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory* (London: Verso, 1979), p. 109.

26 See particularly "Marx's Immense Theoretical Revolution," *Reading 'Capital,'* trans. Ben Brewster (London: Verso, 1979), pp. 182–93.

27 *Political Unconscious*, p. 37.

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Robert Wess
Excerpt
More information

destined to arise in history to step beyond ideology to comprehend the object of history. Althusser accentuates his innovation as he writes against the Lukácsean grain: "Human societies secrete ideology as the very element and atmosphere indispensable to their historical respiration and life . . . And I am not going to steer clear of the crucial question: *historical materialism cannot conceive that even a communist society could ever do without ideology*, be it ethics, art or 'world outlook.'"[28]

Within the subject–object framework, ideology is always the other of truth on the one hand and authenticity on the other. Althusser displaces this framework as he makes ideology the process by which subjects are formed and transformed. He keeps the term "ideology" but uses it to speak rhetorically in conceiving it as the discursive construction of the subject:

> ideology "acts" or "functions" in such a way that it "recruits" subjects among the individuals [i.e., bodies] . . . or "transforms" the individuals into subjects (it transforms them all) by that very precise operation which I have called *interpellation* or hailing, and which can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing: "Hey, you there!"[29]

While Althusser invokes Lacan in using notions such as "imaginary" and "mirror-structure,"[30] he speaks rhetorically when he comes to his key concept of interpellation. As in Therborn, rhetoric is present and absent in Althusser.

In his Althusserian phase prior to his post-Marxism, Laclau subscribes to Althusser's thesis, qualifying structural causality, that the economic element in a social formation is determinate "in the last instance."[31] *Politics and Ideology*, which is from this phase, tries to conceive a subject that is relatively *autonomous* as a "people" independent of the economic and *relatively* autonomous as a "class" expressing the economic. This conception, however, proves incoherent.

28 *For Marx*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Pantheon, 1969), p. 232.

29 "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), p. 174. Althusser's authoritarian rhetoric of police command stands in striking contrast to Therborn's courtship rhetoric of adaptation to one's audience. For a critique of the authoritarianism of Althusser's rhetoric, see my "Notes toward a Marxist Rhetoric," *Bucknell Review* 28 (1983): 126–48.

30 "Ideology," pp. 162, 180.

31 This thesis proved, of course, to make Althusser vulnerable to the charge that he kicks expressive causality out the front door but lets it return through the back. Norman Geras's "Post-Marxism?" (*New Left Review* 163 [1987]: 40–82) helps one to see the sense in which Laclau and Mouffe turn Althusser against Althusser. Subscribing to the "in the last instance" formula himself, Geras distinguishes two sides in Althusser, one upholding this formula, the other showing the way, which Laclau and Mouffe follow, to rejecting it.

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