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Introduction

In the face of the multifaceted critiques of modernity, no one needs to be reminded of how fragile [local forms of civil community] are, how easily they are coopted and perverted. But at a time when the threat of total annihilation no longer seems to be an abstract possibility but the most imminent and real potentiality, it becomes all the more imperative to try again and again to foster and nurture those forms of communal life in which dialogue, conversation, phronesis, practical discourse, and judgment are concretely embodied in our daily life.

(Richard Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivity and Relativism*, 229)

The 1980s and 1990s have been good decades for rhetoric. Stanley Fish, using Richard Lanham's terms, noted the rise of *homo rhetoricus*, suggesting that it was just such a "species" of intellectual that would point us to the future not just of academic inquiry but of human inquiry as well. Such an intellectual would investigate not the world as it is reflected in our scientific practice, but how those reflections themselves are constructed. "[T]he givens of any field of activity – including the facts it commands, the procedures it trusts in, and the values it expresses and extends – are socially and politically constructed, are fashioned by man rather than delivered by God or Nature" (Fish, *Doing* 485), and two of the fields most directly affected by the upswing in the fortunes of "rhetorical man" are economics and science. Much of Fish's work in the 1980s questioned the wisdom of trying to establish foundations – in science, philosophy or any other macro-field – upon which perspective could be built. Fish put forward the competing claim that it is only by examining the contexts of those founda-

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tions and the ways in which those contexts called for certain responses that were themselves products of other contexts (and so on), that the human sciences could proceed, and that the best way to proceed – though certainly not to solve the antifoundational "problem" – was to undertake a rhetorical project that provided the tools with which to do that work. Fish's book was published in 1989. Other essays and books that made much the same argument were published earlier in the 1980s. Jane Tompkins's anthology, *Reader-Response Criticism*, published at the beginning of the decade, concluded with a call for a revival of the original "reader response theory," rhetoric, suggesting that if what we were after was a rigorous understanding of how language shaped the cultural paradigms within which all a culture's work is done, then we can look back to Aristotle for the original cultural criticism. Never mind that Aristotle's system-building was used in part as a justification for a rigidly hierarchized society that saw a limited role for women and that reserved power for an all-Athenian, slave-holding elite. Terry Eagleton, in two books (*Walter Benjamin* and *Literary Theory: An Introduction*) that were widely read by a generation of graduate students, made a similar case for the study of rhetoric, though he was perhaps less sanguine about rhetoric's institutional use if it came along with its original trappings of a stratified class society. His theory book ends with a chapter on political criticism, and sees rhetoric as an "*activity* inseparable from the wider social relations between writers and readers . . . " and since "all theory and knowledge . . . is 'interested,' in the sense that you can always ask why one should bother to develop it in the first place," rhetoric could be seen as that field that served to inquire into the situations out of which epistemic claims could be made. What is perhaps most interesting in all of these calls for a revival of rhetoric as a form of knowledge that provides a key to the importance of all other ways of knowing is that nearly all of them made some reference to Plato or Aristotle as the individual theorists who began the whole business.

The last two decades have seen not only the resurgence of rhetoric in literary critical fields and, beyond them, in philosophy; they have also witnessed the most profound growth in a field that, in the United States, has come to be called *rhetoric and composition studies*. During these decades, countless rhetoric or composition programs were founded, others were reinvigorated, thousands of

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graduate students have found positions in English departments specifically to teach writing. These programs and positions are founded on the idea that the teaching of writing has a lineage that stretches back to Plato's argument with the sophists and Aristotle's attempt to codify the middle ground between them. This is a lineage which has in common the idea that the most useful forms of knowledge for a *polis* will be forms of *rhetorical knowledge*. Different versions of composition studies have different perspectives on the value of rhetoric's epistemological foundations – that it is an art, that it produces knowledge, that it is inevitably bound up with the subject of utterance or writing – but all of them see a critical link between theory and practice: the teacher's work in the classroom and the practitioner's research both require that rhetoric be seen as Aristotle had envisioned it, as an *art* that in part involved the production of discourse and in part involved the analysis required in order to produce it. Much of the work in the 1980s was a carry-over from work done a decade earlier. This work had little if anything to do with the rhetorical foundations of the study of reading and writing – I am thinking in particular of the expressivist pedagogies of Peter Elbow, Donald Murray, and James Bruffee from the 1970s according to which the first aim of composition was to allow students to write from their own experience. On the other hand, many theorists of rhetoric and composition took their cue from Ed Corbett and Andrea Lunsford, who saw links between the epistemological assumptions of the Aristotelian rhetorical tradition and the contemporary "crisis of representation" – a crisis which so many in the field held (erroneously) to be the fault of poststructuralism. This development – marked by books with titles such as *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student* and *Essays in Classical Rhetoric and Modern Discourse* – presented the rhetorical turn in composition studies as the pedagogical culmination of a theoretical turn that elevated rhetoric's status to a way of producing knowledge. Rhetoric now bore upon all fields of intellectual inquiry, and took as its "objects of knowledge" not just academic or institutional subjects but those outside the institutional context as well. What we wrote and how we wrote it were indicators of our ideological situatedness in a world of constraints both social and material.

On both fronts – the theoretical and the pedagogical – the rhetorical turn has been marked, to my mind, by some serious

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philosophical problems. The first significant problem could be called something like a confusion between ontological claims and epistemological claims. One of the classical tradition's greatest strengths was that it situated rhetoric among various different ways of knowing that had fairly clearly demarcated "disciplinary" boundaries. Aristotle, for example, unambiguously divided philosophical and metaphysical problems from rhetorical and political ones, and even in *Rhetoric* (a treatise not marked by ambitious cross-disciplinary theoretical forays) suggested that if an orator proves something so clearly that the principle on which its proof rests becomes evident to the audience and as a result the point becomes proven beyond doubt, then the orator has strayed from the ground of rhetoric. When one does science one does science, and when one does rhetoric one does rhetoric. There are, of course, some problems specific to what science could actually prove by means of demonstration and how those scientific demonstrations therefore differed from rhetorical or dialectical proofs by means of enthymeme or syllogism – problems that have been explored by G. E. R. Lloyd, among others, in masterful ways, and which I explore in a limited way in this book. Nevertheless, the point itself is clear: questions about the nature of being and questions about the nature of knowledge each have a distinct method of inquiry because each has a distinct object of knowledge. Science examines questions about the world in which we live and the nature of its properties, while the practical arts examine the human use of objects in the natural world and the dynamics of that use. Of course, the rub is that in the Aristotelian paradigm – as well as in the Platonic one, though by no means to the same degree – the job of rhetoric is to provide proofs to an audience that is unable to understand the demonstrations or proofs provided by other disciplines, in order to move the audience to action (either political or intellectual) in the *polis*. Rhetoric, in other words, could easily be seen as the point of convergence of the more "objective" ways of knowing – science, metaphysics – and their practical deployment in the drear world. Rhetoric's job is not to move back to the principles of philosophy or the sciences in order to examine the ways in which those principles determine what and how the audience can be moved. However, rhetoric is the only means by which many members of the *polis* would be able to understand and be moved at all, and so rhetoric rests upon

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the work done by the sciences and philosophy, making the job of the orator – to paraphrase Cicero – the toughest and most honorable job in a culture. It is perhaps no surprise, then, that the rediscovery of rhetoric in the 1980s took very seriously the classical injunction to have as wide a knowledge as possible of all the fields upon which rhetorical skill rests. This injunction led Louise Phelps and others to conclude that rhetoric – or, to Phelps's way of thinking, *composition* – should be seen as a practical art. Composition, then, examines the very assumptions on which rest not just the human sciences but also the natural sciences, whose objects of knowledge are not activity in specific situations but phenomena which do not vary from situation to situation but whose properties remain the same outside of our ability to understand them or give them meaning.

Rhetoric, in short, has – to my mind, erroneously – become a way to "reunite" two intellectual forces (or impulses) that have for a long time been working at odds with one another. In Richard Bernstein's words, it might be seen as a way to negotiate the terrain between objectivism and relativism. It is not so much that human understanding is split between ontology and epistemology. Rather, ontology and epistemology are both thrown over in favor of a practical wisdom (*praxis, phronesis*) that examines the ground on which we live our lives. In recent philosophical debates – debates which have more and more included those working both in literary-critical theory and in rhetoric – Bernstein's search for a way to negotiate between the threat of foundational appeals to an immutable, objective capital-T truth and the equally ugly threat of an antifoundational lawlessness of interpretation (or worse, of human action) has been joined by a pragmatism that sees itself as fulfilling rhetoric's "original" epistemic function by engaging philosophical questions without necessarily tying them to the dead dog of "truth." Pragmatism's most forceful proponent over the last fifteen or twenty years of rhetoric's ascendancy has been Richard Rorty, who claims – in his groundbreaking book, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* as well as in subsequent books, including most recently a two-volume collection entitled *Philosophical Investigations* – that epistemology is a more difficult philosophical project if we understand that any model within which we proceed operates by rules that lead us to believe that we have got any control over the game. When we get to the point in an

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investigation where the inadequacy of those rules becomes self-evident, we should stop doing epistemology and engage in a different sort of inquiry – in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* Rorty calls it "hermeneutics" – that allows us to see that inadequacy as a fortunate one, since the capacity we have to see it in the first place is the one that also allows us to change the rules of the game so that those who have not been allowed to play are then included. Philosophy's project – together with the analyses of language, rhetoric included, that have tied themselves to it – has for too long been that of trying to find a meta-philosophical system that unites the various languages with which we play ontological and epistemological games. This project has kept us from understanding the human suffering that goes on all the while the game proceeds. Having thrown our game of the meta, the liberal ironist is in a position to alleviate human suffering. Instead of following the rules of a game from which some are excluded and that change depending upon who is in a position to change them, she interviews in local situations and manipulates the discursive or ideological situation in which suffering occurs. The liberal ironist, in other words, is the rhetor *par excellence*: she is not interested in understanding the relation between the knowledges of science and philosophy and their deployment on the ground; she is interested instead in finding ways, in specific situations, to alleviate the suffering of groups of individuals by moving them to change their understanding of that situation. In rhetoric and composition studies, this sort of pragmatic practice has been incarnated by a social constructivism that understands pedagogy as enabling members of various ideological or discursive communities to describe their surroundings and in so doing to see how they are circumscribed by utterances – and the practical results of such utterances – that are not of their own choosing. The agency that allows subjects to redescribe their discursive situations is also able to transform their own positions relative to those situations, in effect "changing their lives."

This is an extremely attractive project for rhetoric: it avoids the epistemological and ontological impasses that have confronted language philosophy for millennia, and it finds a way to alleviate human suffering that reclaims rhetoric's role in an ethical project linking human understanding to human goodness. Moreover, it enlarges the human community by providing its various compo-

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nents – micro-communities – a means to communicate its analyses of injustice for use in other smaller communities. But this is the second significant philosophical problem for the return of rhetoric, as I will argue in the chapters that follow: this solution raises many questions of a practical and political nature. One of them is a question of just how plausible the redescriptive project of pragmatic rhetoric actually is if it glosses over the distinctions between what we might call "language" and what we might call language's "exigence." I am not interested in what a rhetor's intent is, what motivates certain people to say the things they say. But part of the problem with pragmatism is that while its intentions are good, it ignores some very difficult issues of power and the ways power can be used to get around intelligent, even hermeneutic, negotiation of a community's orientation and the relations among its members. A pragmatic rhetoric may very well allow us to investigate how the cobbling together of conservative platitudes about family, obligation, and free enterprise into something called the "Contract with America" appeals to the fears of many white Americans who are not happy with their lack of job security, and it may allow us to see how the language of the "Contract" is founded on assumptions about class, about race, and about gender that bear very little resemblance to the social reality of United States culture in the years before the turn of the twenty-first century. But it is hard to see how such a rhetoric allows us to do anything more than construct an alternative rhetoric – a rhetoric of inclusion, one that takes account of the complexities of a society that does not look like Newt Gingrich thinks it does – that may let us argue with the "Contract's" agenda but does not necessarily provide us with an analysis of the social, economic, or other material forces that may in fact *prevent* a discursive analysis from having much effect upon the "Contract's" ultimate effects. Pragmatism tends to ignore the point that discursive analysis – rhetoric – rests upon the investigative work of the sciences (and here I include not just the social sciences but also the natural sciences, which have something to tell us about the limitations of natural resources and the spread of disease under certain conditions). Moreover, it glosses over the methodological connections between rhetorical demonstration of contingent truths and scientific demonstration of the properties of natural and social phenomena. Because of these two factors, it will not

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be able to do much more than "nurture those forms of communal life in which dialogue, conversation, *phronesis*, practical discourse, and judgment are concretely embodied in our everyday practices," when all the while the practices of domination and the squashing of communal life by means of hunger – to adapt a telling phrase from Rorty – and the secret police continue apace.

This book is an attempt to assess the contemporary rhetorical turn – called for by such people as Tompkins and Eagleton in critical theory, by Rorty and Bernstein in philosophy, and by Phelps and Corbett in rhetoric and composition studies over the last twenty years – in view of these problems. What happens when ontological and epistemological questions about the nature of rhetoric and its seminal texts – such as *Rhetoric, Gorgias* and *Phaedrus* – are not distinguished in the recent call for a "return to rhetoric"? What are the pedagogical implications (in the last four chapters of the book) of this failure? The book begins with an investigation of just such epistemological/ontological questions as they are addressed by these three seminal texts. It concludes with the pedagogical and practical results for critical, materialist rhetorical projects that have been introduced as ways to proceed given the contemporary critical juncture. My aim is to look closely at some of the contemporary assumptions about the overarching epistemological "uses" for rhetoric (as a "way in" to social and natural scientific investigations) at three important points in the contemporary discussions about the field: discussions of rhetoric's classical "roots," discussions of rhetoric's role in the human and natural sciences, and discussions of rhetoric's connection to pedagogy.

First, it is by means of recuperating Platonic and Aristotelian texts on rhetoric that much of both critical theory and rhetoric/composition studies have been able to pose some of the questions they have been asking, questions about the intimacy of the relation between knowledge, truth, and the means of achieving them; questions about the relation between the human and the natural sciences; questions about the possibilty of formulating a systematic pedagogical theory that accounts for the practical and the transcendent. Both Plato and Aristotle had answers of their own for these broad questions, but my contention is that we have rushed so enthusiasticaly into the rhetorical fray that we have not taken the time to look closely at just what these texts have to tell

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us. Can rhetorical investigations of the practical world serve as a model for other kinds of inquiries? Can science proceed only after we have understood how the paradigmatic ground upon which the sciences rest is thoroughly rhetorical and discursive? These hypotheses have been put forward on the authority of Platonic and Aristotelian rhetoric. To consider these hypotheses, I wanted to go back to those texts and see just what they could offer the contemporary debate. The distinctions between Plato and Aristotle on rhetoric have become almost too commonplace to dispute. Plato insisted that we proceed by means of dialectic rather than rhetoric, implying that rhetoric is an inferior "art" if it is really anything more than mere knack. Aristotle, by contrast, saw a role for rhetoric in conducting an ethical life. Plato found a need to "resort to" rhetoric though he railed violently against its appeals to base emotion, whereas Aristotle embraced the logical components of rhetoric even while he spent a great deal of time justifying its emotional component. While Plato saw rhetoric's failure as a failure to disentangle the natural law and the law of convention, Aristotle saw such distinctions as preceding rhetoric. Yet these distinctions mask some very interesting complexities in the works themselves. The "inconsistency" between the earlier *Gorgias* and the later *Phaedrus*, marked by the former's violent dismissal of rhetoric and by Socrates' almost bitter denunciation of the equation between "might" and "right" and the latter's grudging embrace of rhetoric's figural dimension is not, I would argue, an inconsistency but rather a sign that rhetoric itself is a much more complicated art that it appears. At one point in *Gorgias*, Socrates reaches the stunning conclusion that the four foremost leaders of Athens should be seen as failures because they led the *polis* by appealing to its members' baser concern (such as security from imminent danger and a desire for prosperity) rather than by appealing to an understanding of the general good, no matter that the two appeals could only have been seen as commensurate by any reckoning, philosophical or practical. Socrates, however, sees that there are often only two choices one can make when deciding what action to take in the polis, either to do or to suffer harm, and that neither of these choices may be palatable. Socrates' petulant analysis of Athenian leadership on the one hand and his timid acceptance of the fact that any expression of choice may lead to an unacceptable outcome, on the other, suggest the limitations of

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rhetoric's ability to proceed logically in a world that often does not operate according to logical principles. The embrace of figure in *Phaedrus*, a means of persuading that operates precisely by means of extra-logical associations, can be seen as an acceptance of the irony that insisting on rhetoric's appeal to logic does not necessarily mean that rhetoric's most successful appeal will be the logical one.

There is an equally interesting methodological question in Aristotle's *Rhetoric*. Plato tries to distinguish between dialectic and rhetoric by clearly articulating their domains but ultimately blurs the line between them. Aristotle, however, tries to distinguish between the principles of science and the contingent proofs of rhetoric. The foundations for such a distinction lie in *Nichomachean Ethics* as well as in the first section of book 1 of *Rhetoric* (1358a3–30). But these lines of demarcation become fuzzy when one puts some critical pressure on them. Consider the language Aristotle uses in *Rhetoric* and *Politics* especially in the light of his injunctions that the rhetor must understand how to instruct the audience even if it is not capable of being instructed. There is evidence to suggest that though the rhetor is not required to be a scientist, he should nevertheless be prepared to understand where rhetoric and science intersect. What I want to suggest is that reading Aristotle's texts on rhetoric does not – as Grimaldi and others have suggested and as a majority in the field of rhetoric / composition has understood – provide the key to understanding the human and the natural sciences. What it does suggest is that in order to understand rhetoric, one must also understand how rhetoric rests upon the sciences, and not the other way around. These two chapters separate what is living and dead in Plato and Aristotle – I am not trying to resurrect an Aristotelian or Platonic epistemology but suggesting what we can learn from what is still relevant in it – and in so doing indicate that the advocates of the present rhetorical turn may have overestimated just what rhetoric can do. If, as Aristotle suggests, rhetoric does in fact rest upon other ways of producing knowledge; if the demonstrative proof in rhetoric is based upon the demonstrative proof employed by philosophy and the natural and exact sciences; and if the upshot of Plato's "inconsistencies" is that rhetoric's use of figure marks its limit; then contemporary rhetoric needs to reexamine the claims it has recently made for *rhetoric*'s ability to supplement *science's* limitations.

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