

A Rhetorical Revolution for Philosophy of Education

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In recent years, philosophers of education have turned in their work to literary modes of inquiry for inspiration and direction.¹ Typically this has been in utilizing literature as analytic support — stories and other narrative accounts as sites, evidence, and illustration. Less frequently there has been interest in adopting literary methods for philosophy of education; however, two examples are Greene's existentialist criticism and Noddings's experiential phenomenology. Of present interest is an even more direct attention to literary theory as a founding source. A pertinent example is the recent turn of Nicholas Burbules to narrative/historical tropes as a vehicle for postmodern philosophy of education.² Burbules's contribution is reprised at the conclusion.

Drawing on this broad literary trend, the paper focuses on what amounts to a revolution in scholarly theory in general, and to what is potentially a revolution in doing philosophy of education. This is a *rhetorical* revolution arising in a confluence of writings out of literary criticism and the human sciences. It posits, overall, a critique of human reason within which philosophy of education can situate itself. Here is the thesis: Adoption of a rhetorical perspective is one way that philosophy and philosophy of education becomes postmodern. What this thesis means is taken up in the following discussion: a discussion of tradition and revolution, an illustration of diverse but compatible theorizings, a general characterization, and a set of implications for philosophy of education.

A note to begin. While one of the purposes is to define the rhetorical revolution, the term *rhetoric*, and more so, *rhetorical* is used throughout in diverse and ambiguous ways. This is deliberate as a manifestation of an orientation toward meaning that *is* rhetorical.

TRADITION AND REVOLUTION

The best-known intellectual/political/educational battle in western-world history is Plato's real-life disagreement with the Sophists (couched of course in epistemological terms). Therein, persuasive speech was danger for the Platonists and desire for the Sophists. The theoretical win went to Plato, the poets were expelled from the republic, and philosophy, with knowledge on its side, was forever(?) distinct from rhetoric. Thus, despite rescue efforts by Aristotle and others, Platonic-inspired science, knowledge, and truth have been hegemonic down through the millennia. This hegemony has meant a minor place in the search for truth for what became the humanities and little influence of poetics, literature, and even history on the philosophical canon. Overall, as a fifteenth century Italian grammarian wrote with irony and pathos, "a certain elder man in Athens denies that the arts that essentially serve life rank as knowledge."³ A divided, hierarchical fate for intellectual inquiry, and a subordinate place for rhetoric, seemed set.

While within the humanities, specific interest in rhetoric has waxed and waned, several definitions survive. A first is linguistic, of *rhetoric* as "anything that is

structured as a discourse that is grammatically acceptable⁷⁴ as a naturally-codified language. This is refined in a second definition, of *rhetorics*, as the disciplinary study of discourse, given that “every form...[not only] constitutes its object, but at the same time...is, in itself, the embodiment of a certain rhetoric.”⁷⁵ A third is presaged by this linguistic self-referentiality, as it is theorized in the linguistic turn of the twentieth century. Today, taking on the cast of post-Marxist, post-Freudian, and post-structuralist perspectives, language in philosophy and in all other arenas of human thought is (in the current rhetoric) contextual and socially constructed. What is constituted is a *new* intellectual tradition: *rhetorical inquiry* entails that there is no perfect and universal use of terms; all text is persuasive and all meaning is ambiguous and tentative.⁶

This revolution overturns tradition. In so doing, word, myth and story have new value as do passion, performance and politics. Significantly, within the realm of language, the figurative has worth in its own right. Two forms of revolution operate, one makes rhetoric equal to knowledge and the other — the position of this paper — makes all inquiry rhetorical in a postmodern sense. In a transformed epistemology of a new era of scholarly and cultural valuing, what was formerly dangerous is now desirous and positively so. But, postmodern rhetoric is so much more, I think, than a new take on an aged debate. To set the stage for a postmodern rendering to come, in the next section this rhetorical revolution is illustrated in the complementary theorizings of Paul de Man and Hans Blumenberg.

TWO RHETORICAL FIGURES

Michael Leff posits that for a rhetorical scholar, “the key issue consists in the relationship between the rhetorical *perspective* and the kind of *activity* that it seeks to describe.”⁷⁷ The relationship is interactive and fluid in which the form and content of inquiry resist separation, and any temporary unity is of concrete experience, filtered through specific interests rather than relative to “an abstract, rational calculus.” As herein understood, one way to conceptualize the interaction is through a theoretical construct, of rhetorics of culture and text. As applied to the theories of the following scholars, they reflect traditions within literary studies and the human sciences. In the writings of de Man, the suggested metaphorical relationship is that *culture is encompassed in text*; in contrast in the writings of Blumenberg, the relationship is that *culture encompasses text*. Here is de Man, for whom text delimits culture, and concomitantly, language bounds philosophy:

The critical deconstruction that leads to the discovery of the literary, rhetorical nature of...philosophical...truth...cannot be refuted....But when literature seduces...[with its] figural combinations...it is not the less deceitful.⁸

And, here is Blumenberg, for whom a philosophical perspective emerges as culture creates text:

[A] “philosophical” anthropology has to address the question of whether man’s physical existence is not itself only a result that follows from the accomplishments that are ascribed to...his “nature”....[Man’s existence] cannot...be taken for granted.⁹

For both, rhetoric is philosophy — philosophy is rhetorical.

Belgian born literary theorist, Paul de Man is founder of the French-inspired group of *Yale Critics*, the American deconstructionists.¹⁰ At the outset, something

must be said of the posthumous revelation of his journalistic writings as a Nazi collaborator. One of de Man's chief commentators writes:

[He urges] us to rethink our conceptions of self and of the social on a linguistic basis....[It pushes us] toward an overturning of modernity and toward forms of thought that would not succumb to the lures of ideology. He had learned that it was all too easy to stand by one's statements and one's actions; it was far more difficult to examine them critically.¹¹

De Man had not been able to resist the allure of a forties, European-cultural national socialism and an anti-Semitism. Sympathetic critics (such as Christopher Norris¹²) analyze his life project as a kind of atonement for youthful failing. Its purpose is to posit a new form of subjectivity in "which the subject, far from establishing his or her autonomy through the mastery of...[textual meaning] discovers the radical otherness of this text and his or her unredeemable indebtedness to it."¹³ For de Man, the best prevention against cultural enslavement is a particular practice of reading.

In a first deconstruction of reading, of the world, de Man begins with a premise that distinguishes modernity from pre-modernity. In the latter, there exists an identity between the truth of the world and language; in the former, this is lost in favor of referential representations. In modernity, "truth" is self-consciously provisional. Moreover, there is a continual preoccupation with verification and legitimation. What results is language as a system of artificial signs and the fracture of the "easy rapport" of the subject to the world. One speaks, and in so doing, simultaneously truth tells and lies. Historically, modern referential language — as a development of consciousness — has three moments. The first is disillusion in which the subject discovers "the truth" of the basic relation, that is, referential falsity; the second is a partial recovery in which the subject stands by the falsehood and acts "as if," even if the subject's own legitimacy is at stake in every utterance; and the third gives up belief altogether, accepting that there is no unifying totalization of the existence and meaning of the world. What results is language as the fundamental institution and, for de Man, the imaginary as its own law. Enter here a potential not for subjective transcendence, but for a kind of self-legislation.¹⁴

In a second deconstruction of text, de Man situates theorization not in a relation of language to world, but within language. The premise is a set of traditionally dichotomous relationships of internal/external contributions to reading that are overcome. These are of various formulations of content, form, meaning, and appearance. In the essay "Semiology and Rhetoric," the problematic occurs when in textual instantiations that include philosophy, there can be no definitive distinction between literal and figurative meaning. De Man writes that the figurative as rhetorical "radically suspends logic and opens up vertiginous possibilities of referential aberration."¹⁵ In a disruptive analogy, this means that "the reading is not 'our' reading since it uses only the linguistic elements provided by the text itself....A literary text simultaneously asserts and denies the authority of its own rhetorical mode." This results, moreover, in revealing a false distinction between author and reading and indeed of calling into question "the autonomous power to will of the self."¹⁶ Self as text is rhetorical for de Man.

German philosopher-anthropologist, Hans Blumenberg burst upon the continental scholarly scene in the sixties and has been significant since then with a series

of considerations of the history of human consciousness.¹⁷ The focus of his work, at least in the three major texts available in English, is to describe significant epochal breaks in terms of “a problem” for consciousness: Arising at a particular historical juncture, it is the emergence of modern persons’ “self-assertion,” of seeing themselves as capable of controlling their own destinies in this and not the other, or next, world.

There are three premises for the project: 1) that man (sic.) has multiple cognitive tools with which he avails himself to make sense of the world — contradictory though they may be; 2) that there is a historical continuity that underlies breaks in general ways of thinking, a process of cognition that in spite of dissimilarities between epochs, allows for translation between them; and 3) that in spite of this continuity, there are, in use, forms of a skeptical and relativistic rationality. Basic is a rhetorical stance since there can be no determination of anything like “ultimate ends.” Indeed, for Blumenberg, rhetoric is

a general heading for everything that might be included in an account of the activities and creations that are necessary for our getting along in the world...including myth, metaphor, persuasion, and consensus...[Hermeneutically inspired, this rehabilitated rhetoric is] a rational way of coming to terms with the provisionality of reason.¹⁸

Overall, in his historical investigations, “[Blumenberg grants hypothetically] to past thinkers ‘the very same rationality that he wants to assert for himself...[n]ot an omnipotent rationality...[but] merely a ‘sufficient’ one.’”¹⁹ Thus, self-assertion is always limited. In the tradition of Habermas, the project is aligned in rethinking the Enlightenment and modernity, and specifically, in the English texts of pre-modern influences.²⁰

Blumenberg writes most directly about rhetoric is his 1971 paper (in German) titled “An Anthropological Approach to the Contemporary Significance of Rhetoric.” Initially asserted is an anthropological principle of “insufficient reason.”²¹ Herein, rhetoric operates principally through its distinctive element of metaphor — basic to language and thus text.²² The metaphorical idea is that man has been viewed as lacking, beginning before Plato’s allegory of the cave and ever after, as incapable of being in, knowing of, or having control over the cosmos, nature, etc. He needs truth, but has to turn to rhetoric, for this is all he has.²³ Enter language that anthropologically is not his unique characteristic but is functional relative to his basic difficulty. Enter also action. Writes Blumenberg, “[a]ction compensates for...‘indeterminateness’...and rhetoric is the effort to produce the accords...of regulatory processes in order to make action possible.”²⁴ Consensus, at least as a kind of basic agreement to proceed, becomes the basis for the “real.” Implied, moreover, are three aspects of rhetorical cultural interactions: a first aspect is basic skepticism, since truth cannot be known; a second is a basic terror of the unknown; and the third aspect is a basic terror of the compulsion to act. The latter requires a bit more explanation, one that carries across the ancient conception of rhetoric to the present.

As is well known, traditional rhetorical contests were timed events aimed at persuading an audience about the truth of a matter. But with truth as indeterminate, there is not only present a fear, but also a threat of force, and man as self-assertive

must do something. In modernity, action is called for in all domains except science, within which there is tolerance for “provisional delay” of results.²⁵ Elsewhere, there is no rhetoric of delay, since without one’s action there is only force from someone else or something else. Importantly, the need for and instantiation of self-assertion is mediated symbolically through language — precisely metaphor — whose “rational” function is to allow for substitutive, indirect action. Blumenberg explains, “[m]an can not only *present* one thing in place of another, he can also *do* one thing in place of another.”²⁶ To delay is also self-assertion. This is especially relevant to today’s technological age when what is both expected and possible is immediate action to solve particular problems — action institutionalized without reflection and control. Blumenberg sums: “Man comprehends himself only by way of what he is not. It is not only his situation that is potentially metaphorical; his constitution already is.”²⁷ For him, life and culture are rhetorical.

A POSTMODERN RHETORICAL CHARACTERIZATION

The projects of de Man and Blumenberg illustrate the sophistication of a tradition that today thrives in literary criticism and the human sciences. Actually, something similar is occurring within philosophy, according to Stephen Toulmin. In the last twenty-five years or so attention has turned away from questions about written propositions to ones about oral utterances — to language games, speech acts, and forms of life.²⁸ Language, once privileged in the first days of the analytic linguistic turn, is now more and more deprivileged. Minimally as Toulmin asserts, language can no longer be analyzed essentially but “must be understood always in relation to one or another larger behavioral context.”²⁹ Drawing from the humanistic tradition, this is a process of recontextualization in which there are returns to the particular, the local, and the timely. He asserts:

[t]he present state of...[philosophy] marks the return from a theory-centered conception, dominated by a concern for *stability* and *rigor*, to a renewed acceptance of practice, which requires us to *adapt* action to the special demands of particular occasions.³⁰

Adaptability is central as an analog that interconnects philosophy and society, science and politics; in all arenas, relevant practice is more significant than sterile theory. The point is that practices, policies and polemics obtain significance as they are “adaptable to...the unforeseen — or even unforeseeable — situations and functions...[of the postmodern condition].”³¹

Adaptability is one concept by which the rhetorical tradition is understood. This tradition is one of inquiry — whether it be the inquiry of the practitioner or the professional. All engage in rhetorical situations, utilizing rhetorical tools, one might say, in order to evoke difference. Such situated inquiry is constituted by a set of elements and these elements have characteristics.

Constitutive elements of rhetoric are language, a pragmatic function, a social environ, a historicity, and an ethics. Language is basic, but cannot be taken for granted, since herein is implied language that is never essentialist. Meaning is fluid, ambiguous, tentative, dispersed and deferred. Further, language serves function or purpose: it is pragmatic or practical. Purposes are particular and thus timely; they imply action — that is, mediated interaction and interpretation. This is by persons

who are rhetorical and who utilize rhetoric; implied are aspects that reflect the societal context, of power and ideology. There is no neutrality. This non-neutrality, tied as it is to timeliness within a cultural space, is the historicity of the rhetorical. Origin and limitation are implied; change is pervasive. Finally there is an ethical implication; how can it be otherwise? Human relation and participation all entail workings-through in which there is both potential and actual benefit and harm.³²

Like adaptability, a set of *postmodern* concepts characterize rhetorical inquiry; these run through the elements just named, but are in no sense definitive. A first is figurativity in language in which, as one theorist asserts, “all discourse...turns out to be situationally figurative storytelling.”³³ This literary quality underscores the move from logic and truth to imagination, drama, and purposefulness. Figurativity encompasses the use of metaphorical and other substitutive forms of language, and in addition, the turn to hermeneutical and narrative discourse structures. Significantly, rhetorical philosophy is predicated on the understanding that analyses, explanations, and the other *tropes* of the discipline are just more *stories*.

Figurativity in language indicates a positionality of discourse and its interactional status. Positionality relates to texts and to persons. Textually, to understand the play of language requires both rhetorical expression and comprehension. Positionality enters as the relationship of text and culture (illustrated above) is worked through in each rhetorical instantiation. Literary theorist Paul Hernadi writes that “all instances of human speech and writing...[are simultaneously] message, seepage, and image.”³⁴ They require explanation and explication, inference and detection, and empathetic exploration and enactment. Thus, they require the interaction of persons — speakers and writers, listeners and readers. There is the basic interaction of persons with texts, and the interactions of persons, directly and indirectly, through textual situations. Of the latter positionality, it is commonplace today to emphasize *where people come from* in these interactions.

The interactional character of rhetoric points to another feature, the public quality implied above. Basic is the idea, from Wittgenstein’s insight, that language games are never private, that even personal moments of listening or reading are undertaken through a shared medium. This means, moreover, that there is something consensual, something like agreement, that is basic to a rhetorical tradition. An important aspect distinguishes the modern and postmodern here. In the former, this consensual purpose is the aim; in the latter, this is given up. Persons’ participation in rhetorical processes are underdetermined, and while broadly shared, are not identical enactments. Within the space of shared experience there is room for the play of language fluidity, the play of psychological difference, the play of temporal distancing. There is also a basic ethical dimension.

RHETORICAL PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION

Throughout this paper, the meaning of *rhetorical* has been purposefully multiple and ambiguous. This is to highlight a tradition that is similarly expressive. This ambiguity might also be said to inhabit today’s philosophy of education. Is philosophy of education rhetorical? In answer, the five elements from above are present: the centrality of deprivileged language (at least as less privileged), a

practical, purposive function surrounding education, an environ constructed by its members, a present moment — a historicity — of the field, and a foundational purpose that is ethical (surely more than normative). Thus, one is tempted to claim a place in the revolution for philosophy of education. However, one problem remains. This is the self-conscious choice for revolutionary membership, a claim not yet widely made.

In his 1995 paper, Burbules opened the door for this claim, and for literary/rhetorical contributions to educational philosophy. He also advanced a postmodern turn. In doing so, the current modernist state of education was highlighted in which themes of progress, authority, and normalization are still dominant, and he suggested reformulations of these in postmodern terms. Here, insights from de Man and Blumenberg are significant. Also, Burbules warned against an arrogance and a closing off of questions. A rhetorical perspective for philosophy of education *resolves* these problems.³⁵

Today, philosophy of education has the opportunity to join a significant, postmodern, intellectual revolution. This is opportunity to undo past mistakes of undertaking esoteric and elitist projects, and in assuming a scholarly superiority (that clearly no longer holds). To be rhetorical as philosophers of education means that *we* take on a perspective for our work that has just been described. It means that we value our diversity of interests and orientations. It means, moreover, assuming a humility. This one is tough — if only that an assertive enthusiasm masks what is postmodern timeliness and tentativeness. Lastly, it means that we are always open to new ideas and to recognition that for any of us, there is always still much to learn and much to do. Especially fruitful for our explorations are scholarly traditions — like the literary and the rhetorical — to which we have, as philosophers, been too long estranged.³⁶

1. See Hunter McEwan and Kieran Egan, eds., *Narrative in Teaching, Learning, and Research* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1995); and Philip Jackson and Sophie Haroutunian-Gordon, eds., *From Socrates to Software: The Teacher as Text and the Text as Teacher* (Chicago: National Society for the Study of Education, University of Chicago Press, 1989). See also in philosophy, John Rajchman and Cornel West, eds., *Post-Analytic Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

2. See Nicholas Burbules, "Postmodern Doubt and Philosophy of Education," *Philosophy of Education: 1995*, ed. Alven Neiman (Urbana: Philosophy of Education Society, 1996), 39-48. I want to thank the author for initial inspiration.

3. Angelo Poliziano (1459-1494) as quoted by Ernesto Grassi, "Can Rhetoric Provide a Basis for Philosophizing? The Humanist Tradition," (Second of two parts), *Philosophy and Rhetoric 11*, no. 2 (1978): 75-97, 86. See part one, also translated by John Michael Krois, *Philosophy and Rhetoric 11*, no. 1 (1978): 1-18.

4. Paolo Valesio, *Novantiqua: Rhetorics as a Contemporary Theory* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), 16-17.

5. *Ibid.*, 3-4.

6. See John S. Nelson, "Seven Rhetorics of Inquiry: A Provocation," in *The Rhetoric of the Human Sciences: Language and Argument in Scholarship and Public Affairs*, ed. John S. Nelson, Allan Megill, and Donald N. McCloskey (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), 407-34.

7. Michael C. Leff, "Modern Sophistic and the Unity of Rhetoric," in *The Rhetoric of the Human Sciences*, 23, 24.

8. Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, and Proust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 115.
9. Hans Blumenberg, "An Anthropological Approach to the Contemporary Significance of Rhetoric," in *After Philosophy? End or Transformation*, ed. Kenneth Baynes, James Bohman, and Thomas McCarthy, trans. Robert M. Wallace (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1987), 438. This piece was first published in Italian in 1971 and then in German in 1981.
10. De Man's work is collected in the following volumes: *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1971, 1983); *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986); *Critical Writings, 1953-1978*; and *Allegories of Reading*. Unlike Blumenberg below, there is an extensive secondary literature.
11. Wlad Godnich, "Paul de Man and the Perils of Intelligence," in *The Culture of Literacy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 144.
12. See Christopher Norris, *Paul de Man: Deconstruction and the Critique of Aesthetic Ideology* (New York: Routledge, 1988), beginning p. 177. Less sympathetic is Frank Lentricchia; see his paper written prior to the disclosure of collaboration, "Paul de Man: The Rhetoric of Authority," in *After the New Criticism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), 282-317. See also Juliet Flower MacCannell, "Portrait: de Man," in *Rhetoric and Form: Deconstruction at Yale*, ed. Robert Con Davis and Ronald Schleifer (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1985); and Jonathan Arac, Wlad Godnich, and Wallace Martin, eds., *The Yale Critics: Deconstruction in America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983).
13. Godnich, "The Perils of Intelligence," 143.
14. See Godnich, "The Perils of Intelligence."
15. De Man, "Semiotics and Rhetoric," in *Allegories of Reading*, 10.
16. *Ibid.*, 17, 16.
17. Blumenberg's chief works are these: *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1983), first published in 1966 and revised in 1973-1976; *Work on Myth* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1985), first published in 1975; and *The Genesis of the Copernican World* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1987), also first published in 1975.
18. "Hans Blumenberg: Introduction," in *After Philosophy? End or Transformation*, ed. Kenneth Baynes, James Bohman, and Thomas McCarthy (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1987), 424-25.
19. Robert M. Wallace, "Translator's Introduction," in Blumenberg, *The Genesis of the Copernican World*, xxxiii. In addition to text introductions, see Wallace, "Introduction to Blumenberg," *New German Critique* 11, no. 2 (1984): 93-108, and an earlier piece, Wallace, "Progress, Secularization and Modernity: The Lowith-Blumenberg Debate," *New German Critique* 8, no. 1 (1981): 63-79. Wallace has done much to bring Blumenberg's texts and ideas to English-speaking audiences.
20. See also Blumenberg, "On a Lineage of the Idea of Progress," trans. E. B. Ashton, *Social Research* 41, no. 1 (1974): 5-27.
21. For an insightful discussion of this concept, see also Paul R. Falzer, "On Behalf of Skeptical Rhetoric," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 24, no. 3 (1991): 238-54.
22. Blumenberg does not use the term "text," but its implication is evident.
23. Blumenberg, "An Anthropological Approach," 430.
24. *Ibid.*, 433.
25. Science appears to allow for provisionality in its own rhetorical belief in the "revelation" of truth.
26. Blumenberg, "An Anthropological Approach," 440.
27. *Ibid.*, 456.
28. Toulmin's timeline seems too short since there is a manifest affinity in the widespread movement of American pragmatism and the continental tradition.
29. See Stephen Toulmin, *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), 186.
30. *Ibid.*, 192.

31. *Ibid.*, 186; see reference to post-modernity, 203.
32. This description benefited from larger treatments of postmodern rhetoric. For contrast, see in a modernist vein, Lloyd F. Bitzer, "The Rhetorical Situation," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* (Supplementary Issue) (1968, 1992): 1, 14; and in a postmodernist vein, A.T. Nuyen, "The Role of Rhetorical Devices in Postmodernist Discourse," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 25, no. 2 (1992): 183-94.
33. Paul Hernadi, "Literary Interpretation and the Rhetoric of the Human Sciences," in *The Rhetoric of the Human Sciences*, 264.
34. *Ibid.*," 269.
35. See the conclusion, Burbules, "Postmodern Doubt and Philosophy of Education" in *Philosophy of Education 1995*, ed. Alven Neiman (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 1996).
36. Thanks to Michael Gunzenhauser and Kathy Hytten for important suggestions on an earlier draft.