

Second Thoughts on the Critiques of Big Rhetoric

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This note is divided into three parts. First, I explore some answers to the question “How did Rhetoric get so Big?” Second, I review some of the more important criticisms of a “globalized” or “universalized” view of rhetorical studies. Finally, I contend that the critiques of Big Rhetoric do not withstand scrutiny and ought to be dismissed for insufficient evidence. While there certainly are important issues for scholars of rhetorical studies to consider about how to enhance the quality and importance of our work, such issues should not include the concern that rhetoric has grown too “big.”

By “Big Rhetoric” I refer only to the theoretical position that everything, or virtually everything, can be described as “rhetorical.” I refer to the growth of rhetorical scholarship in communication studies and other disciplines as the “popularization” of rhetorical studies.¹ Theories associated with Big Rhetoric are credited with popularizing or at least rationalizing what Herbert W. Simons (1990) calls the “rhetorical turn” in a variety of disciplines. Within the journals and conventions of members of the National Communication Association (NCA), popularization is often characterized by studies of the form “the rhetoric of X,” where X could literally be anything. Outside of the NCA-defined parameters of communication studies, popularization is evidenced by the apparently ever-increasing ranks of scholars who use “rhetoric” as a relevant and important term of art within their scholarship. By either measure, it can be argued fairly convincingly that “rhetoric” has become a widely used construct in scholarship. What I wish to engage is the disputed desirability of broad definitions and the related popularization of rhetoric.

1. Whence big rhetoric?

There are a number of narratives on the rise of Big Rhetoric already in print in communication studies (Simons 1990; Gaonkar 1990), rhetoric and composition (Berlin 1987; Young and Goggin 1993), and interdisciplinary publications (Roberts and Good 1993; Mailloux 2000; Nelson, Megill, and McCloskey 1987). Many accounts identify the 1960s as a turning point. For better or for worse, there was a confluence of changing rhetorical practices, expanding rhetorical theories, and opportunities for rhetorical criticism. The cultural clashes of the 1960s were felt perhaps most acutely on college campuses. The sufficiency of deliberative argument and public address can be said to have been called into question, whether one was an antiwar activist who hated LBJ's war in Vietnam or a pro-establishment stalwart trying to make sense of the rhetoric of protest and demonstration. Years later, scholars would characterize war itself as rhetorical. What *counted* as rhetorical practice was up for grabs.

At about the same time, our understanding of rhetorical *theory* was being expanded. Here we can identify two main strands of thought. For ease of reference I will call one the symbolic interactionist rationale and the other the epistemological rationale. The symbolic interactionist rationale can be boiled down to a syllogism:

All persuasive actions are rhetorical.
 All symbol/language-use is persuasive.
 Therefore: All symbol/language-use is rhetorical.

Perhaps the two most significant pronouncements of this approach—for my generation of rhetoric scholars, at any rate—are by Richard Weaver and Kenneth Burke. Weaver claims that “language is sermonic” in the sense that whenever we offer a description or label a phenomenon, we are “preaching” a particular way of making sense of it (1970, 201–25). Burke, of course, has two famous (or infamous) statements in *Rhetoric of Motives*: first, that rhetoric is “the use of language as a symbolic means of inducing cooperation in beings that by nature respond to symbols” (1950, 43); and second, that “something of the rhetorical motive comes to lurk in every ‘meaning,’ however purely ‘scientific’ its pretensions. Wherever there is persuasion, there is rhetoric. And wherever there is ‘meaning,’ there is ‘persuasion’” (1950, 172). Obviously, such pronouncements serve as encouragement to

those who would define rhetoric broadly, and arguably fueled the popularization of rhetorical studies within the ranks of NCA.

The epistemological rationale is fueled by the argument that the philosophical criteria used traditionally to separate “higher” ways of knowing, such as “science” (as *epistêmê*), from “rhetoric” (as *doxa*) have been critiqued persuasively. Again, at least for my generation, the key writers here are Chaïm Perelman, Stephen Toulmin, Robert L. Scott, and Thomas S. Kuhn. In 1958 Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca published *The New Rhetoric* in which they argue, in effect, that everything outside of scientific demonstration and mathematical logic was the province of rhetoric and argumentation. Also in 1958, Toulmin critiqued the “analytic ideal” and, borrowing a page from Hume, argues that all substantive claims are contingent. Enter Robert L. Scott, who took Toulmin’s case the next step in 1967 by arguing, in effect, that since the “certain” or “absolute” side of binaries such as certain/contingent, absolute/probable are unavailable, we are left to dwell in the historicized land of contingency and probability, which means that cultural knowledge is the product of rhetorical activity. Rhetoric thus can be viewed as epistemic. Kuhn (1970) provides the historical evidence to apply these insights to the hitherto forbidden land of Science; a bushel full of articles and books written in the past twenty-five years attests to the efforts by rhetorical scholars to identify various rhetorical aspects of the practices of scientists.

In 1996 the Rhetoric Society of America (RSA) invited the original editors of the 1971 *The Prospect of Rhetoric* to revisit the path the discipline of rhetorical studies has taken during the intervening twenty-five years. In his plenary address, Lloyd Bitzer suggests that the “universalizing” of rhetoric was enabled “by making it the theory of all kinds of discourse—poetic, scientific, political, historical, critical, and the rest” (1997, 19). In short, with the expansive definitions of rhetoric came the popularization of rhetorical studies. Interestingly enough, Bitzer blames this on the new rhetoricians of the eighteenth century, not on twentieth-century theorists. But he notes such “universalizing” continues in statements like the following, found in the Report of the Committee on the Scope of Rhetoric and the Place of Rhetorical Studies in Higher Education published in *The Prospect of Rhetoric* (1971): “[rhetorical studies] include any human transaction in which symbols and/or systems of symbols influence values, attitudes, beliefs, and actions . . . (1971, 214). Bitzer laments that, with such a conceptualization, “I find it difficult to find instances of nonrhetorical human transactions” (1997, 20).

Another plenary speaker at the 1996 RSA conference was Edwin Black, who also identifies the 1960s as a turning point for rhetorical studies, though his assessment is somewhat different from Bitzer's. Black blames Richard McKeon's pronouncement that rhetoric is an architectonic art "of structuring all principles and products of knowing, doing, and making," which Black believes means that rhetoric "is everywhere, that it saturates human activity" (1997, 23). Black tells an odd story of how a rhetoric of authenticity, fostered by a "let it all hang out" mentality, threatened not the practice but the "discipline" of rhetoric. The 1960s, though filled with rhetorical practice, is characterized by Black as being antirhetorical in the sense of giving voice to purer forms of expression, collapsing the private/public distinction, and opposing the self-conscious manipulation and strategic uses of language. Black opines that it is this antidisciplinary threat to which the participants of the Wingspread conference were responding. For Black the scope of rhetoric expanded as a result of disciplinary "anxiety" fueled by a threat to the separation of the public and private spheres, which Black believes must be maintained and separated for rhetoric as a discipline to survive.

Regardless of whose account one finds the most persuasive, there is no question that the 1960s and 1970s witnessed a surge of scholarly activity in rhetorical studies. Bitzer notes:

during a dozen years, several initiatives important to rhetorical studies were launched. In the early sixties, a Pennsylvania State University conference of rhetoricians and philosophers recommended what became, in 1968, the journal *Philosophy and Rhetoric*. In the same year, the Rhetoric Society of America commenced publication of its newsletter—now *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*. In 1968 the National Developmental Project on Rhetoric was initiated, in 1970 it was completed, and in 1971 *The Prospect of Rhetoric* was published. At about the same time—in 1970—The Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions at Santa Barbara sponsored an international symposium on the occasion of the publication in English of Perelman's *The New Rhetoric*. In 1977 the International Society for the History of Rhetoric was born at a conference in Zurich; a few years later the Society's journal, *Rhetorica*, appeared. All these innovations contributed to the vigor of rhetorical studies. (1997, 18)

How much of these efforts were fueled by a desire for disciplinary legitimacy? The answer would require a far more sophisticated theory of the psychology and political economics of disciplinarity than I can explore here. A materialist might note that an investment in Big Rhetoric provides various benefits of scholarly credibility, accomplishment, and reward (cf.

Latour and Woolgar 1979, chap. 5). An idealist might simply observe that popularization of rhetorical studies was advanced by members of a discipline who wanted to believe what they were studying was important and widely applicable.

My narrative suggests that broad definitions of rhetoric and the popularization of rhetorical studies are partly due to scholarly attention to the rhetorical practices of the 1960s, partly due to specific positions advanced by influential theorists, and partly due to the understandable desires of members of a discipline to see what they are doing as important. No matter which explanation you might prefer, popularization proceeded apace.² The net effect of these various factors was fairly profound on me as a graduate student in the early 1980s. To put it simply, I could not then nor can I now find a theoretical rationale that persuasively sets off “rhetoric” and “rhetorical” from other categories of human activity and forms of communication. For the most part I think my experience is typical of most, though certainly not all, scholars writing in rhetorical studies today.

2. So what’s wrong with big rhetoric?

The most common complaint against Big Rhetoric is that if rhetoric is everywhere at once, it is no place in particular. For years Thomas B. Farrell has railed against what he calls a monistic approach to rhetoric, declaring a self-named dictum that the broader the scope of rhetoric, the more trivial one’s conception of rhetoric is (1990, 82). Bitzer and Black in the addresses cited above both express concern about the “universalizing” of rhetoric, with Bitzer explicitly calling for the “prudent restoration” of the scope of rhetorical studies.

The most developed critique of globalized rhetoric was initiated by Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar. In two essays, “Rhetoric and Its Double: Reflections on the Rhetorical Turn in the Human Sciences” (1990) and “The Idea of Rhetoric in the Rhetoric of Science” (1993), Gaonkar has explored and, in a qualified way, lamented the popularization of rhetorical studies. In “Rhetoric and Its Double” Gaonkar provides a sort of mass psychoanalytic explanation of how the rhetorical turn represents our flight from the insecurity of “mere” rhetoric. Through a loose retelling and deconstruction of the narratives that have accompanied the rhetorical turn, he points out that “academically rhetoric has never been able to determine its own fortune” (1990, 360). It is largely through the work of philosophers or tempo-

rary rhetorical theorists (like Toulmin or Burke) that we have purchased our academic respectability and justified popularization. Ironically, the discipline of rhetorical studies (presumably within NCA) is neither necessary nor sufficient for the recent rhetorical turn in other disciplines. Furthermore, when scholars *inside* of NCA point out the strength of the rhetorical turn taking place *outside* of NCA, we reduce ourselves to mere “supplement,” since our “legitimacy” is relative to the measurable “presence” of rhetoric found outside our discipline.

Gaonkar’s essay “The Idea of Rhetoric in the Rhetoric of Science” was originally published in 1993 in a special section of *Southern Communication Journal* guest edited by William Keith. That special section was devoted to Gaonkar’s essay and separate responses by Michael C. Leff, Alan G. Gross, Steve Fuller, John A. Campbell, and Lawrence J. Prelli. The essay was later expanded and published in the book *Rhetorical Hermeneutics* (Gross and Keith 1997).³ To follow every twist and turn in the arguments that began in *Southern Communication Journal* in 1993 and that have been generated since is unnecessary to my project. Suffice it to say that “The Idea of Rhetoric in the Rhetoric of Science” is described as a broad critique of nothing less than the discipline of rhetorical studies. Guest editor Keith describes Gaonkar’s essay in rather grand terms. The essay “is a critique that simultaneously exposes, organizes, and evaluates the prevailing assumptions of rhetorical theory and criticism” (1993, 255). According to Keith, Gaonkar “assails the disciplinarity of rhetoric through a historical critique—how can a traditional supplement to other disciplines (‘the rhetoric of . . .’) become in itself a substantial discipline?” (1993, 255).

What I have called “Big Rhetoric” and the popularization of rhetorical studies are both implicit targets of Gaonkar’s analysis. I say “implicit” because Gaonkar explicitly states that he is “neither for nor against globalization” (1997a, 346). Nonetheless, his critiques certainly have been read as aimed, in part, at Big Rhetoric. According to Gaonkar, rhetorical scholars “are more interested in rhetoric as interpretive theory than as a cultural practice” (1993, 259; 1997b, 27). Unbound by the traditional paradigm of public address to delimit the realm of rhetoric, “rhetoric is everywhere” and we have reached a point in Western history where the scope of rhetorical studies has never been broader. In part because scholars recognize that what is “rhetorical” depends on our own interpretation rather than “a quality intrinsic to the object,” anything can be understood as rhetorical and thus “the range of rhetoric is potentially universal” (1993, 261; 1997b, 29).

In a hyperbolic extension of Gaonkar’s critique and the book *Rhetorical Hermeneutics*, the unlikely tag team of William Keith, Steve Fuller,

Alan Gross, and Michael Leff underscore what they perceive as the significance of the definitional critique: “If everything is rhetoric/rhetorical, then it is neither informative nor interesting [to] be told that a practice/discourse/institution is rhetorical. *Si omnia, nulla* [if everything, nothing]” (1999, 331). Similarly, Farrell contends that the more phenomena that count as rhetoric, the less critical insight our textual analysis is likely to have: “because of our own diluted sense of what rhetoric is, we won’t be able to do much with these texts, once we find them . . . We will have—if you will—‘so much to study, so little to say’” (1990, 82).

Gaonkar suggests that the quality of rhetorical scholarship suffers from popularization. According to Gaonkar’s history of rhetorical criticism, “neo-Aristotelianism sought to integrate a critical vocabulary derived from Aristotle with a program of historical research.” The results, he claims “were dismal” and a “massive failure” (1993, 262; 1997b, 31). Following the “collapse” of neo-Aristotelianism, two sorts of critical approaches emerged. One approach was committed to viewing rhetoric broadly as “symbolic inducement.” Gaonkar proclaims that the “critical studies inspired by those theoretical perspectives [phenomenological, structuralist, dramatic, etc.] were as a whole no more insightful than an average neo-Aristotelian study” (1993, 262). The other approach Gaonkar calls “atheoretical” and “ad hoc.” Rhetorical criticism from this approach remains dependent upon the vocabulary of classical rhetoric, which is ill suited for understanding discourse in a postmodern era: “In its current form, rhetoric as a language of criticism is so thin and abstract that it is virtually invulnerable to falsification, and for that very reason, it commands little sustained attention” (1993, 263; 1997b, 33).

So Gaonkar identifies two problems. On one hand we have an overly ambitious mission to broaden the scope of rhetorical theory, while on the other the quality of rhetorical criticism in his assessment is generally poor. The problems are related, in Gaonkar’s view, because we have failed to move beyond a “thin” classical (mostly Aristotelian) vocabulary that can be stretched to describe virtually everything in rhetorical terms, but that is more appropriate for pedagogy and performance than it is for interpretation and criticism. Add to the mix a strong dose of disciplinary insecurity and you have the formula for disciplinary crisis: we have too little of value to say about too much.

To illustrate his case Gaonkar then turns to the literature concerning the “rhetoric of science.” The literature as a whole is “scattered and largely unreflexive,” “uncoordinated,” and “inconsequential” compared to efforts by sociologists to study the role of social influence in the production of

scientific knowledge (1993, 267–68). Gaonkar then reviews essay after essay published on the rhetoric of science and finds each one lacking in one way or another. For the purposes of this essay I will not take the time to review all his criticisms. Suffice it to say that he finds most of it problematic, and when he finds something he likes he does not think the insights are drawn from rhetorical theory.

What is the conclusion to Gaonkar's analysis of "the prevailing assumptions of rhetorical theory and criticism"? I confess I am not entirely clear on the matter, and other readers of his work have shared their confusion as well. To be sure, what he calls the "globalization" of rhetoric is a source of anxiety. For Gaonkar, "globalization severely undermines rhetoric's self-representation as a situated practical art" (1993, 292; 1997b, 76). The broader "rhetoric" is understood, the more trivial the idea, the more it turns into mere "supplement," a "ubiquitous but dull accompaniment, not something worth studying" (1993, 293). Again taking Gaonkar's critique an extra step, Keith et al. explain that what is at stake is the disciplinary status of rhetorical studies within communication departments. They contend that popularization leaves us with an uncomfortable question: "What do we do that is distinctive?" (1999, 331). In the aftermath of Big Rhetoric, "the prospect is so vast that it is hard to recognize anything as distinctively our own. Celebrating the expansion of rhetoric does not resolve our identity crisis" (1999, 331). Accordingly, both within the discipline of communication studies and in academia at large, Keith et al. feel that Big Rhetoric robs us of our ability to answer "What's our 'unique' contribution?" (1999, 333). If current trends continue, they fear rhetoricians within communication studies may have no place left to work: "The important point is that lots of people may have an interest in not allowing the term 'rhetoric' to be watered down to the point where, like 'culture' or 'adaptation' or 'cognitive,' it is freighted with so many overlapping agendas and traditions that it no longer serves any useful purpose for anybody" (1999, 334).

So the recent analysis of Big Rhetoric and the popularization of rhetorical studies can be summarized into three critiques:

1. *Definitional*—If rhetoric is everywhere, it is nowhere.
2. *Evaluative*—Big Rhetoric contributes to weak scholarship.
3. *Political*—Without a clear disciplinary history and discrete identity, the discipline of rhetoric is threatened.

I now turn to each of these points.

3. A critique of the critiques

My response to the definitional critique is that it is simply false. To define a term broadly does not necessarily make the term meaningless or useless. What is significant about the rhetorical turn is not that “everything is rhetoric,” but that a rhetorical perspective and vocabulary potentially can be used to understand and describe a wide range of phenomena. Why is this a bad thing? Note that the definitional dispute is not a metaphysical one. The critics of Big Rhetoric are not arguing that there is an essence of rhetoric that theorists do not comprehend, like those still trapped in Plato’s cave entranced with shadows rather than Reality. Everyone seems to agree that what we are talking about is an interpretive framework that guides scholarly work. Scott’s “On Not Defining Rhetoric” (1973) and David Zarefsky’s “Argument as Product, Process, or Point of View?” (1980) are two excellent essays that lay out different but compelling cases for setting aside definitional debates and getting on with the task of research. *Any* phenomenon can be described using *any* disciplinary vocabulary. Scott suggests that there are many “points of view” available for scholars, “among them political science, sociology, psychology, linguistics, anthropology, and history” (1973, 92). Rhetoric may be one among “many points of view useful for getting one’s bearings” in any particular environment (1973, 93). Similarly, Zarefsky argues that argumentation is a perspective selected by the scholar and that the usefulness of that perspective cannot be settled a priori. As Zarefsky notes, “it can be put to the pragmatic test” (1980, 235).

Consider an analogy with the terms “physics” and “physical.” Arguably one of the most important moments in Western intellectual history is when a group we now call pre-Socratic philosophers broke from the tradition of understanding and describing the world in purely religious terms and started to describe the world as *physis*, nature (Guthrie 1962, 26–38). Their explanations were monistic: everything has a “physical” basis that can be understood. Not everyone chose to follow such a route, of course, just as not every scholar in academia today claims to do rhetorical theory or criticism. But the *scope* of these physicists’ claims were “global” and “universal.” Now, 2,600 years later, most of the sciences are still informed by the general notion that almost everything can be described as “physical.” Where is the problem? When was “physics” every in danger of losing its disciplinary authority? Similarly it is not self-evident that there is any problem with the fact that almost any phenomenon today could be described in rhetorical terms. The fact that we *could* do so does not necessarily mean

we will bother to do so, just as having the ability to describe using the language of physics does not automatically mean we will bother.

Is our situation any different from that of many other disciplines? Could not a political theorist make the case that just about anything involving people or animals could be described as “political”? The same could be argued about psychology, sociology, or anthropology. Consider recent textbook definitions of these disciplines: “Psychology is the science of behavior and the mind” (Gray 1999, 3); “Psychology is the systematic study of behavior and experience” (Kalat 1999, 5); “Sociology is a wide-ranging discipline, concerned with understanding human social life” (Lie 1996, 1); Sociology “can be defined as the scientific study of the patterns and processes of human social relations” (Stark 1998, 6); “Sociology is the study of human social life, groups, and societies” (Giddens 1996, 1); Anthropology “is the study of the human species and its immediate ancestors” (Kottak 2000, 4); or “Anthropology calls itself the study of humanity and is clearly the broadest in scope and most generalizing of the disciplines” (Bodley 1996, 9).

The above “definitions” are no less broad than those currently in use to describe rhetoric. All of these disciplines could put work in the form of “The Politics of X,” “The Sociology of X,” etc. to illustrate the enormous range of phenomena that could be examined through their particular discipline’s vocabulary. All, in other words, share the supposed risks of broad definitions and popularization. Why? Because of the human ability to use language in diverse and sometimes “promiscuous” (Gaonkar’s term) ways. As Gaonkar notes, what counts as “rhetorical” depends on our own interpretation rather than one using a rheto-meter to detect a given “quality intrinsic to the object” (1993, 261). The same can be said for the physical perspective, the political perspective, the sociological perspective, the economic perspective, and so forth. Just because anything or everything could be described with these various vocabularies does not mean that each vocabulary is any less valuable or useful.

Bitzer makes his point, with an example, that Big Rhetoric has gone too far: when Larry Rosenfield at the Wingspread conference wryly commented that the notion of rhetorical phenomena “includes everything but tidal waves,” Richard McKeon quipped, “Why not tidal waves?” (quoted in Bitzer 1997, 20). To me the important point thirty years later is that no one has bothered to write about the rhetoric of tidal waves. So what is the problem?

The evaluative critique has been amply addressed by others, including Charles Willard, who suggests that Gaonkar's sweeping arguments can be "best dismissed for lack of evidence" (1997, 190). Herbert Simons (1999) has offered a well-argued review of *Rhetorical Hermeneutics* in which he points out that Gaonkar does not prove what he asserts. According to Simons, Gaonkar "offers a series of damning claims about NCA-style rhetorical scholarship for which he offers not a shred of evidence" (1999, 89). Deirdre McCloskey claims that Gaonkar "depends on bluster" (1997, 104). The simplest response may sound sophomoric, but it is to the point: what gives Gaonkar the authority to be the discipline's arbiter of quality? By what criteria does he, or any other critic, make an assessment of the importance of an entire discipline's literature? Now if you think my criticism of Gaonkar suggests a certain hubris on my part, then surely you must concede it would take a great deal more audacity on Gaonkar's part to dismiss not just one scholar's work but virtually an entire discipline's.

To be fair to Gaonkar, my objection is less to his carefully argued analysis of a variety of scholars' texts and more to the inferences scholars have made based on his work. Gaonkar has made it clear that he is "not particularly interested" in the definitional maneuvers involved with Big versus Little Rhetoric. My point is simply that the case has not yet been made that a broad conception of rhetoric leads to weak scholarship, nor can it be assumed that narrower conceptions would necessarily improve the quality of scholarship.

The political critique is this: without a clear disciplinary history and discrete identity, the discipline of rhetoric is threatened. I think there are four problems with this critique. First, the argument begs the question whether "disciplines" are necessarily desirable "things" to preserve. Big Rhetoric does not have to claim to be some sort of meta-discipline to provide a worthwhile perspective from which to engage controversy over what critics describe as a resurgence of "disciplinary parochialism" and "disciplinary imperialism." In this era of interdisciplinary and postdisciplinary studies, it is very much an open question whether the price of maintaining a "unique" disciplinary identity is a reasonable one (Schiappa 1995; Smith 1998).

Second, the claim that there must be an agreed-upon history of the field is simply false. Many academic disciplines simply do not fret about their history (Kuhn 1970). At most there may be a few pages at the beginning of introductory textbooks that provide a (potentially contestable) narrative about the discipline's origins, but what socializes students into the

discipline are ongoing theories and problems. Within rhetorical studies, the decade of the 1990s witnessed more challenges to our own origin narratives than have appeared in centuries (see Cole 1991 and Schiappa 1999), but there is nothing about this contestation that stops any rhetorical theorist or critic from doing their thing.

Third, “disciplines” are notoriously difficult to pin down, as scholars working in the sociology of science have argued for decades. There is no simple or neutral way to begin to identify what counts as the discipline of rhetorical studies. The most one can do is to stipulate a particular definition, such as Simons does when he notes that Gaonkar’s claims focus on “NCA-types” who self-identify as rhetoric scholars. It is true that even within that group there is tremendous variation in the kinds of work being done. In addition, outside of a pretty short list, there are few authors or theoretical works that one can safely assume *all* rhetoric graduate students have read, let alone accept. But our situation is not all that radically different from the situation in other disciplines, including literary studies, cultural studies, philosophy, comparative literature, sociology, anthropology, and history. The humanities in general can be characterized as notoriously undisciplined. So much the better for the humanities.

Frankly we should distrust generalizations about whole disciplines—there is simply too much variation. The reputational status and respect accorded to rhetorical studies vary not only from institution to institution, but even from one scholar to another.

Definitional squabbles do not determine the respect and resources a scholar, department, or “discipline” receives—quality work does. Can we do better work? Most of us can. But nothing in the antipopularization critiques of Gaonkar, Farrell, and others sets forth a program for how to do so.⁴ Gaonkar claims he is “agnostic” on the question of defining rhetoric (in Simons 1999, 94). But what is the point of all of the critiques of Big Rhetoric if none of the critics involved has a better idea? Is it fair to ask for an alternative course of action from them? I think so, but fair or not, without constructive suggestions all their critiques lead to is disciplinary self-loathing.

This leads to my fourth and final response to the alleged political threat of Big Rhetoric, namely, that scholarship advances not through meta-theoretical wrangling (including, admittedly, my own) but by the production of exemplary work. This is Kuhn’s point throughout his work on scientific paradigms. The “winners” of paradigm conflicts, or periods that Kuhn called “revolutionary science,” are those who offer exemplary prob-

lem-solutions that become a model for other scholars and graduate students. The ongoing test of each of us as scholars and for each of our departments and for our discipline as a whole is one of quality and usefulness. There are plenty of examples of scholarship done by NCA rhetoric-types that—by any reasonable criteria of quality—we can be proud of and that point to a hopeful future. The best way to protect the reputation and status of rhetorical studies as individual scholars, departments, and as a “discipline” is to do good work.

The more relevant question is whether popularization has hurt or helped NCA-type rhetoric scholars. I suggest it has helped. The more scholars and administrators hear the word “rhetoric” used in a nonpejorative way, the better. The “rhetorical turn” at work in a variety of disciplines provides an opportunity for those of us within NCA to contribute to meaningful scholarly conversations both within our department and with those outside. Can we do more, and can we do what we do better? Again, the answer is undoubtedly yes. But again the anxiety advanced by the critics of Big Rhetoric gives us little clue as to how.⁵

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Notes

1. These phenomena have been conflated in the literature with descriptions of the "universalizing" or "globalization" of rhetoric, but both terms are misleading. Scholars who favor broad definitions of rhetoric do not necessarily make the ontological argument that rhetoric is a "universal" practice or behavior (Kennedy 1998). Nor do broad definitions entail efforts towards the economic internationalization of rhetoric implied by the term "globalization" (see, for example: Galbraith 2000; Hutton and Giddens 2000). So, while some of the recent rhetorical studies literature that uses these terms is central to my concerns here, I have elected to part from some of the vocabulary.
2. An alternative narrative might incorporate the writings of Hans-Georg Gadamer or Jacques Derrida as important theorists who have broadened our understanding of rhetoric, but I think it is arguably the case that their influence in the United States comes later in the story than the events described here.
3. The title is unfortunate, for it steals the thunder from the historical method of rhetorical hermeneutics developed and advanced in the works of Steven Mailloux (1989, 1998).
4. For example: Gaonkar consistently takes critics to task for using what he believes to be an outmoded understanding of human agency, yet in his own rhetorical analysis of his fellow scholars he relies on a remarkably traditional notion of agency (see Simons 1999, 94).
5. My thanks to Herbert W. Simons, Ramsey Eric Ramsey, and my colleagues at the University of Minnesota for their feedback on an earlier draft of this note.