

WRITING HISTORIES OF THE RHETORICAL TRADITION: HISTORIOGRAPHY AS STRATEGY

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I am using the word "strategy" in the title of this essay partly because I wish to emphasize the rhetorical character of all historical accounts of the rhetorical tradition. As Hayden White points out, "[t]he contemporary historian [approaches the past] not as an end in itself, but as a way of providing perspectives on the present that contribute to the solution of problems peculiar to our own time" (41). I should note that there are two perspectives at work here which ought not be conflated into one: first, the theoretical perspective from within which we recount the past and second, the societal perspective from within which we evaluate the present. The gap between these two perspectives is as wide as the gap between theory and practice. The historian of rhetoric must take note of the discontinuous and asymmetrical relationship that obtains between a theoretical and a societal perspective, and negotiate the gap between a theory of history (on the basis of which the past is recounted) and an advocacy of social practice (on the basis of which a future direction for society may be advanced). "Strategy," in this context, refers to the type of necessary adjustments that must be made so as to facilitate the task of shifting gears from theory to advocacy. It is this kind of adjustment Gayatri Spivak addresses when she remarks: "knowing that such an emphasis is theoretically non-viable, the historian then breaks his theory in a scrupulously delineated 'political interest'" (207). This is a crucial moment, a moment through which the act of writing history shifts into an act of political intervention. Because I take political intervention to be more closely akin to a provisional politics rather than to a political program, I also use the word "strategy" to suggest a sense of provisionality. Edward Said's public remark, that he was working for the Palestinian state to establish itself so that he could then become its critic (cited Spivak 124), captures for me poignantly the kind of provisionality that "strategy" implies when it is tied to advocacy. Writing histories of rhetoric, then, is strategic when the historian's account of the tradition can make the shift from theory to practice, from a historical account to a political intervention.

Current Historiographies

Today, one of the most central issues facing historians interested in producing auto-critical accounts of their disciplinary traditions is the role that historical accounts play in disclosing the voices of oppressed subjects in the distant past. This issue pivots on the larger question of intellectual practices in the Academy and the capacity of intellectuals to make the discourse of society's other known--a question that has been raised frequently in the past, and by various theorists. Theorists associated with the Frankfurt School, for instance, questioned the dominant tendency among intellectuals of the times to organize their scholarly activities around the values associated traditionally with canonized texts. Walter Benjamin's great dictum, "[t]here is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism" (256), exposed canonized texts (which the Academy had endorsed and continued to celebrate as true embodiments of the original values of Western Civilization) as works whose "universal message" reflected the particular interests of an oppressive regime or helped sustain a dominant group in position of power. Far from disclosing the discourses of the oppressed, in other words, traditional intellectuals were charged with amplifying discourses backed by oppressive regimes and, as such, with perpetuating, wittingly or unwittingly, structures of domination and exploitation. Thus, the perspective opened by the Frankfurt School made it possible to regard historical accounts of a given discipline as so many efforts to validate anew texts whose messages were judged, by authoritarian groups of one time or another, worthy of dissemination and preservation. In our own discipline, for example, George Kennedy's *Art of Persuasion* could be seen from such a perspective not only as an account of rhetorical theory in the classical age but also as an attempt to canonize texts which had been endorsed, circulated, and preserved for posterity by those very same forces that had ensured the total exclusion of women and slaves from the classical *polis*. In this manner, the historian's desire to preserve the historical record and to reanimate its spirit in our age could also be taken as a gesture whose net result is none other than the effective reinscription of exclusionary valuations of the past onto the present.¹

Under the Frankfurt School, then, the question of the intellectual's role in disclosing society's other was addressed by means of an interpretive program patterned after the dual movement of negative and positive hermeneutics, as expressed by Paul Ricoeur.² To fulfill both requirements of hermeneutics, interpreters of canonized texts would have to serve the double function of ideological demystification and utopian affirmation. In Fredric Jameson's formulation, an interpreter was to serve a demystifying vocation whose mission would be "to unmask and to demonstrate the ways in which a cultural artifact fulfills a specific ideological mission, in legitimating a given power structure, in perpetuating and reproducing the latter, and in generating specific forms of false consciousness" as well as an opposite vocation whose mission would be "to project [a cultural artifact's] simultaneously Utopian power as the symbolic affirmation of a specific historical and class form of collective unity" (*Political* 291). For the historian of Rhetoric, such a program would require the dual project of exposing Rhetoric's ideological import *and* revolutionary potential, its capacity to perpetuate prevailing social arrangements *and* to challenge the sovereignty of dominant valuations. In other words, the historian of Rhetoric was to assess a past text by noting simultaneously the support it provided and the opposition it incited to specific structures of domination, its confirmation and contestation of existing exploitation, its capacity to veil and unveil the operations of power. Let Roland Barthes' recently published notes on Classical Rhetoric--notes based largely on a conception of rhetoric as a "privileged technique (since one must pay in order to acquire it) which permits ruling classes to gain *ownership of speech*" (13-14)--act as a marker of the first part of this double movement. Meanwhile, Terry Eagleton's history of Rhetoric completes both facets of the hermeneutical program, first positively, by grasping rhetorical instruction of citizens in the classical age as inextricably connected to judiciary and political practices, as conscious efforts at "intensifying common verbal effects for concrete political aims" (107); and, second negatively, by examining how rhetorical instruction was subsequently "encoded by the pedagogical apparatuses of later ruling classes" (102) which reduced rhetorical treatises to so many "handbooks of ruling-class power" (101).

The version of marxist theory associated with the project of ideological demystification and utopian affirmation places the task of

disclosing the voice of the oppressed on the interpreter's capacity to get beneath the surface structure of the text (understood as the site of ideological mystification) and to recover the deep structure of the text (understood as the locus of the inalienable other). To the extent that an interpreter can bring out into the open what a given work has tried to suppress (i.e., the work's "political unconscious"), he or she can be said to have uncovered "the repressed and buried reality of [a] fundamental history" which, for Jameson, is none other than the history of society's other (*Political* 20). In this way, the struggles of the oppressed are grafted onto a narrative account, and the historian can retell the various stories of society's numerous oppressed subjects in the unified narrative of a single story: "the collective struggle to wrest a realm of Freedom from a realm of Necessity" (*Political* 19). Thus, marxist historiography, as practiced by the Frankfurt School and as carried out most recently by Jameson, answers the question of the other by means of a grand narrative of the continuous struggle between the classes throughout the ages. In this emancipatory narrative, the gap between the historian's account of the past and his advocacy for social change in the present is covered over.

Under French post-structuralist theory, the project of disclosing the voice of society's other becomes infinitely more complex. To begin with, structures of domination and exploitation are construed by post-structuralists neither as identifiable and recognizable forces nor as discrete phenomena whose historical specification the interpreter can ascertain. Let Foucault's various inquiries into the heterogeneous workings of oppression in the prison, the asylum, and the clinic act as a cautionary note against the presumption that power is homogeneous or that its effects are identifiable. For Foucault, there are no discernible forces governing or directing the exercise of power, no identifiable holders of power. The heterogeneous character of the networks of domination and exploitation renders their reduction to a coherent narrative of class-struggle counterproductive and, as such, challenges the marxist version of history as a grand narrative. From within the post-structuralist notion of power, then, Jameson's proclamation that the story of the past needs to be "retold from within the unity of a single great collective story" (*Political* 19) and that past texts must be seen as so many "syllables and broken fragments of some single immense story" (*Political* 105) appears as reductive and monolithic as does his restriction of rhetoric to a "precapitalistic mode of linguistic

organization" and his subsequent relegation of rhetoric only to that period of human history (classical antiquity) that saw the existence of a "relatively homogeneous public" (*Ideologies* 122).

While Foucault's formulation of power links domination to chance-events with indeterminate effects, Derrida's notion of identity as "difference" challenges the sovereignty of the subject and questions the plausibility of its coherent representation. Derrida's by now famous proclamation that "there is nothing outside the text" (*Of Grammatology* 158), that there is "nothing before the text, no pretext that is not already a text" (*Dissemination* 328) is an outright rejection of the notion of language as a stable system of signification. Such a rejection, along with a concomitant cancellation of the autonomy of the signified, turns language into a process in which "every signified is also in the position of a signifier" (*Positions* 20), the signifier no longer maintaining any determinable relation to extra-linguistic reality. The impossibility of signifying any intentional meaning carries over from the general domain of language to the specific domain of rhetoric: "Rhetoric," writes Paul de Man, "radically suspends logic and opens up vertiginous possibilities of referential aberration" (10). In Derrida as well as in de Man, the irreducible heterogeneity of *différance* opens the way for a critique against all forms of identity and all acts of historical representation. With this, the historian's effort to disclose the oppressed subject in the past becomes nothing more than a practice in self-delusion.

So far, I have tried to offer a brief sketch of the two most prominent models of historiography in our time, and to outline their respective positions vis-a-vis the intellectual's role in disclosing the voice of society's other. Situating the past text in causal relationship with the historical conditions underpinning its production, limiting subjectivity to an identifiable effect of determinate operations of power, marxist historiography projects the identity of the oppressed onto the texture of a grand narrative whose mission is to represent "the irrepressible voice and expression of the underclasses" (*Political* 105). In an interpretive program that equates identity with presence and representation with adequation, the literary act of representing the oppressed is all too often conflated with the political act of representing their interests, and the intellectual projecting the oppressed onto a utopian narrative erroneously understands himself to function as their political representative. According to marxist

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historiography, then, the society's oppressed can be represented, and the historian who gives presence to oppressed subjects becomes their political representative. On the other hand, the post-structuralist insistence on identity as difference and representation as radical alterity underscores the exclusionary character of all forms of identity and underlines the heterogeneous character of all acts of representation. The historian's representation of the oppressed is a fiction that has nothing to do with the oppressed, let alone with their political interests. With no access to society's other, the historian confronting the radicality of post-structuralist claims of difference and alterity stands impoverished across the future, incapable of giving a voice to oppressed subjects or to affirm any definite form of otherness. Clearly, both historiographical models make evident each other's limitations vis-a-vis their contradictory stances across society's other. While marxist historiography finds its energy in the illusion of representing the oppressed politically, post-structuralist historiography relinquishes the dream of representing anyone at all, politically or otherwise. While the former affirms politics in the name of the other, the latter stands utterly immobile, incapable of intervening politically, bereft of a will to affirm.

Historiography as Strategy

What I have called for in the introduction to this essay can now be re-expressed as a call for a historiography which would accept the radicality of post-structuralist difference and alterity but which would also historicize this radicality by way of a provisional affirmation in the here-and-now.³ Let me explain.

To begin with, the historian would frame his or her account of the past neither by a conception of events as they supposedly happened in the "real" world nor by a vision of an oncoming emancipation. Instead, the historian would begin by situating a past text within the sign-system operative during the time of the text's production, and by noting what changes, if any, the text under question may have effected in the dominant system of signification. Initially, then, the historian proceeds from within the tracks of a well-known post-structuralist procedure: any change in signification-function is at once an addition and a supplement, a repetition and a rupture. As Derrida remarks, "[t]he movement of signification adds something . . . but this addition . . . comes to perform a vicarious

function, to supplement a lack on the part of the signified" (*Writing and Difference* 289). Following this double movement of supplementarity, the historian takes note of the dominant signification system and its repetition through the text, but also of the text's effort to displace the hegemonic sign-system by charging it with a new function. In this way, a given text becomes the simultaneous site of repetition and rupture, the effect of a dominant system of signification and the condition for its crisis.

By way of an illustration, I turn to Gorgias' famous defense of Helen. Constructed around a series of plausible alternatives (was it divine fate, human force, *eros*, or *logos* that caused Helen's departure?), Gorgias' defense follows a familiar pattern: the enumeration of a series of alternative events, each one of whose occurrence rules out the possibility of the defendant's guilt.⁴ Like other court-defenses of the times, this type of defense derives its significance from a very basic form of argumentation--argument from probability--a form which, ever since the rhetorical/legal practices of Corax and Tisias, had remained most fundamental to practices of dicastic rhetoric. Insofar as the *Helen* puts forth arguments that appeal to reason and make reasonable inferences, then, the *Helen* works within, and perpetuates further, the dominant system of signification. Yet, at the same time that Gorgias repeats the dominant system of signification, he charges it with a new function: to display his own dexterity as a rhetorician. In addition to their ordinary, inferential coding, arguments in the *Helen* are also invested with a rhetorical force and acquire a playful and ostentatious dimension. The net result of this additional function, this supplement in signification, is a confusion as to what falls within and what falls outside the auspices of legal argument, what constitutes evidence and what constitutes play. "I want to give an accounting in my speech," says Gorgias, "and relieve this woman who has been ill-spoken of from the charge, demonstrating that those who blame her are misled and showing the truth so as to end this ignorance" (2). In the original, the phrase *psebdomenous epideixas kai deixas talethes* juxtaposes the act of exposing a false case with the act of proving the true case, though the former act is associated with *epideixis* (self-display, show off) and the latter is associated with *deixis* (proof, evidence). Placing the oratorical act of self-display within the connotative domain of legal proof, the phrase makes demonstration

as much a matter of rhetorical self-display as it is a matter of legal proof.

How are we to interpret the effort made by the *Helen* to supplement legal argument with linguistic playfulness? How are we to read this change in the dominant chain of signification, this momentary interruption and relinking of the chain, such that terms like "proof," "evidence," or "demonstration" no longer exclusively signify a legal practice but can now also signify rhetorical expertise?

It is at this juncture that the historian can plot the text's effort to displace the system of signification as a gesture of confrontation against networks of domination and exploitation. The change in the function of legal argumentation effected by this text can now be read as a sign of the necessary changes that local forces of domination and exploitation had to make in order to continue to exert their rule. Produced under the patronage of aristocracy, the *Helen* embodies the changes in legal argumentation aristocrats must make if they are to remain in a position of power. The *Helen*, then, suggests two things: first, that aristocracy is encountering an opposition which has reached the point of crisis; and, secondly, that to get out of that crisis, aristocracy must reconceptualize legal argumentation. The specific recommendation of the text is that aristocrats stop thinking of legal argumentation as the exclusive domain of reason and begin revitalizing dominant notions of valid proof and reasoned evidence with the energy of rhetorical playfulness.

Such a reading is made possible when we take a given text of the past to be not only what post-structuralists have termed a "subject effect," the effect of discontinuous and heterogeneous networks of domination and exploitation, but also the condition of change produced in these networks. The detection of a rebellious gesture does not necessarily presume the affirmation of a given identity, and the historian asserting the presence of a rebellious gesture is not obliged to affirm an essential identity. It is possible to assert, in other words, that subjectivity manifests itself by virtue of the crisis it produces--the oppressed other leaves its trace on local forces of oppression by necessitating their changing configurations. Asserting the identity of the other through the changing configurations of oppression is a move in line with the general post-structuralist conception of identity as never fully recoverable, always under erasure, irreducibly discursive. Admittedly, the act of projecting the

identity of the other onto the oppressors does require that the historian construct a negative consciousness and, thus, make a recognizably essentialist move. Nevertheless, the historian's reconstitution of the identity of the other does not amount to a claim "this is how things really were," but to a quite different claim: "given the changing configurations of oppression and domination, this is who the other might have been."

A theory of change in terms of a new function in the signification system opened up by the text, a displacement of the function of signs, sets into motion an active transaction between past and present. The net effect of such a transaction is the historian's realization that the instruments he or she brings to the study of the past are themselves constituted by the hegemonic system of signification active in his or her day. If the possibility for action lies in the displacement of function between sign-systems, the breaking and relinking of the signification chain, then, the historian is obliged to disrupt the sign-system which made the production of his or her history possible to begin with. Post-structuralist suggestions of a way out of this crucial dilemma come in the form of a persistent self-questioning: all the historian can do is to be suspicious of his or her own authority as an investigating subject, to place the presuppositions that have made his or her project possible under perpetual critique. But as Spivak has pointed out, this is not always enough. Effecting a change in the function of current historiographical writing amounts instead to making a decision, on the part of the historian, to enter into a theoretically non-viable space. This means the decision to enter into the space of political intervention by making, in Spivak's words, "a *strategic* use of positivist essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest" (205).

In such a procedure, the positing of an identity becomes a methodologically necessary fiction, invaluable to the project of critiquing historically contingent processes and their role in shaping particular forms of identity. Once again, the positing of a collective identity is offered by the historian not in the name of historical reconstruction, the act of having uncovered the "real" identity of some group, but in the spirit of provisional affirmation, the act of having arrested momentarily the endless flow of signifiers. When collective identities are thus affirmed, the writing of history acquires a practical dimension with real consequences for society in the present. Through

his or her perspective on the past, the historian opens up what Foucault termed a "subject position" for his or her interlocutors, a "vacant place that may in fact be filled by different individuals" (95). In other words, the discourse of history provides an occasion for readers of history to assume a given identity in the present, to feel part of a collectivity, and to engage themselves in the political sphere. In this way, the historian can be said to have opened a cultural space for those prepared to commit themselves to the improvement of the social, even though such a commitment can only be carried out under provisional identities, fictional collectivities, and tentative politics.

To return to the example I have already used. Insofar as the *Helen* embodies the changing configurations of aristocracy, the subjectivity made manifest by the work is a "subject effect," an effect of aristocratic domination. Insofar as the *Helen* embodies the crisis that necessitated changes in the configurations of aristocracy, the work also manifests the trace of those who produced the crisis, i.e., the agents of change. Naturally, we cannot know who these agents were and any inferences we choose to make about their identity must remain provisional. My own commitment to the teaching of public speaking leads me to constitute those agents of change as members of the underclasses who used their gift of eloquence as the sole weapon against aristocratic rule. To constitute the identity of the oppressed this way says less about the nature of the oppressed in the fifth century BC than it does about the type of intervention I am prescribing to members of this society and at present time. In choosing to view the *Helen* both as an effect of the aristocratic class and as a condition of its change, I am also choosing to affirm the power of public deliberation to change the inequalities of this society. To be sure, the move that links public deliberation and democracy is an essentializing move. But from within the perspective of a teacher desiring to constitute students as social agents, this move can be also be regarded as the strategic use of an essentialism.

The model of historiography I have offered was meant to dramatize the tension that ensues when the writing of history is pulled in one direction by theoretical difference and in another, opposite direction by a provisional essentialism. Such a pull checks both the marxist desire to grant the oppressed an expressive subjectivity and the post-structuralist desire to posit their total unrepresentability. Historiography as strategy suggests the need to

choose strategically one's own essentialisms as a necessary way of inaugurating people's provisional entrance into the arena of cultural politics.

NOTES

¹ See also Todorov's historical account of classical rhetoric, which equates the persuasive aspect of classical rhetoric with the imperialist-democratic *polis*: "All that is possible only in a state where institutional constraints are weak and where the power of a deliberative assembly is very strong" (63).

² See *Freud and Philosophy*: "Hermeneutics seems to me to be animated by this double motivation: willingness to suspect, willingness to listen" (27).

³ It finds its theoretical source in several of Spivak's works but most prominently in her essay "Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography," *In Other Works* 197-221.

⁴ This form of legal argument was frequently used by Antiphon; but it was also used by Gorgias in his defense of Palamedes.

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