Rhetorical Agency: Mind, Meshwork, Materiality, Mobility

LesBelikian

Published by Punctum Books

LesBelikian.
Rhetorical Agency: Mind, Meshwork, Materiality, Mobility.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/66795

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2331636
1.

Productivity as a Context for Theorizing Rhetorical Transaction

In the following study, applying an assemblage-theoretical approach to a canonical text, we’ll investigate the prospects for conceptualizing rhetorical agency as the enactment — the production — of social change. Certainly, rhetorical agency is often studied as a potential, a capacity first held in reserve by speakers and listeners and then, in principle, brought to bear during rhetorical transaction (see Campbell or Herndl and Licona). Yet it’s important to theorize rhetorical agency as a kinetic manifestation, not just as a possible supply of communicative energies. Doing so would justify our seeking rhetoric’s effectivity, our circumventing the suspicion that communication might only be to mirror the conditions already in place.

Is it possible conceptually to link rhetorical functionality with social change? It ought to be. While definitions of “rhetoric” abound, the most familiar must be that furnished by Aristotle, describing rhetoric as an ability to find the available means of persuasion, and thereby affirming that rhetoric’s very rationale is to create change. Elsewhere in the Rhetoric, Aristotle adds that “most of the matters with which judgments and examination are concerned can be other than they are, for people deliberate and examine what they are doing, and [human] actions are all of this kind” (Aristotle: On Rhetoric 42). Similarly, in the Nichomachean Ethics, he portrays “the deliberative faculty” itself as that through which we engage “things that are variable” — not things that simply “move,” but “things that in their very being can be otherwise than they are” (McNeill 32).

Today, we are all the more inclined to view social relations as among these variable, contingent things, these matters which, through deliberation and other forms of collective enterprise, can be made otherwise than they are. In that case, it should indeed be possible conceptually to link rhetoric with
social change, and even to demonstrate how the former could produce the latter.

However, an array of theorists have come to deprecate the Aristotelian model as instrumentalist, as attributing to rhetorical utterance the causal efficacy of some philosophical sling-shot. Commentators have even discerned in that framework a “primeval elitism,” the ascription, to certain special speakers, of an uncommon will to suasion, an inherent ability to galvanize such audiences as would prefer to remain inert (McGee 22). To be sure, not everyone in rhetorical studies has found the Aristotelian view so exceptional. It does, after all, situate the audience as “more than a target, more than a consumer,” indeed, as “a kind of collaborative agency for making ongoing judgments” (Farrell 96). Still, rhetorical theory has persistently developed strategies for exiting from instrumentalism—each of them, come to think of it, according less and less agency to the human actors who would have to operationalize any genuine social change.

By now, those alternative means of escape have evidently allowed researchers to depart from an outworn “logic of influence,” this latter being the allegation that rhetoric can “modify attitudes or induce action on the part of consummate individuals” (Biesecker 232). Thus the successors to the Aristotelian position (that cornerstone of the traditional stance) have outstripped both the notion that rhetoric might express the resistless will of the rhetor, and the notion that rhetoric might stage-manage the thoughts and behaviors of subjects imagined as stable, fully formed, self-sufficient. Even so, the counter-Aristotelian approaches have not abolished every last trace of instrumentalism, causality, or influence, for they have not left us with a vision of rhetoric as contributing nothing. Instead, as an overview of the last quarter-century’s worth of rhetorical-theoretical development could show, each of them has merely displaced the locus of rhetorical effectivity.

For, although there have been shifts in the characterization of the properly rhetorical mode, rhetorical effectivity is still located somewhere. Clearly, it’s no longer located, not exclusively so, at the instrumentalist site of a purposively collaborative intentionality, or at the epistemic site of intra-collective
knowledge, or at the critical-constitutive site of interpellative expression, or at the just plain constitutive site of self-regenerating symbolization, or at the articulatory site where “this practice” is linked unobtrusively “to that effect, this text to that meaning, this meaning to that reality” (Grossberg qtd. in Greene, Another, 34–35). Instead, rhetorical effectivity is apparently located at all of these sites, the lot of them inhering within what some commentators might go so far as to call the social totality.

If we were to reflect on these contemporary viewpoints on rhetorical functionality, all of them involving the (often occluded) assumption that rhetoric does retain some effectivity, we would see that they turn out, without exception, to share an emphasis on rhetoric as productive, whether or not that label is highlighted in their description. Therefore the point remains that, so long as there’s rhetorical effectivity (so long as rhetoric is, indeed, productive), we really oughtn’t to have much difficulty finding a theoretical justification for linking rhetoric (say, by way of collective action) with genuine social change.

Unfortunately, rhetoric nowadays is not only epistemic, duplicitous, constitutive, and articulatory, but also woven into an autopoetic social logic, a collective trajectory within which speakers and listeners are caught up, but over which they have precious little say. Our own project, therefore, will be to help repopulate rhetorical transaction by locating precisely the sort of agency through which rhetoricity could articulate with social change. The contribution here will be to lay out, in contrast to much of the rhetorical-theoretical common sense about such matters, a conceptual argument designed to upset some widespread notions as to rhetoric’s productivity, and, more specifically, to counteract an otherwise unfettered trend to diminish the role of any human actors. Yet the point of our diverging from that trend isn’t to bypass the study of agency as practiced within contemporary rhetorical scholarship, nor is it to demolish the most salient of the stances already taken. Instead, it’s to protect those positions in their own terms, merely reworking their disclosures so as to arrive at a solution.

We should begin by sizing up the problem which the solution is to engage. It’s that research has arrived at an impasse
such that all the different conceptualizations of rhetorical functionality are, in effect, colluding to undo the agency they ought to be uncovering. That’s because not even the theorists of an epistemic, critical, constitutive, and/or articulatory rhetoric can, at present, offer a cogent account of the manner in which rhetoric would indeed link with social change.

A Miscellaneously Self-Effacing Rhetorical Agency?

To explain rhetoric’s effectivity in keeping with the accounts provided by contemporary theorists is quite a task. Many such commentators, it’s only fair to add, would object that, but of course, the whole purpose of their theorizing is to “reestablish the primacy of rhetorical agency,” the reestablishment of this primacy being prerequisite to any arguments about what rhetorical agency might be able to accomplish (Gardner 203). So, to rescale the objection, to bring it down to size, let’s note that rhetorical theory has, at present, surprisingly little wherewithal for actually reestablishing the primacy of rhetorical agency. And let’s even attempt a glancing survey of the lexicon, the idiom, in which contemporary theorists are talking about the sorts of agency at stake in rhetorical transaction. That way, we ought to be able to see that the salient conceptual vocabulary militates against the claim that there’s any agency proper to rhetoric to begin with.

Citing Ahern, citing Geisler, citing O’Hair et al., citing Turnbull, citing Campbell, and citing Koerber, Amanda Young (2008) notes that, while rhetorical agency remains “key to rhetorical inquiry,” its definition looks, all of a sudden, to be inordinately “slippery and fluid” (227). Christine J. Gardner (2011) concurs. She adds that, even if rhetorical agency does involve “the capacity to act,” recent scholars have defined “this slippery term,” rhetorical agency, in a “variety of ways” (203). The variety reflects a hydra-headed effort at rehabilitating rhetoric in the face of “a postmodern critique” that, decentering the subject as traditionally conceived, all but “reduces rhetors” to “points of articulation” (Gardner 203). So, although rhetorical agency can’t nowadays be treated as the province of a sovereign subject, it can at least be studied as ideology, or as power, or
as responsibility, or — perhaps a bit disingenuously — as human potential, or as resource, or as performance, or as illusion, all of these emerging as equally acceptable definitions (Gardner 203).

No wonder Amanda Young would take such care to emphasize that, when it comes to talk of rhetorical agency, “the challenge is not simply” to define it, but “to recognize it in context,” the implication being that each definition, in stipulating its own preferred context, will dictate which sorts of evidentiary claims may be admitted in the first place (228). But this must be why rhetorical agency is so slippery and fluid: it’s everything from the quintessentially ideological and the authentically responsible to the inherently performative and the merely illusory. Remarkably, though — as Young further explains, drawing on pieces by Turnbull, by Young and Flower, by Flower, by Koerber, by O’Hair et al., and by Campbell — rhetorical agency has also managed to acquire certain “fundamental properties,” and these include questioning, negotiation, choice, and evaluation (228).

The conundrum, then, is that rhetorical agency is currently being conceptualized in a manner that precludes any reestablishment of its primacy, since this is an agency whose own contents, ranging from “choice” to “ideology” — opposites as these are — must forever be undertaking a sort of mutual effacement.

To pursue the point a little further, if only for the sake of clarity, let’s consider what happens to rhetorical agency when it’s conceptualized in terms not only of “ideology” but also of “choice.” For this amounts to theory’s giving with one hand while taking away with the other, as by devising a view in which rhetorical agency is nebulously deterministic, but, then again, nebulously voluntaristic, too.

**Rhetoricity Bound, Unbounded, and Both**

If we could try to keep “ideology” and “choice” apart for just a heuristic moment, then “ideology,” pure and simple, would refer to a framework (for our thought and action) which is quintessentially directive, justificatory, comprehensive or totalistic in tendency, and unconscious. By contrast, “choice,” pure and simple, would imply our ability willfully to opt out of any
framework whatever, no matter how directive and totalistic that framework might be. But the definition of “ideology” contradicts the definition of “choice,” just as the definition of “choice” contradicts the definition of “ideology.” And even if choice really is a “fundamental property” of rhetorical agency, there’s no self-evident method for distinguishing between, on the one side, a determined, ideological modality of choice and, on the other side, an untrammeled, voluntaristic modality of choice (Young 228). Therefore, a rhetorical agency in which “ideology” is theoretically sutured to “choice” must be next to useless, for the reason that it is too voluntaristic to be tenable, and yet too deterministic to make any difference.

To be sure, many of us would hew to the position that even ideology can’t be seamless, that it necessarily betrays internal fissures. As Christian O. Lundberg (2009) asks, in rejoinder to Ronald Walter Greene, what about “failed interpellations,” and what about “impotence in the governing apparatus?” (183). But the question as to interpellative failure and/or managerial incompetence is still separate from the question as to choice. For choice, pure and simple, would be sometimes to choose against competent and even successful interpellations. Therefore “choice” remains tied to voluntarism, whereas “ideology” (successful, incompetent, or whatever) remains tied to determinism instead. At the same time, so long as rhetoricity is promiscuously distributed between an improbable determinism and an unworkable voluntarism, then to say that its agency equates to “human potential” is to say nothing about it at all (Gardner 203).

If we were in a position to recognize whether it’s the deterministically ideological that trumps the voluntaristically chosen, or whether it’s the other way around, then we would be able to decide whether rhetorical transaction can make things otherwise than they are. But not only are we not in any such position, we are not even in a position to rule, other than by resorting to theoretical fiat, on so much as the difference between the ideological and the chosen. For, on the one side, there’s the never-ending regress of the ideological, to which theorists can retreat against the threat of voluntarism, and, on the other side, there’s the never-ending regress of the chosen,
to which theorists can retreat against the threat of determinism. The only way out of either regress would be to make a flat-out assertion, as by saying “Yes, determinism trumps voluntarism, or “Yes, voluntarism flouts determinism,” or, alternatively, “Yes, both determinism and voluntarism are just as irreducible as can be.”

As for the question of consensus, well, according to Christine J. Gardner and others (see, for example, Lundberg and Gunn 102), the best that contemporary rhetorical theory has to offer in the way of a leading indication, in the way of a statement that evokes “the essence of the plurality of views,” must be Karlyn Kohrs Campbell’s celebrated argument of 2005, an argument in which rhetorical agency is disclosed as promiscuous, protean, perverse, and even paradoxical (Gardner 203). Indeed, if research into agency is travel, then Campbell’s “Agency: Promiscuous and Protean” has become a must-see attraction, highlighted as such in a substantive, even sumptuous brochure titled The Sage Handbook of Rhetorical Studies (2009), edited by Lunsford, Wilson, and Eberly. That reference work begins with a series of “road-maps” for the student of rhetoric, one of them explaining exactly where to look for “Rhetorical Agents and Agency” (xxi–xxiv). Many individual studies are cited there, though in a manner not so much economical as abstemious. It’s only in the case of Campbell’s text that the editors include entire paragraphs, one after the other. And this must be to leave no doubt that, no matter how many miscellaneous treatments there may be to choose from, Campbell’s “Agency: Promiscuous and Protean” is, for the foreseeable future, pretty much the last word on this slippery and fluid topic.

But if rhetorical agency can really be as miscellaneous as Campbell indicates, then it will have to be not only slippery and fluid but homogeneous as well. It will have to populate the black box of rhetorical transaction with, for example, “power” as indistinguishable from “illusion,” and with “ideology” as coextensive with “choice,” all of these inhering, precisely as theorized in contemporary rhetorical studies, in one and the same rhetorical agency. Meanwhile, any rhetorical agency conceptualized in this way will forever be canceling itself out. For, under
a description of rhetorical agency as so interminably miscella-
neous, whatever is (for example) authentically and voluntaris-
tically progressive about rhetorical agency can, in theory, also
prove to be whatever is treacherous, deterministic, and retro-
gressive about rhetorical agency. The problem becomes that, so
long as rhetorical agency is all things to all rhetorical theorists,
it’s just too plain fluid and promiscuous to help us establish any
intelligible connection between rhetorical functionality and
genuine social change.

Variegation (Not Conglomeration)

We do seem presented with a conception of rhetorical agency
as, on the one side, surprisingly complicated (for this is an
agency that can collocate everything from hard-core power
to solipsistic illusion) and yet, on the other side, astonishing-
ingly simple (for this very same agency is not just sometimes
but always elusive). Still, to the extent that the line of reason-
ing pursued by Campbell does remain helpful, then we should
embrace the possibilities it discloses. Indeed, the internal struc-
ture of Campbell’s own argument suggests an expedient for
simplifying the busyness, and yet for complicating the single-
mindedness, that attends the present-day theorization of rhe-
torical agency. For, even as “Agency: Protean and Promiscuous”
implies that rhetorical agency must always be undoing itself, it
also implies that rhetorical agency must always be proceeding
from somewhere — and not just from anywhere, but from four
sites in particular. These are the sites of rhetorical subjectivity,
rhetorical conventionality, rhetorical transcendence, and rhe-
torical materiality.

In Campbell’s essay, to be explored later, we’ll notice four
main collectors into which it seems possible to distribute all
the otherwise miscellaneous features of rhetorical agency.
Subjectivity, for example, might be a collector for what writ-
ers such as Gaonkar would call the ideological, and what writ-
ters such as Condit or Gunn would call the illusory (Gardner
203; Young 227). And materiality (whether referring to a pre-
formed sort of materiality, or to a “performance” of materiality,
or to some other condition of materiality) might be a collec-
tor for whatever aspects of rhetorical transaction do involve an object-like exteriority (Gardner 203).

Meanwhile, convention, or conventionality, might be a collector for significations, discourses, social norms, mores, shared values or anything else functioning as a “resource” (Gardner 203) to facilitate “negotiation” (Young 228). Finally, transcendence might be a collector for “human potential” (Gardner 203), understood in terms of “choice,” “questioning,” “evaluation,” and “responsibility” (Young 228). If so, these latter references, to human potential and the rest, would then be allusions to the role that rhetoric can arguably play in creating a better shared world for all the participants.

But to complicate rhetorical agency by folding it into four is not to suggest that any particular feature, dimension, and/or property of rhetorical agency—such as “power”—would belong, without question, inside this, that, the other, or the next of the four collectors (Gardner 203). To the contrary, it might very well remain nomadic, capable of migrating among the sites of subjectivity, conventionality, materiality, and transcendence. The point, however, is that to fold rhetorical agency into four would be to highlight the potential for an interactive, rather than internecine, collaboration among its constituents. In other words, while it’s merely self-defeating to decide that rhetorical agency can be the stapling of “ideology” to “choice,” it’s at least workable to shift to a view of rhetorical agency as roomy enough for both subjectivity and transcendence—so long as it’s understood that these, in remaining distinct and separable, would remain other to one another. Under such circumstances, rhetorical agency might prove internally heterogeneous and yet parliamentary, as in Kenneth Burke’s usage, where all the participatory “sub-certainties,” none of them “precisely right” or “precisely wrong,” are equally “contributory” (512–13).

For now, though, we are left with a rhetorical agency so uniformly fluid, so universally promiscuous, so unanimously perverse as to constitute not a conversation but a collective misapprehension. It’s a misprision such that the theorists of a voluntaristic rhetorical agency and the theorists of a deterministic rhetorical agency are always talking past one another, and
always in a slaloming “monologue” that, leaving all the “sub-certainties” precisely wrong, effectively reproduces “everything in its image” (Burke 512). Thus some hypothetical eavesdropper, curious to know whether rhetorical transaction can conduce to genuine social change, would nowadays hear (out of the left side of her headset) that it can’t, and also (out of the right side) that it can, and she would be left nonplussed as to how rhetoricity could ever live up to its rationale, its task of helping make things otherwise than they are.

But even if we do have to concede that rhetorical agency is both deterministic and voluntaristic, we ought to treat the concession itself, with the internal heterogeneity it actually bespeaks, as warrant for the claim that rhetorical agency is irreducible to any unitary substance, no matter how protean and promiscuous. After all, the risk we face (namely, that those aspects of rhetorical agency which we’d prefer to align with choice, free will, and the like, might yet be explained away as epiphenomenal to some overarching social logic) is not to be overcome by just any approach yielding a more complicated account of rhetorical agency. It can only be overcome by an approach which clearly divulges its philosophical commitments. Although these would probably not be commitments to an unabashed determinism (the latter obliterating any prospect of human agency), they might still be commitments to some conflicted truce between voluntarism and its counterpart.

Unfortunately, writers on rhetorical functionality are not, in fact, tending to disclose their philosophical commitments. Instead, they are avoiding the subject altogether. That’s what it means for them continually to elaborate on rhetoric’s means or mechanisms, while continually pleading ignorance as to rhetoric’s ends or purposes — even at a time when the “fundamental properties” of rhetorical agency (questioning, negotiation, choice, evaluation) appear, in theory, to be dissolving into determinism by another name (Young 228).

To illustrate, we’ll consider a couple of projects aiming to highlight rhetoric’s temporality (very much as requested by Trapani in 2009), yet managing to chug along without betraying the least hint as to whether we should read this rhetorical fluidity as confirming either that (a) people can often exceed
the confines of social structure, or else that (b) people are perpetually shuffled between social-theoretical concentration camps.

In “Un/Framing Models of Public Distribution” (2005), Jenny Edbauer does help us see that the so-called “elements” of the rhetorical situation, with “exigence” as a case in point, are neither particularly discrete nor impossibly indeterminate. Better to say that all aspects of rhetoric “bleed” beyond their heuristically constructed borders (Edbauer 9). So rhetorical utterance betokens an ecology, a “viral economy,” where communication occurs not as instrumentalist transmission but as affective spreading—indeed, as “shared contagion” (Edbauer 13, 18). On the minus side, though, the author manages to avoid taking any stand as to whether rhetoric’s contagiousness means that interlocutors remain free to exercise an inalienable capacity for choice, or whether it instead means that they are forced, through communicative processes, into just those “affective channels” prescribed for them (21). In short, we still cannot tell, not even after the author’s so successfully complicating the means of communication, what it would actually be (choice? interpellation? having being born that way?) that finally animates rhetorical transaction.

It’s the same story, and not by coincidence, with The Available Means of Persuasion: Mapping a Theory and Pedagogy of Multimodal Public Rhetoric (2012). There, Sheridan, Ridolfo, and Michel declare that they “find it essential to preserve some understanding of rhetorical agency,” before adding, as if for the sake of balance, that “we do not increase our agency by pretending that it exists apart from a complex network of human and nonhuman agents” (107). Unfortunately, the authors gradually translate the term “agency” into the term “velocity” — and that’s to beg the question. For, even if “velocity” does describe the career of agency, we’re still in the dark as to what would go, as it were, into the agency whose career is being described. While they do offer valuable insights into rhetoric’s multimodal turn, these writers neglect to divulge any fundamental philosophical commitment either way, whether to a view of rhetorical agency as bespeaking (even to the teeniest, tiniest extent) an absolutely irreducible human capacity, or else to a
view of rhetorical agency as betokening a totalistic social force that’s puppeteering everybody from behind the scenes.

So there’s a deficiency in such works, each of them toiling (head-down) in its own vineyard, but each in its own way pleading ignorance, rather than taking any stand on rhetorical voluntarism, or on rhetorical determinism, or on both. These treatments don’t, of course, tell us what to think; they tell us only what to think about. Nevertheless, in their single-minded focus on the means of communication, they siphon away attention from the ends of communication, from the question as to whatever it is that communication might be good for in the first place.

Meanwhile, there cannot, in the absence of any defensible rationale for studying rhetorical transaction, be any justification for researchers’ gesturing to the virus-like spreading of rhetorical utterances, or for their adducing the acceleration or deceleration of such utterances within multimodal ecologies. That’s because the problem with comparing utterances to viruses is the same as with comparing the contents of communication to genes (and the contexts for communication to organisms). It’s that the biologistic analogy is fictive, anyway.

Let’s recall that when contemporary researchers in the so-called hard sciences do hypothesize about the constitution and behavior of genes, organisms, viruses, and the rest, they’re expected to ground their claims, or their speculations, not in just nothing, but, rather, in a set of assumptions as to the availability of a “code script” (Schrödinger, cited in Benítez Bribiesca 30). A hermeneutic key of this kind places boundaries on what can reasonably be said about the problem in question. An oncologist, for example, will assume that the “genetic information” necessary for understanding a particular virus must, in the first place, be “stored in a relatively stable molecule such as DNA,” such that any knowledge about the molecule can, henceforth, inform any knowledge about the virus (Benítez Bribiesca 30). What’s more, such an assumption will itself be grounded theoretically, just as the theory in turn will be grounded philosophically. Thus, in the instance of the oncologist who appeals to DNA, or to relatively stable molecules, or to code scripts, the underlying philosophical commitment might be followed
all the way back to Immanuel Kant, who laid the conceptual groundwork for any subsequent confidence as to the correlation between thought, or representation, and reality.

By contrast, contemporary rhetorical scholars typically remain silent as to precisely which code script, if any, could serve as their interpretive template — and also as to precisely which philosophical commitment(s), if any, could justify their investigation to begin with. So it’s no wonder when this or that study, its scope so circumspectly limited to the moment of circulation, contributes no findings to help us decide whether rhetorical agency belongs to voluntarism, or to determinism, or to both of these at the same time. The only alternative (i.e., to turning this blind eye of circumspection) would be for the theorists, the ones tasked with shaping the direction of research into rhetorical functionality, to decide whether they’re committed to voluntarism, or to determinism, or to both. And, for that to happen, these same theorists would have to confront, rather than gloss over, the difference at stake among the options.

Alas, rhetorical studies presently risks vitiation by virtue of its own magnanimity, its agnosticism on the question of what could finally keep the options apart, preventing them from dissolving into one another. We find this toxic generosity at play in even the most rigorous attempts to differentiate among stances, for example, in the editorial paraphernalia for the collection Rhetoric and Philosophy (1990).

There, Richard Cherwitz manages a remarkable feat of translation, carefully surveying a number of rhetorical-theoretical universes in such a manner as to render them interchangeable. For, on the one side, he maintains that we should certainly inspect the philosophical assumptions that underlie the various “conceptions of rhetoric,” given that those assumptions and conceptions already map out the “different ways in which the legitimacy of the rhetorical enterprise can be secured” (3, 9). But, on the other side, he maintains that any specific choice we might make as to “philosophical perspective,” i.e., as to our rationale for pursuing Option A rather than Option B, will remain “a matter of preference” (10). So, according to Cherwitz, writing twenty-five years ago, the “significance of there being a plurality of possible groundings of the rhetorical enter-
prise” — groundings such as realism, relativism, critical rationalism, idealism, materialism, existentialism, deconstruction, and pragmatism — “resides in just the tensions among them,” with the implication that all of the tensions are already getting along famously (xviii).

By now, it does seem that many researchers are content with just that sort of assessment. If all the philosophical assumptions do fall to our preferential disposal, then let’s be charitable and uplift the lot of them in one fell swoop. Let’s even prefer to suture them together, so long as we’re not too individualistic about it. Since there’s just the one “rhetorical world” (a continuous “landscape,” a Mobius strip) for all the different approaches to address, each of the viewpoints can presumably contribute a certain something of its own (Cherwitz 4). To be sure, such permissiveness will mean that rhetoric becomes not just pluralistic, but promiscuous and protean, too. Any stretch of rhetoricity will prove as amenable, say, to existentialist analysis as to relativist analysis. But now that all the viewpoints have been globalized, we can domesticate, i.e., dismiss as merely local, any tension between the deterministic and its other.

At a moment like this, the objection might arise that it’s ill-mannered to cast such aspersions upon the state of the rhetorical art. Why shouldn’t everyone’s theoretical perspective be a matter of preference — and why shouldn’t a thousand flowers bloom, here in the one rhetorical world? Well, the answer is, in part, that “preference” isn’t applicable, as we’ll see when we visit Nathan Stormer’s conception of the will to matter. But the rest of the answer, calling for explanation now, is that there isn’t the one rhetorical world, anyway.

To accept the line of reasoning above, that which we’ve associated with Richard Cherwitz (but which is by now ubiquitous) would be to accept that rhetorical theory already constitutes a tableau — a self-evident body of developments for just anyone to study, and if not exactly from nowhere, then still from a standpoint that makes no difference. That’s a notion of the kind which Annemarie Mol (1999) has critiqued as perspectivalism. It’s the belief, ostensibly pluralistic, that viewpoints cannot really matter, that the “object” of our “gazes and
“glances” remains pristine, safely concealed from our particular ways of seeing (Mol, “Ontological Politics,” 76.)

True, there’s always the conundrum as to what might happen to an object that’s inaccessible, that’s withdrawn from us. But that’s separate from the question of what might happen to an object that’s disclosed to us. In the latter case, Mol would contend that any perspective we adopt must be, to some greater or lesser extent, an ontological intervention, a productive, co-constitutive interaction with that which is being observed. So, to adopt this or that viewpoint (even on something as multiple as contemporary rhetorical theory) isn’t merely to adopt a stance consistent with the object. It’s also to adopt an object consistent with the stance.

The claim might sound preposterous. Surely it’s the other way around; surely the stance, the perspective, the viewpoint must be accountable to the object — and unilaterally so. Don’t we already know as much because of those paradigm shifts, those unilateral sorts of development which operate everywhere, even, as Thomas Kuhn has reported, in “normal” science? For, if it’s true that paradigms, or interpretive frameworks, are overthrown by reason of their inconsistency with the data, then just any scientific revolution can show that, whereas viewpoints have always been ephemeral, the objects of the viewpoints have always been fixed, waiting around for the benefit of whichever would be the next, more nearly perfect perspective.

But that isn’t, after all, the best way to read a paradigm shift. It isn’t that Object X prevails, surviving the shift, persisting undaunted as Paradigm A concedes to Paradigm B. Instead, as Kuhn (2000) himself explains, it’s that the old object vanishes from the scene contemporaneously with its support system, and always in favor of its rival, the Object Y which Paradigm B has managed to promote instead. A quite charismatic example concerns the element formerly known as phlogiston, once a prime candidate for explaining the processes of combustion, but eventually driven out of the picture, hand in hand with its own paradigm, by the element currently known as oxygen. And if we do grant the interdependence of the object (say, phlogiston as guest) and the paradigm (say, phlogiston chemis-
try as host), then we’re ready to concede that perspectives, too, can be ontological interventions.

Returning now to the rhetorical-theoretical object, the tableau with which we’ve begun, we should be able to see that, because perspectives are indeed ontological interventions, it’s most improbable that the perspectives aligned with voluntarism could be engaged in building just the same reality, or world, or landscape as the perspectives aligned with determinism. The voluntaristic perspectives would be inculcating a reality where agency persisted as irreducible beyond free will. But the deterministic perspectives, by contrast, would be inculcating a reality where rhetorical agency reduced to the workings of collective force, of social logic. So the better conclusion is that rhetorical voluntarism and rhetorical determinism must belong to incommensurable ontologies, each of which entails a radically divergent set of possibilities for rhetorical transaction.

Now, with respect to normal-scientific research, Kuhn’s later work shows that, while it’s an error to conflate progress with unproblematic linearity, and while we “cannot get from the old to the new simply by an addition to what was already known,” there is always some non-trivial change between the before and the after (15). To be sure, since any paradigm shift will involve the displacement of one language by another, each phase of development requires its own, carefully hermeneutic explication:

Consider the compound sentence, “In the Ptolemaic system planets revolve about the earth; in the Copernican they revolve about the sun.” Strictly construed, that sentence is incoherent. The first occurrence of the term ‘planet’ is Ptolemaic, the second Copernican, and the two attach to nature differently. For no univocal reading of the term ‘planet’ is the compound sentence true. (Kuhn 15)

Yet it’s not as if the normal-scientific researcher is permitted, every now and again, to start appealing to the Ptolemaic paradigm, or to Aristotelian physics, or to phlogiston chemistry. In each of these cases, which are among Kuhn’s main illustra-
tions, a formerly available cross-section of reality—let’s call it a reality as such—has long since gone away. And, now that the ontological checkbox for an entire assemblage (terms, referents, and all) has been de-selected, the language in question is no longer vital, no longer viable to speak.

By contrast, in contemporary rhetorical studies, voluntarism and determinism are practically coeval, equally permissible for researchers to invoke. Just ask Richard Cherwitz, with his insistence that, while there are, of course, alternative perspectives—such as relativism and existentialism—for the rhetorical scholar to adopt, all of these are still compatible. It’s as if they’re only alternative lenses upon the self-same world (where, or so one imagines, phlogiston and oxygen might be able collaboratively to explain combustion).

But this difficult contemporaneity means that we are confronted with a hermeneutic task of our own. Over there, in Kuhnian normal science, researchers can resort to concepts such as punctuated equilibrium to capture the logical form underlying “development.” For while it’s true that normal-scientific paradigms are separated by chronology, what’s more important is that they are separated by difference, by the incompatibility that makes their juxtaposition worthwhile.

Over here, though, in contemporary rhetorical studies, it’s all equilibrium and no punctuation, or at least seemingly so. Our own interpretive problem, therefore, includes recovering the missing separations, reclaiming the forgotten boundaries between rhetorical-theoretical perspectives. And since mere chronology is even less relevant for rhetorical studies than for normal science, the starting point is to acknowledge that different rhetorical paradigms do, after all, bespeak different ontologies. These alternative realities are so very much separated, so clearly punctuated by their radical incommensurability, that it would be quite the distortion to speak of them as belonging to one and the same world, or landscape, or rhetorical-theoretical tableau.

Now, one might assume that the rhetorical scholars of today, with their recourse to approaches like actor-network theory, object-oriented ontology, and so on, must already have begun contemplating the incommensurability among para-
digms. They must already have started noticing the distinc-
tions that would re-punctuate, re-differentiate, re-heterogenize
the rhetorical-theoretical tableau. But exactly the opposite has
been happening, with even the most forward-looking of proj-
ects tending to contribute yet more elisions through which to
characterize the singularly unworkable world. That’s apparently
the case for Thomas Rickert’s *Ambient Rhetoric* (2013), which,
in addition to arguing that there’s just the one reality for rheto-
ric to be grounded in, also lapses into what would seem to be a
misreading, a misprision of what we’ve earlier, borrowing from
Annemarie Mol, learned to call “perspectivalism.”

To illustrate, we’ll read just enough from Rickert to show
that the author must have forgotten that alternative paradigms
are not, in fact, reducible to alternative lenses on a single real-
ity. They are not, in other words, dismissible as the “many gazes
and glances,” all directed at a state of affairs that’s everywhere
the same (Mol, “Ontological Politics,” 76). To the contrary, they
are ontological (not purely epistemological) interventions, each
of them capable of unleashing its own objects, its own inter-
ferences, and its own possibilities for development. The disap-
pointment, then, is that Rickert contends with perspectivalism
by trivializing it:

There is no “my” way and “your” way of seeing the
world, no epistemological windows on a (stable,
objective) world “out there” that in turn substantiates
cultural relativisms. Rather, world is already implica-
ted, and hence it both generates and participates
in who we are. Worldviews, then, as ways of seeing
an already preexistent world, are not originary but
derive from this more fundamental weddedness to
world. (xvi)

So, yes, it’s hearteningly monogamous of Rickert to be over
here, deploying his perspectival (existentialist, phenomenol-
ogist, and object-oriented) resources in just such a manner
as to consolidate the one rhetorical world. At the same time,
it’s equally monogamous for other sorts of researchers to be
over there, someplace else, deploying their own perspectival
resources, consolidating a different rhetorical world to which we’re fundamentally wedded, anyway.

To be sure, we might still be enamored with the prospect of arriving at an ambient rhetoric. If so, then all we really need to reject is the notion that it’s desirable for there to be this singular environment for rhetoric’s perambulations, this cohesive ecology with a nice big auditorium in the middle—a mead hall where the many heralds may gather to be heard, as in Michel Callon’s (1986) turn of phrase, speaking in unison. Rickert (with his presumption that weddedness-to-world comes first, that situated viewpoint comes second) might not hear himself in that famous character from the short story, that curiously utopian figure who claims to be “not even from a place, just from near a place” (O’Connor 188). But rhetorical theorists do have to be from somewhere, and (to judge from those Graeco-Germanic intonations) Rickert must be from the paradigm that we’ll later identify as the existential-transversal landscape of rhetorical agency. It’s not, come to think of it, so bad a perspective to be from, not if you’d like to keep company with the specifically human actor. But it isn’t the only environment accessible from within contemporary rhetorical scholarship—nor is it, not by a long chalk, the only auditorium where the many theoretical voices might gather as one.

Still, we should notice that, when it comes to Rickert’s own stance on rhetorical functionality, the operative word is “preparatory” (269). It’s to propose that, while there might not really be any ambient rhetoric just yet, we can still do our best to help bring it into being. In that case, if we’re at all interested in trailing just such an ambient rhetoric, we should probably say the whole enterprise seems prematurely prospective, contingent for now upon the taxing (not even preparatory, but, as it were, pre-preparatory) work necessary to clear the way.

So how, under such circumstances, might rhetorical theory (writing an internally heterogeneous sentence about rhetorical agency) begin to establish not even a preparatory, but simply a pre-preparatory clearing for the consideration of (a) voluntarism, and (b) determinism, and (c) both of these together? The answer isn’t that we should look around for a bigger-and-better code script, a template anticipatory enough for
everything. Instead, it’s that we should visit, and learn to take equally seriously, the four conceptual landscapes where rhetorical agency is already being manufactured, regardless that the (Kuhnian) hermeneutic key in force over here might differ radically from the one in force over there.

If we concentrate on dominant terms (rather than on proprietary critical constructs or arbitrary philosophical preferences) we can start to see that, of the four main rhetorical-theoretical realities we’re to visit, each will involve a different orientation to the problem of voluntarism-and-determinism. The social-structural landscape, grounded in the subjective, will be clearly deterministic, whereas the material-semiotic landscape, grounded in the material-and-relational, will be confusedly so. By contrast, the existential-transversal landscape, grounded in the transcendent, will be strikingly voluntaristic, even in comparison to the rhetorical-humanistic landscape, which is grounded in the conventional. In this case, it’ll be the former that knows where it stands, the latter, not so much.

But our project becomes that of traveling and documenting, of reporting on what each of the four ontologies can tell us about the inconsistent constitution of rhetoric’s agency. Our discoveries might, in time, pre-prepare subsequent researchers to see that rhetoricity does involve not only the subjectivity, conventionality, and materiality that continually constitute things as they are, but also the transcendence that continually makes things otherwise. And, in that case, our hypothetical eavesdropper might begin to hear, out of both sides of her headset, that the productivity of rhetorical transaction is indeed such as to conduce to genuine social change, regardless that there’s rhetorical determinism, and regardless that there’s rhetorical voluntarism as well.

Since there’s no time like the present for packing, we’ll shift to a chapter on selecting some theoretical-and-practical equipment to keep our travailing light. In subsequent chapters, the third through the sixth (and toting our knapsack’s worth of tackle), we’ll journey to this, that, the other, and the next of the four landscapes of rhetorical agency. At the end, in Chapter 7, we’ll reflect on the prospects, the options for conceptualizing
rhetoric as somehow capable of making things otherwise than they are.