



## Twentieth-Century Rhetorics and Rhetoricians: Critical Studies and Sources

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**Michael G. Moran and Michelle Ballif (Eds.)**

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Students and scholars with an interest in contemporary rhetorical studies often question where they might seek an initial introduction to the writings of unfamiliar but important figures. This book endeavors to provide such an introduction to forty key thinkers in the field of rhetoric, with a particular emphasis on composition studies and rhetorical studies as conceived by American departments of English. The focus on issues relevant to rhetoric within the discipline of English turns this volume toward many figures who may be unfamiliar to most students and scholars in Communication. On the other hand, many figures of great importance to Communication during the past century, such as Kenneth Burke, Jurgen Habermas, I. A Richards, and Richard Weaver, are well introduced by the contributors.

The forty rhetoricians introduced in this encyclopedia are organized alphabetically, each with a distinct chapter and unique contributor. Each chapter begins with a brief biographical sketch, followed by an introduction to their major theories and works. At the end of each chapter is a partial list of major primary works, followed by a short list of suggested secondary readings. Each chapter is typically less than fifteen pages, usually well-written, and in most cases relatively easy to grasp without prior introduction to the rhetorician being discussed. While it covers most of the major figures of the twentieth-century rhetorical tradition, this volume has a particular strength in its discussions of critical, postmodern, and poststructural thinkers such as Helene Cixous, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Ernesto Grassi, and Jean-Francois Lyotard.

For scholars in Communication Studies, especially those steeped in the American rhetorical tradition within that discipline, this book's greatest value may lie in its ability to present many of these figures not only coherently but also with enough depth and flavor to retain some of the power of their original works. With over forty contributors, some of whom are well known within American Communication Studies, this book's overall focus on English and Composition rarely undermines its utility to students and scholars in the field of Communication. Even in those chapters that seem most strictly focused on issues related to composition, there is much for a student or teacher of communication to consider about the practices within our discipline.

As Omar Swartz has noted, questions of pedagogy are more central concerns to rhetorical studies in the discipline of English than in the discipline of Communication Studies.<sup>1</sup> As such, the rhetorical approaches to pedagogy (particularly basic-course pedagogy) discussed in some of these chapters could serve rhetoricians within Communication that are concerned with the dominance of lock-step and science-driven models of education and oratory. Combining the writings about rhetorical pedagogy and composition studies with works more commonly associated with rhetorical criticism and rhetorical theory may

simultaneously give this text a sense of disjunction while displaying the uncomfortable tension between rhetorical theory and pedagogy within Communication Studies that Swartz points out.

From this reviewer's vantage point, particularly strong chapters include Cynthia Haynes's discussion of Derrida, Luanne Frank's explanation of Foucault, Susan Jarrett's (re)formulation of Habermas, and Stephen Browne's introduction to Richards. Given my own novice status in regard to some of the figures central to composition studies, it is much harder to assess the accuracy or representativeness of the views expressed by the contributors for some chapters. However, I can attest to the value of these chapters to my own constant attempts to reconsider how rhetoric, oratory, and argumentation might be taught from a perspective that does not assume a single univocal way of speaking or learning.

For all its value, however, this volume does bear two considerable drawbacks. The first perhaps is merely a question of expectations, but when the subtitle of this text promises "Critical Studies and Sources," I feel justified in pointing out that by and large what is missing from this volume is the critical stance. The explanation of many of these thinkers is generally much stronger than I have encountered elsewhere; however, the brevity and breadth of each chapter, in seeking to introduce the reader to a figure, has left no space for critical consideration of that figure.

Second, the encyclopedic and biographical approach that predominates this text is not itself without certain assumptions about the structure of knowledge, the status of the author, and the role of the reader. While in itself this structure may not be objectionable, it does strike this reviewer as odd that the uniform attention to biography would be laid over top of a discussion of Foucault's contributions to rhetorical theory, when it was the writings that bear the sign "Michel Foucault" that asked "What does it matter who is speaking?"<sup>2</sup> Of course, one cannot expect that an encyclopedic volume relinquish its alphabetical organization just because it contains an entry on Derrida, but it does seem that the uniform attention to biography in these chapters has undermined the possibility of scholars introducing thoughts under the sign of a name rather than figures or people. For many thinkers who might already seek to psychologize, such as Kenneth Burke, this seems quite appropriate, while for others who would eschew such a style of writing, this seems quite odd.

This book intends to be an encyclopedic introduction for forty key thinkers in the last hundred years of American rhetorical studies, and it achieves this goal quite well. While it is difficult to conceive of a course in a department of Communication that might require students to read this text, I certainly can imagine select chapters being incorporated into reading packets. Providing a student with a chapter on a figure from this text as well as with primary text by that figure might work as a fruitful way of introducing and then exploring that figure's work. As a reference volume, this text might serve students in English and Communication Studies who are looking for short introductions to unfamiliar figures. For scholars setting out into unfamiliar territory, the chapters here would certainly be acceptable starting points from which to gain an initial orientation toward a thinker's primary works. This book would also be an excellent way for scholars in Communication Studies to introduce themselves to some of the useful insights and issues currently resonating in English Composition and Rhetoric.

The editors have done a commendable job of identifying forty critical scholars and have amassed some of the best brief introductions to how these thinkers approach the study of rhetoric.

### Notes

1. Omar Swartz, "Interdisciplinary and Pedagogical Implications of Rhetorical Theory," *Communication Studies* 46 (1995): 130-139.
2. Of course, it was not even Foucault who was the "author" of this line, either.

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