



On Objectivity and Politics in Rhetoric

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Like stories in the naked city, there are as many motives for discussing the mix of politics and the life of the mind as there are people engaged in either. People frequently mix their political motives like bad metaphors in ugly, confusing ways. Like lemmings who know not what they do as they cast dice for His clothing, some of us follow mentors we love in a plunge from the cliff that we know leads to unseemly self-contradiction. Thus, I follow Edwin Black (Black, 2000).

Why are we here? A guest editor wanted to create a Byzantine counter-political politics. Infected with the politics of two major lobbying organizations, the American Council of Trustees and Alumni and the National Association of Scholars, Jim A. Kuypers joined a minority of disgruntled rhetorical scholars in an effort to import the culture wars from the field of English into communication studies (Kuypers, 2000). Emily Eakin, a columnist for the New York Times, is the problem:

To a small but powerful faction of disgruntled Americans, I could be a symbol of much that is wrong with higher education. I graduated not so long ago from a university filled with world-renowned experts on Shakespeare, Milton and the ancient Greeks. But I never attended their classes. I didn't have to. They weren't required.

I met my degree requirements by taking "Feminist Literary Criticisms" and "Women and the Avant-Garde," as well as two courses on Beckett and Nabokov. For my thesis, I wrote on novels by Marguerite Duras, Milan Kundera and Toni Morrison, all of them published within the last 30 years. I graduated without having read for credit "The Odyssey," "Paradise Lost," a single play by Shakespeare or a single novel by Jane Austen, George Eliot or Henry James. To groups like the American Council of Trustees and Alumni and the National Association of Scholars, I am an object lesson in miseducation. My college career is precisely the kind of scandal they have vowed to eradicate (Eakin, 2001).

We have never read much Shakespeare in the study of rhetoric and communication, so the issues are not quite the same. Here, the problem is that our graduates no longer must read the great speeches, nor must they read the boring, endlessly repetitive textbooks that once passed for rhetorical theory (Agricola, Quintilian, Wilson, Blair, Whateley, and the lot). Kenneth Burke is now more important than Aristotle is, and he is barely cold in his grave. You are only half-educated if you have not familiarized yourself with discourse theory produced in Europe since World War II (and likely joined in a chorus of universal rejection of its articulation). The study of public address looks for pattern and meaning to permit the study of multiple texts and textual fragments, whereas in the past it looked for such qualities as eloquence in single, apparently finished texts. The purpose of rhetorical study is now social and cultural criticism, and the dominant perspective is performative, emphasizing that justice, freedom, and life itself are as they do.

Academics treat academic problems according to principles of academic politics. The American right wing, however, does not know how to conduct itself without a bogeyman under the bed, someone to blame for the sorry condition of the political economy. This has been so since the days of tail gunner Joe McCarthy and the House Un-American Activities Committee. In the present climate, there is a convergence of everyday politics and academic politics because the radical right has successfully defined the bogeyman as "the

liberal.” A liberal lies beneath every problem, and since the success of the Reagan Revolution, the only rock left for liberals to hide under is the American college or university. The convergence of conservative views of education and of practical politics produced a “postmodern word list” that allows the true believer to know the enemy by the words she uses. The List, created by the National Association of Scholars, includes terms such as AIDS, Feminism, Gay, Gendered, Historicism, Ideology, Marginalized, Oppression, Racism, Slavery, Structuralism, TV, and Whiteness (Eakin, 2001). At least since Lynne Cheney’s tenure as head of the National Endowment of the Humanities, to speak these terms marks one as a bogeyman, more dangerous than assault rifles to our heritage and to our children.

Why is Edwin Black here? From Kuypers’ perspective, Black provides some intellectual integrity for a retro practice that contradicts itself by creating a politics that pretends to be against politics. Black also provides trajectory for a scholarship that, without him, would be without destination. (That is, Black directs intellectual inquiry toward the proper role of “the critic” in academe. By contrast, Kuypers’ plaint leads to a simple judgment about the acceptability of “conservatives” who desire one day to have an intellectual impulse.)

When I worked at the University of Wisconsin, Edwin Black was my role model, my friend, and my mentor. Whatever opinions others have of him (and I have no reason to think that they are different from my own), his intellectual integrity is beyond question. His research is careful and programmatic almost to a fault. He found a sterile practice in his 1950 Ph. D. dissertation at Cornell University, a practice that went by the name “Neo-Aristotelian,” but which was informed by shallow and incomplete readings of Aristotle. Working in both English and Communication Departments, Black spent fifteen years crafting the book *Rhetorical Criticism: A Study in Method* (Black, 1965). Although it did not survive in print as long as it deserved, the book wrought a revolution in communication studies. Rhetoricians no longer practiced their art in the same way. The University of Wisconsin press re-issued the book thirteen years later, and Black modestly noticed its effects:

Even now, dead or alive, this book is certain to affect different readers in different ways, but it cannot recapitulate its original impact because the methods by which rhetorical criticism is practiced have changed since 1965. There is less uniformity in the techniques of rhetorical criticism and in the sorts of subjects deemed appropriate to it, less agreement on its proper role or its ideal condition, more contention, more experiment, more confusion, more vitality. For good or ill, this book has been involved in some of these changes and so it represents now what it could not have represented in its first printing: an episode in the modern history of its own subject (Black, 1978, pp. ix-x).

Though never a Luddite, Black has always been the enemy of science. Of course, he is not opposed to ways of thinking that lead to putting men on the moon or to successful brain surgery. But he proactively practices the politics of anti-science, a quality he exhibits with hustings-like invective in this most recent statement: “No one, to my knowledge, has represented criticism as scientific. At most (or least?), it has been characterized as ‘pre-scientific’—a condescending representation that assumes, quite gratuitously, that human mental activity is a pyramidal hierarchy with something called ‘science’ hovering halolike above its apex and a grotesquely conceived ‘criticism’ buried somewhere in its nether region.” (Black, 2000) That is, Black is opposed to the idea that objectivity is the absolute standard of knowledge, and that what we know on our own, of our own thinking, is suspect because of its subjectivity. Black celebrates subjectivity, here as he did consistently in all of his work since 1950 (see especially Black, 1978, pp. x-xv). If new-right arguments could seduce him into believing that new styles of rhetorical criticism are political in the way of “two-culture” academic politics (Snow, 1959), however, he might argue for disinterestedness, a kind of objectivity about which he could be enthusiastic even at the risk of complicity with Kuypers’ retro version of practical, everyday politics (cf., Frye, 1957, pp. 3-29).

Now I can get excited, because the way we articulate memories of our collective mission as scholars and writers will determine the *raison d’être* of our intellectual practice. Why do we study what we study? Two Terms are in play, “critic,” and “rhetorician.” Either may be an object-noun, either may be an adjective delimiting the object. To say “I am a rhetorical critic” puts one in the company of critics, who are yet distinct because not all of them deal with rhetoric. To say “I am a critical rhetorician” puts one in the company of rhetoricians, who are yet distinct because not all of them practice critical methods. The literary

scholar is completely committed to the idea of form and genre in discourse. She subscribes to an ideology that presents discourse as “naturally and necessarily” divided into poems, plays, novels, orations, etc. The great problem from this angle is to define “rhetoric” in such a way as to distinguish it from poetry, for instance, and from all other forms and genres of discourse (see Bryant, 1973). You cannot be too narrow in your conception of “rhetoric” without diminishing the importance of your subject, and you cannot be too broad in your conception of “rhetoric” without saying that *everything* is “rhetoric,” thereby undercutting the logic of criticism. By contrast, the rhetorician is completely committed to the idea that people *perform* discourse in everyday life. She subscribes to an ideology that presents discourse as “naturally and necessarily” (as)signing human beings to ritual narratives, expressions, articulations, and arguments that result both in “success” operating within a closed system of communication, and in reproduction (constitution) of the State. The great problem from this angle is to define “criticism” in such a way as to distinguish rhetorical scholarship from the bellow of the politician and the rap of the used car salesperson (Condit, 1990, pp. 339-43). You cannot give up entirely on the tradition of rhetorical criticism without losing the method that distinguishes scholarship; but you cannot surrender entirely to traditional methods without losing an accurate description of the power of rhetoric to make things come true, whether the “coming true” is one’s dream of a successful family, one’s nightmare of an allegedly-reformed State being reproduced with social injustice in tact, or one’s theory of “criticism” as the regulative ideal of an academic practice.

In this context, two troubling passages in Black’s editorial “On Objectivity and Politics in Criticism” require response. As my own title indicates, I believe that Black smuggles a politics into his statement against politics by suggesting that we identify ourselves as critics and not as rhetoricians. A reading of rhetorical criticism, as practiced in the middle part of the last century, funded Black’s dissertation, his book, and the second edition of the book. “Criticism is that which critics do,” he said, and he backed up that claim with research impressive both for its breadth and for its depth of understanding (Black, 1978, p. 4). As any reading of the professional journals since 1975 would indicate, the practice of rhetorical critics has changed dramatically – indeed, that change prompts Kuypers’ complaints. That which critics do today is proactive, openly political in its acknowledgment of its bias and its agenda to produce practical theories of culture and of social relations (including political relations). Black’s habit is to refer to critical practice by describing the *persona* of “the critic,” as in this passage where he has just finished an elaborate analogy between criticizing and judging:

Of course, the analogy between the critic and the courtroom judge can be taken only so far. A critic’s being fair in criticism is not wholly the same as a judge’s being fair in a courtroom. Conventional procedures of law prescribe to a considerable extent the claims and counter-claims to which a judge is obliged to attend in order to be fair. Such a prescriptive order is not available to the critic. The critic’s procedures are, when at their best, original; they grow *ad hoc* from the critic’s engagement with the artifact. And because the critic has to generate not only a judgment of the artifact, but also the procedure by which the judgment was reached--because, in short, the critic’s responsibilities are legislative as well as judicial--the critic may have to be subjective more often than the judge in the court. That is because critics, unlike judges, cannot lay responsibility for their judgments on any code for which the critics themselves are not individually responsible. (Black, 2000)

You can see ten repetitions of the phrase “the critic” (including slight variants) in one seven-sentence summary paragraph. Each usage prescribes an appropriate state of mind, belief, or action, or it condemns the inappropriate. The usage, of course, can report what a scholarly researcher discovers in seeking out “that which critics do”; but, troublingly, it can also mark a familiar political rhetoric used to generate those beliefs about what is “necessary and natural” to reproduce the political conditions of one generation in the symbolic environment of the next generation. Black could be interpellating “the critic.”

Not to be confused with *interpolation*, the mathematical manipulation learned in high school algebra, *interpellation* comes from the French root *j’apell*, “I call you out.” As in most romance languages, you express “What is your name?” as “How are you called (out in a crowd)?” *Interpellation* is close to Kenneth Burke’s use of the Terms *name* and *naming* (Burke, 1959, pp. 3-7 and ff). You can find it easily as a common feature of all political rhetoric, but one usually associates *Interpellation* with Louis Althusser’s explanation of the reproduction of ideologies (Althusser, 1971, pp. 127-186). The theory is that much of your personality, maybe all of it, is a result of your having been “called into Being” by a complex of

discourses. It begins at birth: Your parents did not want you, the special and particular person that you are. They wanted “a baby.” Before birth, however, they began to make a discursive picture of this “baby,” choosing names for it, outfitting a room for it, planning for its education, planning what games to teach it (baseball, tennis, chess), and planning for it all manner of other cultural activities. Most of these *namings* (*interpellations*) are decisively influential upon the life of a child; but the child has no say in them, and when the time comes that the interpellations might be resisted, the child is put in a one-down position (or even two-, three-, four-down, or more) of having at the same time to resist the mother, the father, the church, the state -- in a word *the tradition* that has always already *named* him or her. So, for instance, the difference between *Jacques* and *Jacqueline*, the mere sign you decide upon when you know the sex of your child, is far more than a grammatically correct ending. That slight difference of grammar carries with it the corpus of all gender differences, most of them purely political. As Parmenides wrote, human beings forever have gone “On the right boys; on the left girls” into virtually different worlds. (From *Fragments On Nature* in Fieser, 1996)

In Black’s world, scientists go right and critics go left. So long as he sticks to his great liberating principle that politics and criticism are hopelessly entwined, I see no problem arising from exposing the particular strategy used to create the next generation of critics. Here is the Edwin Black I would follow over a cliff:

Certainly there is nothing wrong with a critic’s having political convictions. It is unavoidable. Only an idiot is without political convictions--in rare cases, maybe a holy idiot, but an idiot all the same. The very term, “idiot” is from the Greek word for “non-political person.” We do not want to read rhetorical criticism written by an idiot, which really means that we do not want to read rhetorical criticism that has no political dimension to it. It may be possible to write apolitical but still luminous criticism of pure music or of nonrepresentational painting, but it is hard to imagine apolitical rhetorical criticism that is not desiccated. So, yes, rhetorical criticism is likely to have a political dimension and it ought to (Black, 2000).

But when he goes on to say, “The inhibiting complication is that although the critic’s political convictions may merit respect, they are not necessarily going to be any more interesting or intelligent or original than the general run of political convictions” (Black, 2000), I look for a last-minute hand-hold to keep me from the fatal leap. In this moment of retreat, Black is saying that “the critic” he interpellates learns nothing in the process of criticizing; or, more ominously, that what “the critic” learns has no bearing on politics.

As Northrop Frye tells the story (Frye, 1957), we may have invented all of criticism in a pique, and then preserved its traditions exactly as Black preserves “the critic.” The Pablo Casals, The Master who can Act in the world, does Act. He creates Art. Those of us not so gifted write criticism instead. Why and for whom do we write? We write to celebrate and to appreciate, and to enable others to celebrate and to appreciate. We also write to expose and to rebuke, and to enable others to justify staying at home watching television tonight instead of buying tickets to the concert. Over time, criticism becomes itself an art form, and it becomes proper to refer to Kenneth Burke with the appellation Master. We write for each other, in other words, and our *raison d’etre* is our product, a performance. We set this up by pretending to have greater knowledge than our readers, or more good taste, or more experience in consuming the finer things in life. Historical dictionaries, notably the Oxford English Dictionary, show that increments of meaning of the Term “criticism” are rhythmic, occurring at the turn of the 18th, 20th, and now the 21st centuries. Each increment begins with an oxymoron, the claim that the ancient Greeks were masters of an Art of criticism that they practiced, but about which they never wrote. (If it does not quack, why would you want to call it a duck?) As I write this paragraph, I receive in the mail a complimentary copy of the 2000 edition of T. S. Dorsch’s *Classical Literary Criticism* (Dorsch, Aristotle, Horace and Longinus, 1965). It consists of selections from Plato, Aristotle, Horace, and Longinus, all of which argue about the status of things as Art or non-Art, but say not a word about “criticism.” At least The Party of “The Critic” must have its story straight, for I know nowhere else in the Arts and Sciences where a 35-year-old set of truncated translations have attracted so little attention that they can remain “textbook standard.”

The politics of The Party of “The Critic” are objectionable on two grounds. First, the politics plays uncritically upon the thickness of time. Secondly, the politics survives because of its premeditated silence.

Time is **Thick** with reference to the experience of those who measure it. At any one moment, people of all

ages populate the world. Those who are old enough recall the Vietnam War as a lived experience have buried their sources of information about that war so deeply in the subconscious that they are innumerable. Those born after the war, although they are inundated with data concerning it, are actually limited to the narratives they can keep in mind from books they studied in school, from conversations with elders, and from all the other sources of extended lived experience. Those yet to be born, and those so long dead that their voices are beyond even extended lived experience, share silence. (Discourse attempts to compensate for their silence by preserving histories for the dead and fantasies for the yet to be born.) Politically, the thickness of time matters because elders construct cultural and social formations to prolong the power they hold over the younger by virtue of the maturation process. Grown people are larger than growing people are, in other words, and in that power of influence, intimidation, and perhaps terror they hold the younger in conditions of bondage ranging from respectful awe to cowering abjection. “The Critic” is in one moment a child, uneducated, called out from the crowd and instructed in the technology of an academic practice. In the next moment, the same child, now grown, calls out “the critics” of a subsequent generation. The message is not constant, however. Translation difficulties account for some of the deviation, as in the parlor game where people whisper a sentence to each other, one at a time, and giggle at the variation between the original message and what the last person to receive it repeats. The “old time religion” argument is of greater interest in this context.

An Appalachian bluegrass gospel song rings out from my grandfather’s porch: “Give me that old time religion, give me that old time religion, give me that old time religion; it was good enough for grandpa, and it’s good enough for me.” People have a tendency to prefer, and to teach, both **what** they learned and **the way** they learned it – that is how we get canons and traditions. (Save me from arguments that something intrinsic to canon particulars justifies the elevation of preferences until we agree on particulars to dissect.) Black’s “the critic” learned the gentlemanly ways of Herbert Wichelns and, drawing on Wichelns’ extensive connections to the extended lived experience of Cornell literati, the “criticism” of heirs to Matthew Arnold, including, of course, the constructed history of criticism that implicates Aristotle and the ancient Greeks. This politics consists of being and staying above the fray of “interests,” whatever those “interests” may be. Whether or not you agree with Black’s position within these politics, nothing is wrong with it **for its time**. Time changes, however. Marxism is not the specter of Bolshevism; Stalin is not directing pogroms in Russia; and no one I know of practices “politicized criticism” today. Black never had the same interest as his mentors and heroes in preserving the position and privilege of an aristocracy dutifully protecting the vestiges of *haute culture* from barbarians at the gate. As he practices the academic politics of interpellating “the critic” of the next generation, in other words, nothing remains of the context that once justified maintaining the appearance of an apolitical academic practice. Today, the “interests” of academic politics have to do with the survival of the planet, not with the fortunes of this or that group of power brokers. Of necessity, because the times require it, “the critic” younger scholars would interpellate is not an innocent bystander. He is a performer, a rhetorician. His speech acts are performative, constituting action in their very utterance (DeLuca, 1999).

No one wants to read criticism anymore. Perhaps, insofar as Frye was right to believe that critics write as artists for themselves, no one ever wanted to read criticism except to check out the competition. People, however, do want to read books, essays, cereal boxes, anything that can help them make sense of the cacophony that is postmodernity. The great irony of modernity is that it worked. Science in fact gathered more and more data until our brains (and their extensions) bulge with the product of what writers once called “the knowledge explosion.” But that term is a misnomer. Technology has produced a **data explosion**. Data do not become knowledge until people understand it. I feel like a child groping for understanding, understanding that will result in nothing more difficult than a **name**, a **Term** that captures a meaning for me (and perhaps for others). It might be a wrong Term, or a temporary Term, or a partial Term, but it will signal understanding of data that I did not have before I happened upon it. All scholars are in my position, I think. The next step in wherever a research project leads is always the choice of the next Term, the next signified concept, to key into the hard drive. Because word choice has forever been the business of rhetoricians, all scholars are rhetoricians in this most basic sense, even if we rhetoricians do not succeed in pushing the envelope past invention into disposition, style, memory, and ultimately delivery.

From one perspective, that which is most frequently adopted by practicing scientists, it does not matter what Term you choose to designate the Object under investigation. The bigger part of “objectivity” is commitment to the independence of Things from the Terms used to sign them. If all you desire is data, nothing is wrong with this belief. If you want knowledge, however, you must become “the critic” as well as “the rhetorician.” Critics discover nuances amongst apparently interchangeable vocabularies of *disposable*

Terms. (That is, if two or more people cannot use Word 1 in an expression to come upon an agreed meaning, they try Word 2, then Word 3, etc., until they come upon Word Right, which then becomes *indisposable* for all who participated in the communication event that led to understanding.) Nuances matter because they capture the relations of data with all the stages of lived experience in a human community. You do not have to be a brain surgeon to gain this knowledge, although, curiously, some brain surgeons make excellent rhetoricians (Damasio, 1999). Rhetoric has never been a particularly difficult subject. You need first a vocabulary large enough to have more than one Term to designate each data set under investigation. You need knowledge of cultural context broad enough to know how controversial, and how intense, usages are likely to be when the “interests” of different generations clash. As you grow old, as you wear the cuffs of your trousers rolled, you must have the wisdom (*phronesis*) to recognize the possible superiority of younger, powerless perspectives that barely acknowledge history, never mind respect it. Before you rush to articulate and to defend the old ways you were taught, you need to be ready for new interpellations, new platforms, new ideas, new Terms, new Parties, new possibilities, new politics.

That one should not take up the topics of sex, religion, and politics in polite conversation (or in the classroom) is a vestige of the same culture that produced the Cornell vision of “criticism.” Such discussion would be “ungentlemanly” (Burn, 1968). It has been more than a century since the politics of the day justified this restriction on rhetoric, but just a taste of it survives in Black’s attitude toward the politics he desires “the critic” to display:

I think that unless the critic has something fresh and knowledgeable to say, the critic should just shut up about politics. If the critic does that, then the political convictions of the critic will be presuppositional. That is, the critic will observe, judge and argue *from* some political convictions rather than *to* them. The critic’s politics will be implicit rather than explicit. Even so, the contours of the critic’s political convictions will be clear enough from the criticism. (Black, 2000)

So, Black confesses to an academic politics of deception, dissimulation, and fundamental dishonesty. When interpellating “the critic” and “criticism,” the first thing a rhetorician should do is to identify her political orientation. Her syllabus should contain a paragraph describing the trajectory of her course. Her book should have a Chapter that aligns her politics with that politics practiced in the workaday world by political parties competing for control of the State. She must be fair, describing the politics of those who disagree with her in a light that leans more toward portraiture than caricature. I make these claims from the sure conviction that you cannot organize data into useful knowledge if you start with the intention to be slippery, evasive, “implicit rather than explicit.” I got this sure conviction from my mentor, Edwin Black, who said in the 1960’s what he now repeats:

The only instrument of good criticism is the critic. It is not any external perspective or procedure or ideology, but only the convictions, values, and learning of the critic, only the observational and interpretive powers of the critic. That is why criticism, notwithstanding its obligation to be objective at crucial moments, is yet deeply subjective. The method of rhetorical criticism is the critic. (Black, 2000)

“The critic” is broken who disrespects his audience, hides from them, and leaves them guessing as to his fundamental political commitments. “The critic” needs fixing who will not identify her opponents and articulate issues with them in mind, even (if it is Satan you are chasing) preparing space for the Devil himself to respond. If “the critic” Black now sells is still under warranty, I want the address of the manufacturer so that I can order a repair – and perhaps an upgrade so that I will have a proper interface with the software I run on my PC clone laptop.

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