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Embracing the Superficial: Michael Calvin McGee, Rhetoric, and the Postmodern Condition

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On a sultry August evening, 1994, I head from Iowa City to Coralville to attend my first doctoral seminar with Michael Calvin McGee. I had already learned of his declining health, the reason he holds classes in his home. I had heard stories of his unorthodox teaching style. I am not prepared, however, for his unsettling manner of putting students on the spot. "Are you a cloud hopper or a clod hopper?" he roars hoarsely as he greets us in the living room amidst books, mismatched armchairs and the smell of strong coffee. "If you are a cloud hopper, you should try to write your term paper as a clod hopper and vice versa." Befuddled, I struggle to figure out what exactly is my scholarly temperament, only to conclude that I don't really know. Now, nine years later, I believe Michael goaded us with this question to think, perhaps for the first time in our academic lives, about our intellectual and political identities. Goaded and provoking were his most effective pedagogical tactics, and I recall my mentor's question in the moments of intellectual fogginess and occasional disciplinary identity crises.

I single out this scene from my kaleidoscope of McGee memories because the tension between "cloud hopping" and "clod hopping" has marked both the tradition of rhetoric as an academic discipline and our own self-understanding as scholars and teachers. Being an academic rhetorician is not easy on one's psyche, given the uneasy tension between theory and practice throughout rhetoric's history. Most people who received liberal arts education know that being a rhetorician is not quite like being a surgeon or a plumber. As Plato and Aristotle, as well as a host of philosophically inclined folks after them decreed, rhetoric is useful but it does not involve knowledge of things and phenomena that exist outside discourse. 1 A surgeon must know human anatomy, and a plumber must know why the pipes are

clogged. They deal with things and phenomena that are governed by natural laws, not by human laws, traditions, and institutions. For much of its history, rhetoric was seen as a way of enabling people to participate in these distinctly human institutions, either by advocating the status quo or by urging social change. The role of rhetoric, however, was confined, in Aristotle's words, to "discovering all available means of persuasion" ([Rhetoric](#) 1355b2). For much of its history, professors and students of rhetoric focused on "role-playing the part of great speakers at the moment of eloquence" ([McGee](#) 1990, p. 274). They were hopping, so to speak, from one great speaker to the next in order to acquire a robust repertoire of linguistic skills, to be deployed when the occasion was right. In the academy, the inferiority of rhetoric to other, more "substantive" fields, especially natural and social sciences, was assumed, and the distinctions between rhetoric and other verbal arts continuously reinforced. 2

By the mid-sixties, when McGee was a graduate student, academic rhetoricians felt increasingly compelled to redefine their craft in terms of method of analysis rather than the means of persuasion. Influenced by the growing dominance of social sciences, rhetoricians now defended their profession by appealing not to its social usefulness but to its systematic character. Without a set of theoretically respectable methods rhetoric risked losing its footing as a legitimate academic discipline. Reflecting on this shift, McGee argued that a preoccupation with the "method" took away from discourse itself, and made a critic choose between deciphering the hidden "divine" meaning of an otherwise obscure text and revealing hidden messages of "secular exploitation and dominion" (1990, p. 278). Graduate programs in rhetoric now favored familiarity with "the theories of those who write about 'criticism' from any fields of the Academy" (1990, p. 275). To become a successful rhetorician meant to learn the role of a consummate cloud hopper, adroit at substituting one fashionable theory for another.

A turn towards theory and method may have improved the academic status of the discipline and eased rhetoricians' self-doubts, but, as McGee's saw it, the trend also resulted in the devaluing of rhetoric as a form of social action, giving way to what resembled philosophy and literary criticism. Calling for a turn to "critical rhetoric," McGee made it his own project to understand and explain "the nature of the "rhetorical" in human life generally, in and out of the academy" (1990, p. 275). This project, in its various instantiations, was informed by McGee's unconventional approach toward the history of rhetoric (the attitude he called "anagogy" after Hans-Georg Gadamer) and his acute sense of performative, situational character of discourse, both practical and theoretical. Although some might say that Michael embraced postmodern discourse theories with an unwarranted zeal, his unique combination of perspectives on rhetoric allowed him to move beyond the imagined disciplinary dichotomy between theory and practice. He did so by fashioning a performative model of rhetorical theorizing, what he referred to, in his later years of

teaching, as "performative criticism."

"You don't have to argue ontology," McGee used to admonish, meaning that rhetoric does not need justification or grounding outside itself, in the world of the "real." This advice, of course, runs counter to what all good Aristotelians would argue. Superficiality is a charge that rhetoric (and those who speak on its behalf) has had to endure since the times of Plato's Academy and Aristotle's Lyceum. Because these institutions successfully promulgated the notion of language as a medium of representation, rather than a mode of cultural reproduction, rhetoric was divorced from the rituals of public culture through which many of techniques of persuasion had crystallized. McGee's insistence on the materiality of rhetoric [3](#)—on the constitutive force of the superficial—compelled him to search the rhetorical tradition for different paradigms. Rather than seeing an unbroken chain of influence in the intellectual history of rhetoric, McGee pointed out antagonisms that implicated rhetorical theorizing in social and political controversies of different time periods. Over and against theories that equated reason, truth, and reality but aspired to transcend their own historicity, he pitted theories that self-consciously embraced the power of language both to persuade and to call into being. McGee's work on Isocrates and Edmund Burke is a good example of showcasing "rhetorical theories" whose claim to knowledge in no way cancels their claim to power. [4](#)

Although irreverent toward philological and chronological pieties, McGee's anagogical juxtaposition of theories and epochs has yielded some profound insights into the "nature of the rhetorical." One of his favorite comparisons was between pre-modern and postmodern conceptions of society and culture, a comparison that rested on their difference from the Enlightenment, with its valorization of disembodied truth over the process of understanding, writing over speaking, and sciences over the humanities. Pre-modern and postmodern conditions, in contrast, despite their many differences, both value situated understanding, exhibit an oralistic orientation towards performance, and regard the human being—not scientific objectivity—as the measure of all things.

Drawing parallels between "hyperreality" of postmodern simulacra and the narrative mode of reality construction in the ancient world, McGee stressed that cultural reproduction via shared stories and symbols is indeed what makes rhetoric key to the negotiation of the social world both "then" and "now." As he put in one of his "conversations," ancient rhetoric "walked the line between the arts on the one side and the sciences on the other—between stories of the religion and the stories of the practical world that have to be told as we conduct politics and carry on marketplace activities" ([Corbin](#) 1998, 75-76). If the Enlightenment bequeathed us science and its attendant ideology of positivism as ways of dealing with social reality, the postmodern condition invites us not only to question meta-narratives of

modernity, as [Lyotard](#) (1984) has it, but to refocus on the role of rhetoric as an answer to contemporary historical realities.

The so-called postmodern condition, in McGee's reckoning, should not be confused with "postmodernism," the latter representing an intellectual trend rather than a historical-cultural context that we all confront when we get up in the morning. Although postmodernist notions of hyperreality and simulacra resonate with an ancient Greek idea of logos as a leading force (hegemon) in the formation of the social—and thus suggest a shift towards rhetoric as a master term of cultural reflection, many postmodern thinkers' preoccupation with the arcana of interpretation and their fondness for impenetrable writing style often result in the worst kind of cloud hopping. As [McGee](#) wrote in the inaugural issue of ACJ, "the postmodernism that pursues an isolationist policy with regard to other schools and styles of academe—writing primarily for "insiders," preaching to the converted—is distressing. Many writers, who could be teaching instead, are politicking in cabals"(1997). In contrast, "postmodernity keeps attention on the conditions, situations, and circumstances which determine, influence, prompt postmodernism" (1997).

The conditions, situations, and circumstances that McGee points to as signs of postmodernity amount, in his estimation, to a new "ecology" of culture, with which traditional modes of rationality simply cannot cope. Much of what he calls "postmodernism" has expended a lot of effort on showing the inadequacy of old Enlightenment ideas. The problem is that in the name of critique of the Enlightenment many scholars chose to declare victory and go home and thereby abnegated their responsibility as rhetors and citizens. Many postmodernist theses—"the radically de-centered subject," "authors and readers as products of signifying practices," "the precession of simulacra" and so on—acquired an aura of academic pieties to be nurtured and exemplified for their own sake. While he agreed with these theses—and taught them to his students—McGee passionately disagreed with the ivory tower elitism of high priests of postmodernism. "Hyperreality" and "fragmentation of culture" for McGee are contexts in which we as postmodern political subjects must continue our search for community, meaning, and social change.

Because "reality" is in question thanks to the proliferation of mediated representations does not mean we must throw our hands in the air and declare any representation inadequate to advance a collectively shared understanding of social problems and possible solutions to them. [Baudrillard's](#) (1994) lamentations notwithstanding, postmodernity forces us to realize how surface solutions often work most effectively in promoting social change. According to McGee, structural, long-term solutions are doomed not only because they rely on an antiquated

Enlightenment conception of causality, but because they do not work fast enough. Take the issue of homelessness, McGee would say. If deep structural causes of the problem are identified and structural solutions posited, we don't get any closer to solving the issue: "We are so concerned with what causes people to be homeless, and whether or not we would be morally justified in helping these 'lazy, no-good' people, that we forget to treat the symptoms. We forget to give them places to live" (Corbin 1998, p. 88). Any social problem, then, "will not be perceived as a problem until it is made hyperreal—that is, until it is recognized on the television sets and talked about" (1998, p. 89). Nancy Reagan's "Just say no" in response to drug abuse in the United States may seem as shallow as a Nike commercial's "Just do it;" however, both appeal to the values of control and achievement. It would be foolish to discount these appeals as empty slogans, for their power derives not simply from the authority of a spokesperson or the pervasiveness of advertising, but from a regular American's identification with the normative ideals they invoke. In McGee's opinion, the American Left has a chance of becoming a mainstream cultural force only if it gets over its disdain for palliative measures offered by conservatives and instead of looking for structural answers gets to the work of crafting rhetorically attuned diagnoses of contemporary social ills.

A rhetorical alternative to fighting in the streets or changing the infrastructure will necessarily be incremental, culturally specific, and provisional—in short, it will operate on the level of performance rather than on the level of a universally applicable theory. McGee imagined the work of an academic leftist as a series of "little guerilla forays into the rhetoric of liberalism" (Corbin 1998, p. 94), because liberalism is the inescapable cultural context of US American politics. Ideology is not monolithic, it is never "complete" but exists in and through fragments of discourse. A rhetorician's job, therefore, is to put these discursive fragments together in the hope of bringing fragmented audiences into a community at a particular moment in time, to use the momentum created by this temporary identification to bring about change.

McGee did not consider himself a romantic for wanting to "remodel" liberalism. He believed that his alternative was realistic, because rhetoric is a realistic alternative to violence or structural changes in the economy. His approach to ideology critique was different, however, from the bulk of Anglo-American poststructuralist scholarship that shifts the burden of "resistance" to audiences. Although McGee himself pointed out that "text construction" in our hyperreal, fragmented culture occurs in front of television sets and computer screens rather than in editing rooms of media corporations, he did not see this circumstance as an invitation to celebrate the emancipated agency of the reader. While acknowledging the variability of audiences and their reception of mass mediated discourse fragments, McGee still emphasized the work of critical rhetoric as an embodied performance, rather than as a study of diverse audiences' reactions to an "apparently finished discourse."

A professional critic's first job, on this view, is "inventing a text suitable for criticism" by reconstructing it out of fragments of mass mediated culture ([McGee](#) 1990, p. 288). Such a reconstruction, however, will be consequential only insofar as critics mind the rhetoricity of their own performance: "With regard to their own formal writing, they will function as advocates or adversaries of the "the text" who invent, arrange, style, remember, and deliver arguments in favor of particular judgments of salience, attitude, belief, and action" (1990, p. 282).

In a way, McGee's scholarship and pedagogy can be described as a series of efforts at reconstruction and critique of two master "texts," "rhetorical theory" and "liberal ideology." With regard to "rhetorical theory," McGee has had an undeniable impact on the interpretation of the rhetorical tradition by making his students and their students explore rhetoric as a constitutive social force. McGee's reconstructions of "liberalism" have inspired a similarly strong following. However, to attempt a reconstruction of an apparently finished "text" called Michael Calvin McGee, one would need to account for not only published and unpublished essays, but a host of electronic messages and polemics McGee engaged in until the very last day of his life, let alone memories of his lectures and seminars that his students carry around. In the years to come, this unfinished "text" will expand even further, as new generations of thinking people, in and outside of professional academic circles, join the conversation about rhetoric, liberalism, and the future of democracy.

The title of a lesser known [McGee](#) essay, "The Practical Identity of Thought and Its Expression" (1979) aptly summarizes his "materialist" view of rhetoric as well as his own life-long labor of making rhetoric central to the political and intellectual life of his contemporaries. Although he enjoyed soaring into the theoretical stratosphere to converse with the past and present generations of thinkers, his passions and reasons for living the life of the mind were always grounded in the here and now. This, I now understand, is a mark of a consummate rhetorician.

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Endnotes

1. A charge of rhetoric's "lack" of substance carried over from Plato to Aristotle. See [Haskins](#) (2002).
2. See, for example, [Hariman](#) (1999).
3. The materiality of rhetoric is a recurrent leitmotif of McGee's thinking. For a representative statement, see [McGee](#) (1982).
4. Edmund Burke was the focus of [McGee's](#) Ph.D. dissertation (1974). McGee's reflections on Isocrates exist either as published essays (e.g., [1985](#)) or as "back burner" material posted on his website, (f)ragments <http://www.mcgees.net/fragments/essays/back%20burner/isocrate.htm>