

Rethinking the Rhetorical Situation from Within the Thematic of *Différance*

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Critiques bring to the analysis of rhetorical events various assumptions about the nature of symbolic action. Yet almost invariably they share common presuppositions about the constituent elements of the rhetorical situation and the logic that informs the relations between them. Whether theorists and critics adhere to an "old" or a "new" rhetoric, they continue to operate under the assumption that a logic of influence structures the relations between the constituent elements in any particular rhetorical situation. Symbolic action (what has historically been a linguistic text) is almost always understood as an expression that, wittingly or unwittingly, shapes or is shaped by the constituent elements of the situation out of which and for which it is produced. This long-held conception of the rhetorical situation as an exchange of influence defines the text as an object that mediates between subjects (speaker and audience) whose identity is constituted in a terrain different from and external to the particular rhetorical situation. Hence, the rhetorical situation is thought to modify attitudes or induce action on the part of consummate individuals.

I believe a rethinking of the rhetorical situation is called for on two interrelated grounds. One, the understanding of the rhetorical text as a discourse whose meaning is constituted by its relation to either an exigence operative at a particular historical moment or a consciousness anterior to the rhetorical event commits us to a naive notion of influence and blinds us to the discourse's radically historical character. Two, the construal of the rhetorical situation as an event made possible by way of an exchange between consummate individuals, severely limits what we can say about discourse which seeks to persuade: if any symbolic act is no more than an event that links distinct and already constituted subjects, then rhetorical discourse bumps up against the impenetrable and unalterable space of the subject, "a threshold which none of the strategic [responses] manages to cross."¹ That is to say, if we posit the

audience of any rhetorical event as no more than a conglomeration of subjects whose identity is fixed prior to the rhetorical event itself, then we must also admit that those subjects have an essence that cannot be affected by the discourse. Thus, the power of rhetoric is circumscribed: it has the potency to influence an audience, to realign their allegiances, but not to form new identities. Clearly, the traditional concept of the rhetorical situation forces theorists and critics to appeal to a logic that transcends the rhetorical situation itself in order to explain the prior constitution of the subjects participating or implicated in the event. If the identities of the audience are not constituted in and by the rhetorical event, then some retreat to an essentialist theory of the subject is inevitable.² Ultimately, this commits us to a limited conception of the subject and, in turn, to a reductive understanding of the rhetorical situation. In this essay I want to suggest that a re-examination of symbolic action (the text) and the subject (audience) that proceeds from within Jacques Derrida's thematic of *différance* enables us to rethink the rhetorical situation as articulation. Indeed, deconstructive practice enables us to read symbolic action in general and rhetorical discourse in particular as radical possibility.³

Obviously this is not the first attempt to mark a productive relation between the rhetorical analysis of texts and deconstruction. A plethora of theorists and critics, both within and outside the discipline of Rhetoric, have availed themselves to deconstructive practice under the shared conviction that, more than any other theoretical or critical perspective, deconstruction takes the rhetoricity of all texts seriously.⁴ Deconstructive critics decipher all events as strategic impositions: as willed and, therefore, provisional limitations of a potentially unlimited and indeterminate textuality. Typically, Jacques Derrida and his disciples work toward the disclosure of the tropological structure of modes of thinking which, while purporting to be mere "means of expression," affect or infect the meaning produced. Beyond its demystifying function, however, deconstruction has yet to be appropriated in a productive way by critics working in the field of Rhetoric. What still remains to be done—and what this essay seeks to offer—is a reading of the rhetorical situation from within the frame of deconstructive practice in order to specify what can be produced that is useful for the analysis of rhetorical events. This essay will proceed in the following manner: in the first section, I will take up the text as a constituent element of the rhetorical

situation. Here I will delineate what I take to be the productive relation between the rhetorical analysis of discrete symbolic actions and deconstruction. By way of a close reading of Jacques Derrida's thematic of *différance* as it is performed in a number of his essays, and particularly as it is staged in *Glas*,⁵ I will suggest that deconstruction is a way of reading that seeks to come to terms with the way in which the language of any given text signifies the complicated attempt to form a unity out of a division, thereby turning an originary condition of impossibility into a condition of possibility in order to posit its ostensive argument. I will argue that from within the thematic of *différance* the "rhetorical dimension" of the text signifies not only the play of the tropological figures operating on its surface level, but also the (non)originary finessing of a division that produces the meaning of the text as such. That is to say, the "rhetorical dimension" names *both* the means by which an idea or argument is expressed and the initial formative intervention that, in centering a differential situation, makes possible the production of meaning.⁶ In the second section of the essay, I will fix my glance on the audience as a constituent element of the rhetorical situation. Here I will show how a deconstruction of the subject gives rhetorical critics and theorists access to the radical possibilities entailed in rhetorical events: if, as I will argue with Derrida, we conceive audience as the effect of *différance* and not the realization of identities, then our conception of rhetorical events must allow the potential for the displacement and condensation of those provisional human identities. I will recommend that we rethink the rhetorical situation as governed by a logic of articulation rather than influence. Once we take the identity of audience as an effect-structure, we become obliged to read every 'fixed' identity as the provisional and practical outcome of a symbolic engagement between speaker and audience.

I. Situation and Speaker

Twenty years ago Lloyd Bitzer simultaneously opened his seminal essay "The Rhetorical Situation" and inaugurated the journal *Philosophy and Rhetoric* with a series of questions, all of which boil down to one: How are we to define the rhetorical text? Bitzer's answer is widely known and based upon an onto-phenomenological differentiation between instrumental and expressive utterance:

a work of rhetoric is pragmatic; it comes into existence for the sake of something beyond itself; it functions ultimately to produce action or change in the world; it performs some task. In short, rhetoric is a mode of altering reality, not by the direct application of energy to objects, but by the creation of discourse which changes reality through the mediation of thought and action.⁷

"Rhetoric," here, is the name given to those utterances which serve as instruments for adjusting the environment in accordance to the interests of its inhabitants. Of course, absolutely central to Bitzer's definition of rhetoric is the suggestion that rhetorical discourse is a response to, and called into existence by "some specific condition or situation which invites utterance."⁸ In his view rhetorical discourse is an effect structure; its presence is determined by and takes its character from the situation that engenders it. As he puts it, "rhetorical discourse comes into existence in response to a question, a solution in response to a problem." According to Bitzer, the situation is the "necessary condition of rhetorical discourse," and as such it "controls the rhetorical response in the same sense that the question controls the answer and the problem controls the solution": "Not the rhetor and not persuasive intent, but the situation is the source and ground of rhetorical activity—and, I should add, of rhetorical criticism."⁹

In 1973 Richard E. Vatz published "The Myth of the Rhetorical Situation," a gesture which challenged the validity of Bitzer's definition of rhetoric. Vatz indicts, quite correctly, Bitzer's definition of the rhetorical text as an operation that "disengage[s] the 'meaning [that] resides in events,'" and argues, to the contrary, that "statements do not imply 'situational characteristics at all': the statements may ostensibly describe situations, but they actually only inform us as to the phenomenological perspective of the speaker."¹⁰ Vatz brought into the discussion what Bitzer had excluded—the intervention of an intending and interpreting speaker-subject. Citing Chaim Perelman and Murray Edelman, Vatz notes both how "the very choice of what facts or events are relevant is a matter of pure arbitration [on the part of the speaker]" and how the communication of "'situations' is the translation of the chosen information into meaning."¹¹ Hence, for Vatz rhetorical discourse is "an act of creativity . . . an interpretative act," and not something discovered in situations.

As an alternative to conceiving rhetorical discourse as the deter-

mined outcome of a situation, Vatz calls for a reversal of the cause-effect relation between situation and discourse proposed by Bitzer. Since, as Edelman states, "language does not mirror an objective 'reality' but rather creates it by organizing meaningful perceptions abstracted from a complex, bewildering world," rhetoric "is a cause not an effect of meaning. It is antecedent, not subsequent, to a situation's impact."¹² For Vatz, as for Edelman, rhetorical discourse is to be analyzed as an expression of a speaker's intentions and interpretations which bring rhetorical situations into being.

Several essays have since been published that take up the question of the relation between the rhetorical text and the rhetorical situation. Continuing the debate between Bitzer and Vatz, critics have defended, rejected, or modified Bitzer's and Vatz's views of rhetoric and the rhetorical situation. In all cases, however, critics still take as their founding presumption a causal relation between the constituent elements comprising the event as a whole. Either speaker or situation is posited as logically and temporally prior, one or the other is taken as origin.¹³ The present discussion will not try to review this body of arguments; rather it will attempt to turn what appears to be an impasse (does situation or speaker occupy the position of origin?) into a productive contradiction, one that makes it possible for us to rethink rhetoric in a new way. Such task may begin with Vatz's essay which, more than any other, makes visible the contradiction that rules both sides of the debate. As already noted, Vatz's ostensive purpose is to propose an alternative to Bitzer's definition of rhetoric and the rhetorical situation. Whether or not we agree with Vatz's own proposition, we may at least see his essay as a successful counter-statement. Nevertheless, and this is the mark of the double-gesture that inhabits his own writing, even as it questions the validity of Bitzer's central proposition, Vatz's essay simultaneously confirms it. After all, Vatz's statement is a response to Bitzer's essay; Vatz reads "The Rhetorical Situation" as itself a situation with an exigence that invites a response. And yet, is not Vatz's own article an effect of arbitration on the part of a choosing individual? So, then, is Bitzer right or is Vatz right? Is situation or speaker the origin of rhetorical discourse?

It is at this juncture that a deconstructive intervention might prove productive and has, in fact, already been set into operation by Vatz. As I have shown, Vatz inverts the hierarchy between situation and speaker posited by Bitzer. What if, rather than simply choosing sides, we were to suggest with Derrida that by upsetting the hierar-

chy and producing an exchange of properties between situation and speaker, Vatz unwittingly uncovers and undoes the operation responsible for the hierarchization and, thus, displaces both the foundational logic of his own and Bitzer's argument? If both situation and speaker can stand in for cause, "if either cause of effect can occupy the position of origin, then origin is no longer originary; it loses its metaphysical privilege."¹⁴ How, then, are we to account for the production of rhetorical texts? What are we to read rhetoric as the sign of? To answer these questions, I turn to a discussion of *différance* and try to flesh out its implications for the theorization of the rhetorical situation.

Rethinking Speaker and Situation from within the Thematic of Différance

Any serious consideration of the productive interface between rhetorical analysis and Derridean deconstruction must begin by charting the onto-theoretical precepts that inform deconstructive practice. Within the parameters of the present essay, this means thinking through the concept-metaphor *différance* that plays a formidable role both morphologically and historically in the works of Derrida. Derrida's notion of *différance* is rooted in Saussure's *Cours de linguistique generale*. In one of his earliest essays Derrida remarks how, in conceiving language as a system of signs whose identity is the effect of difference and not of essence, Saussure is put in the peculiar position of having to conclude that, contrary to common sense,

in language, there are only differences *without positive terms*. Whether we take the signified or the signifier, language has neither ideas nor sounds that existed before the linguistic system, but only conceptual and phonic differences that have issued from the system. The idea or phonic substance that a sign contains is of less importance than the other signs that surround it.¹⁵

For Derrida, Saussure's text proposes a notion of difference that unwittingly points to a division within as well as between distinct elements in the linguistic system: the play of difference which Saussure saw operating *between* elements and thus constituting the value of any discrete element in the linguistic system is for Derrida always already at work *within* each element. This internal difference, this interval which separates every element from that

which it is not, while "by the same token, divid[ing] the present [element] in itself," is, for Derrida, what lends every element its value.¹⁶ *Différance*, as Derrida names it, marks an originary internal division, a 'fundamental' non-identity which, he tells us in *Positions*,

forbid[s] at any moment, or in any sense, that a simple element be present in and of itself, referring only to itself. Whether in the order of spoken or written discourse, no element can function as a sign without referring to another element which itself is not simply present. This interweaving results in each 'element'—phoneme or grapheme—being constituted on the basis of the trace within it of the other elements of the chain or system. This interweaving, this textile, is the *text* produced only in the transformation of another text. Nothing, neither among the elements nor within the system, is anywhere ever simply present or absent. There are only, everywhere, differences and traces of traces.¹⁷

The sign as "trace-structure," the sign as 'constituted' out of a structural principle of original non-identity or radical alterity, is precisely that which Derrida elsewhere names the "graphematic structure."¹⁸

In a way that will soon become evident, Derrida's *différance* effects a link between deconstruction and the analysis of rhetorical texts by supplying rhetorical critics with a mechanism that enables them to specify more adequately the rhetoricity of a text. For now, it is important to note that the thematic of *différance* is operative throughout Derrida's early as well as late essays. In fact, we could even decide to decipher most of his essays as variations on this theme. For example, we might read Derrida's essay entitled "Différance" in *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs* as something like the logic of *différance* or the questioning of the arche; we might decipher his earlier essay on Rousseau in *Of Grammatology* as the attempt to rename "différance" as "the graphic of the supplement;" we might describe "Signature Event Context" and "Limited Inc." in terms of a reinscription of *différance* as iteration or radical citationality. We might even go so far as to suggest that in every case Derrida's essays re-mark the trace of "the systematic play of differences, of the traces of differences, of the spacing by means of which elements are related to each other" in any given text.¹⁹ In

short, we could take the entire lot of Derrida's essays as an assemblage seeking to play and sometimes even perform the *différance* that structures all texts but which is always covered over in the writing.²⁰

But what about this *différance*? Why should rhetorical critics struggle with this complicated internal division that is said to inhabit all writing, structure all speech, and scandalize all texts? What is so critical about this seemingly critical difference? In his essay "Différance" Derrida provides a possible answer: "*Différance* is what makes the movement of signification possible"²¹ The play of *différance*, as Derrida puts it, is "the possibility of conceptuality, of the conceptual system and process in general:"

What we note as *différance* will thus be the movement of play that "produces" (and not by something that is simply an activity) these differences, these effects of difference. This does not mean that the *différance* which produces differences is before them in a simple and in itself unmodified and indifferent present. *Différance* is the nonfull, nonsimple "origin"; it is the structured and differing origin of differences.²²

To repeat, *différance* makes signification possible. Only to the extent that we are able to differ, as in spatial distinction or relation to an other, and to defer, as in temporalizing or delay, are we able to produce anything. "*Différance*" is, as Derrida puts it, "the formation of form."²³ Here we do well to look a bit closer at an essay in which Derrida provides an extensive structural description of *différance* and then proceeds to discuss at even greater length its enabling power. In "Linguistics and Grammatology" he says,

[*différance*] does not depend on any sensible plenitude, audible or visible, phonic or graphic. It is, on the contrary, the *condition of such a plenitude*. Although it does not exist, although it is never a being-present outside of all plenitude, its possibility is by rights anterior to all that one calls sign . . . concept or operation, motor or sensory. This *différance* is therefore not more sensible than intelligible and it *permits the articulation of signs* among themselves within the same abstract order . . . or between two orders of expression. *It permits the articulation of speech and writing*—in the colloquial sense—as it founds the metaphysical opposition between the sensible and the intelligible, then between signifier and signified, expression and content, etc.²⁴

Derrida's *différance* is, as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak points out, the name for "the lack at the origin that is the condition of thought and experience"; all writing in the narrow sense, like all speech, marks the play of this productive non-identity.²⁵ *Différance*, Derrida writes, is the structural condition which makes it possible for us to perform any act.

For a concrete example of the enabling power of *différance* we can turn briefly to Derrida's *Glas*. In this work Derrida binds Hegel to Genet, Genet to Hegel. In so doing, he constructs two columns of discourse which make reading or decipherment a problem. How are we to read this two-pronged, two-pegged text? As I have already suggested, we can decide to decipher this text as the dramatization of *différance*. Indeed, it seems to me that no other work by Derrida more proficiently stages the play of *différance* than *Glas*. The very typographic form of the text ("if one decides to concentrate on one column the eye is drawn by the other"²⁶) as well as the writing on both sides ("how the seeming exposition in the Hegel section seems upheld yet undone by the unruly Genet column"²⁷) dramatizes the structural power of *différance* by performing it graphically. Briefly said, in *Glas* Derrida transposes the logic of *différance* into the graphic of *différance*: it is the white, what we usually take to be empty, space between the Hegel column and the Genet column that gives rise to the text. The space between the (in)dependent columns marks a differencing zone that, as Derrida puts it in "The Double Session,"

through the re-marking of its semantic void, it in fact begins to signify. It semantic void *signifies*, but it *signifies* spacing and articulation; it has as its meaning the possibility of syntax; it orders the play of meaning.²⁸

Glas performs the vantage point from which it becomes possible to see in a very vivid and concrete way how the value of a symbolic act, like the value of any element in a system, is a function of its place in an economy of *différance*. It is in the middle or the suspense of the two previously unjoined texts that meaning can be said to have been made. In fact we might go so far as to suggest that the blithe proposition in *Glas* is: everything deliberately and unavoidably happens in its crease, in its fold. It is in the structural space between the Hegel column and the Genet column that Derrida's text would play out its 'meanings'. Again, the space between the two (in)dependent texts

deliberately and unavoidably stages the incision, the cut, the introduction of a differencing zone, a structure of *différance* that in being divided makes meaning possible. *Différance* is deliberately performed as the fold, where the border between inside (Hegel or Genet) and outside (Genet or Hegel) becomes undecidable as the text slips erratically from one column to the other. In short, the enabling power of *différance* is expressed or demonstrated in *Glas* as the asymmetrical (non)engagement of Hegel and Genet:

each page is folded dissymmetrically down the middle, for Hegel and Genet can never be identical. The equation is never balanced, reading and writing never coincide, and the page is never quite folded up.²⁹

In shuttling us between the Hegel and the Genet columns, Derrida's *Glas* involves us in the 'active' movement of *différance*. Typographically dramatizing the economy of *différance*, he engages us in the work of a decipherment which produces the suggestion that all activity is made possible only by finessing a divided origin, a *différance*.

Such finessing, Derrida points out, in what might be taken as a metacritical comment in *Glas*, is hardly without interest:

Before attempting an active interpretation, verily a critical displacement (supposing that is rigorously possible), we must yet patiently decipher this difficult and obscure text. However preliminary, such a deciphering cannot be neutral, neuter, or passive. It violently intervenes, at least in a minimal form . . .³⁰

The reader as well as the writer, and in the case of *Glas*, the philosopher as well as the poet, generates a discourse whose 'meaning' "is already, and thoroughly, constituted by a tissue of differences."³¹ That meaning emerges as nothing more than a tissue of differences, however, should not be taken as a disabling discovery. In fact, Derrida points out that it is in deciphering difference as a *différance*, that we begin to read, and it is in transforming this condition of impossibility into a condition of possibility that we are enabled to speak and write—intervene.

Returning to the central question raised in this section of the essay, we can ask once again: How can Derrida's decision to read all texts as the trace of an inaugurating *différance* help rhetorical theorists and critics account for the production of rhetorical texts?

As I mentioned at the start, deconstruction allows us to take seriously the *rhetoricity* of discursive practices. What does this mean in terms of the discussion on *différance* and what implications can it have for the practice of contemporary rhetorical criticism that takes the text as one of the constituent elements of the rhetorical situation?

Derridean deconstruction begins by considering the way in which all texts are inhabited by an internally divided non-originary 'origin' called *différance*. The divisiveness of that 'originating' moment is, so to speak, covered over or, as I put it earlier, finessed into a unity by the writing and the speaking. In fact, the finessing of the non-identical into an identity is, as was noted above, precisely the activity that makes signification happen.

At this point, it might be emphasized that the provisional imposition of something like a unified origin is both a necessary and an interested gesture. It is necessary since the articulation of anything requires the temporary displacement of plurality, the provisional limitation of a potentially unlimited and indeterminate textuality (i.e., historical, discursive field). It is interested since, as I have shown, *différance* underwrites all discursive practices and thus exposes all beginning points, all primordial axioms and all founding principles as constructions—impositions, traces of a will to knowledge.³² In "Linguistics and Grammatology" Derrida describes the necessary and interested gesture this way:

If words and concepts receive meaning only in sequences of differences, one can justify one's language, and one's choice of terms, only within a topic [an orientation in space] and an historical strategy. The justification can therefore never be absolute and definitive. It corresponds to a condition of forces and translates an historical calculation.³³

All symbolic action marks an intervention and an imposition—a deferral of and differencing between the historically produced discursive field—whose own authority is historically produced and, thus, provisional. As Derrida put it elsewhere, "if the word 'history' did not carry with it the theme of a final repression of *différance*, we could say that differences alone could be 'historical' through and through and from the start."³⁴

The transitory character of one's choice of foundational terms is precisely that which any text cannot admit if it is going to make anything like 'truth' appear; however, the text's own provisionality

is also that which the language of the text repeatedly performs, despite all efforts to conceal it. We are continually reminded that although our own desire for unity and order compels us to "balance the equation that is the text's system," the textuality of the text itself "exposes the grammatological structure of the text," and reveals "that its 'origin' and its 'end' are given over to language in general."³⁵ Because the text is always and already given over to language in general, there is invariably a moment in the text "which harbors the unbalancing of the equation, the sleight of hand at the limit of a text which cannot be dismissed simply as a contradiction."³⁶ This textual knot or inadvertent "sleight of hand" marks the rhetoricity of the text and, in so doing, enables us to locate the unwitting and interested gesture that finessed *différance* in such a way that the writing could proceed. In every case the rhetoric of the text marks the intervention of *différance* onto the scene of writing. Moreover, the rhetoricity of the text also sustains the trace of the unwitting and interested gesture that, in re-writing the 'originary' division as an identity, effected the text. Thus rhetoric can neither be taken as mere ornamentation for nor accessory to the 'essential' argument or proposition of a text. While *différance* constitutes the structural 'condition' for signification, rhetoric is the name for both the finessing of *différance* that inaugurates a text *and* the figurality of the text that puts us on its track.

The deconstructive displacement of questions of origin into questions of process frees rhetorical theorists and critics from reading rhetorical discourses and their 'founding principles' as either the determined outcome of an objectively identifiable and discrete situation or an interpreting and intending subject. In fact, it implicates them in a much more complicated and unwieldy project: it obliges them to read rhetorical discourses as "the interweaving of different texts (literally 'web'-s) in an act of criticism that refuses to think of 'influence' or 'interrelationship' as *simple* historical phenomena."³⁷ That is to say, neither the text's immediate rhetorical situation nor its author can be taken as simple origin or generative agent since both are underwritten by a series of historically produced displacements. The implications this has for rhetorical theory and criticism will be made evident after we examine the rhetorical situation from the side of reception rather than production. Thus, the next section will suggest how we might begin to re-write the rhetorical situation from within the thematic of *différance* by taking up the relation between the text and the audience.

II. Text and Audience

So far I have tried to show that Derrida's *différance* provides us with a critical edge for rethinking the relation between a rhetorical text and its speaker or situation. A deconstruction of those relations obliges us to question both the speaker's and the situation's presumed authority over the production of discourse. But where does that leave us? I would like to suggest that if we supplement our deconstructive reading of rhetorical discourse by a reading of audience that proceeds from within the thematic of *différance*, it becomes possible for us to rethink the logic of rhetorical situation as articulation.

I begin the discussion on text and audience with the observation that whenever rhetorical theorists and critics contemplate the rhetorical situation, they do so with some notion of audience in mind. Indeed, at least in the twentieth century a preoccupation with audience has often served as *the* distinguishing characteristic of critical practice in our discipline. Yet, even in essays explicitly seeking to develop a theory of the rhetorical situation (with audience invariably identified as one of its constituent elements), the concept of audience itself receives little critical attention: in most cases, audience is simply named, identified as the target of discursive practice, and then dropped. For the most part, theorists do not approach audience as a problematic category. Lloyd Bitzer exemplifies this general complacency best when he remarks,

What characteristics, then, are implied when one refers to "the rhetorical situation"—the context in which speakers or writers create rhetorical discourse? Perhaps this question is puzzling because "situation" is not a standard term in the vocabulary of rhetorical theory. "Audience" is standard; so also are "speaker," "subject," "occasion," and "speech." If I were to ask, "What is a rhetorical audience?" or "What is a rhetorical subject?"—the reader would catch the meaning of my question.³⁸

Indeed, one is expected to catch the meaning of Bitzer's question "What is a rhetorical audience?" because one is trained, at least in terms of the theoretical/critical lexicon, to think of audience as a self-evident, if not altogether banal, category. Based on what has been said about it, theorists and critics seem to agree on the nature and function of audience. Surveying the history of the concept as it has been used in the theorization and analysis of rhetorical events,

Thomas Benson remarks: the term "audience" signifies for theorists and critics the presence of a body "*influencing* the design of and being *influenced* by a symbolic action."³⁹ In other words, as a collective animated by an identifiable and shared predisposition, audience implicitly figures into discussions about the rhetorical situation as a constraint upon rhetorical discourse. As a recipient of rhetorical messages, audience also figures forth as a confederate body susceptible to persuasion and, ultimately, "capable of serving as mediators of the change which the discourse functions to produce."⁴⁰

There can be no doubt that the dominant concept of audience as a collectivity that both influences and is influenced by discourse is based on the traditional humanistic conception of the subject. As Michael C. McGee puts it, rhetorical theorists and critics "presuppose a 'people' or an 'audience' " that is "either (a) an objective, literal extension of 'person', or (b) a 'mob' of individuals whose significance is their gullibility and failure to respond to 'logical' argument."⁴¹ In both cases they hold firmly to a conception of the human being that presumes an essence at the core of the individual that is coherent, stable, and which makes the human being what it is. Across the board, the subject, and by extension the audience, is conceived as a consciousness, an "I" which thinks, perceives and feels, an "I" whose self-presence or consciousness to itself is the source of meaning. For example, even though they disagree with each other on the generative ground of rhetorical discourse, both Bitzer and Vatz presume the presence of an audience that finds, in any rhetorical situation, its ontological and epistemological foundation in the notion of a sovereign, rational subject. In Bitzer's words, an audience signifies "only . . . those persons who are capable of being influenced by discourse and of being mediators of change."⁴² Implied in this statement is the suggestion that rational persons respond appropriately to reasonable propositions—a suggestion Vatz's argument presupposes. What must be noted here is that theorists as diverse as Bitzer and Vatz predicate their views of audience on the common presumption that fixed essences encounter variable circumstances. Given this conceptualization of the audience, Benson is justified to define the rhetorical situation as a complex governed by the logic of influence. In the next section of the essay, I intend to problematize the feasibility of the notion of audience modeled after the sovereign subject and, by way of conclusion, offer a theorization of the rhetorical situation that provides us with an alternative to the logic of influence.

Rethinking Text and Audience from within the Thematic of Différance

In several of his works, Derrida challenges the presumed integrity of the phenomenological subject, the subject of the humanistic tradition that, as I have shown, plays a formidable role in our understanding of the rhetorical situation. He launches a deconstruction of the centered subject by attempting to think presence, including the subject as a consciousness present to itself, as "starting from/in relation to time as difference, differing, and deferral."⁴³ In short, Derrida takes seriously the possibility that the subject, like writing and speech, is constituted by *différance*.

Before fleshing out the various implications the deconstruction of the humanistic subject has for traditional notions of audience and situation, we must examine more closely Derrida's elaborate argument, one that enables him to forge the polemic suggestion that the centered subject is an effect-structure and not an ontological *a priori*. Derrida's deconstruction of the humanistic subject turns in great part on the effacement of the subject/structure binary that allows humanists like Husserl and Freud⁴⁴ to posit a self-present I, "a fixed origin" that itself "escape[s] structurality" in such a way as to limit "the play of structure."⁴⁵ Perry Anderson puts it this way:

What Derrida had seen, acutely, was that the supposition of any stable structure had always depended on the silent postulation of a center that was not entirely 'subject' to it: in other words, of a *subject distinct from* it. His decisive move was to liquidate the last vestige of such autonomy.⁴⁶

As Anderson intimates, Derrida deconstructs the subject by showing us how the identity of any subject, what I earlier called the core of the human being, like the value of any element in any system is structured by *différance*. This forces us to think of subjectivity not as an essence but as an effect of the subject's place in an economy of differences. For example, in his essay "Semiology and Grammatology" Derrida writes that,

Nothing—no present and in-different being—thus precedes *différance* and spacing. There is no subject who is agent, author, and master of *différance*, who eventually and empirically would be overtaken by *différance*. Subjectivity—like objectivity—is an effect of *différance*, an effect inscribed in a system of *différance*.⁴⁷

In this essay, Derrida recommends that we think the subject not as a stable presence constituted and operating outside the play of *différance*, but instead as a production or effect-structure of *différance*.

If the identity of the subject is to be taken as the effect of *différance* and not of essence, then it is marked, like any sign or any object, by an internal difference that prevents it from being present in and of itself. As Derrida puts it,

This is why the *a* of *différance* also recalls that spacing is temporization, the detour and postponement by means of which intuition, perception, consummation—in a word, the relationship to the present, the reference to a present reality, to a *being*—are always *deferred*. Deferred by virtue of the very principle of difference which holds that an element functions and signifies, takes on or conveys meaning, only by referring to another past or future element in an economy of traces.⁴⁸

By way of the operation of *différance*, Derrida underscores the radically historical character of the subject. Against an irreducible humanist essence of subjectivity, Derrida advances a subjectivity which, structured by *différance* and thus always differing from itself, is forever in process, indefinite, controvertible. In fact,

“absolute subjectivity” would . . . have to be crossed out as soon as we conceive the present on the basis of *différance*, and not the reverse. The concept of *subjectivity* belongs *a priori* and in general to the order of the *constituted*. . . . There is no constituting subjectivity. The very concept of constitution must be deconstructed.⁴⁹

Like any other object, the subject is a historical construct precisely because its ‘unique’ and always provisional identity depends upon its operations within a system of differences and the larger movement of *différance*: the subject is neither present nor “above all present to itself before *différance*.” Like speech and writing, “the subject is constituted only in being divided from itself, in becoming space, in temporizing, in deferral.”⁵⁰ Rather than marking a place of identity, the subject designates a noncoincidence, “a complex and differential product”⁵¹ continuously open to change.

Rewriting the Logic of the Rhetorical Situation as Articulation

What implications might the deconstruction of the subject have for our definition of the audience and, thus for the rhetorical situa-

tion? Simply put, the deconstruction of the subject opens up possibilities for the field of Rhetoric by enabling us to read the rhetorical situation as an event structured not by a logic of influence but by a logic of articulation. If the subject is shifting and unstable (constituted in and by the play of *différance*), then the rhetorical event may be seen as an incident that produces and reproduces the identities of subjects and constructs and reconstructs linkages between them. From the vantage of the de-centered subject, the rhetorical event can not signify the consolidation of already constituted identities whose operations and relations are determined *a priori* by a logic that operates quite apart from real historical circumstances. Rather it marks the articulation of provisional identities and the construction of contingent relations that obtain between them. From within the thematic of *différance* we would see the rhetorical situation neither as an event that merely induces audiences to act one way or another nor as an incident that, in representing the interests of a particular collectivity, merely wrestles the probable within the realm of the actualizable. Rather, we would see the rhetorical situation as an event that makes possible the production of identities and social relations. That is to say, if rhetorical events are analysed from within the thematic of *différance*, it becomes possible to read discursive practices neither as rhetorics directed to preconstituted and known audiences nor as rhetorics "in search of" objectively identifiable but yet undiscovered audiences. *Différance* obliges us to read rhetorical discourses as processes entailing the discursive production of audiences, and enables us to decipher rhetorical events as sites that make visible the historically articulated emergence of the category 'audience'.

Such perspective, of course, implicates us in a larger, radically historical project that works against essentializing and universalizing claims. If rhetorical discourses (which are themselves played by *différance*) are deciphered as practices that perform the situated displacement and condensation of identities and audiences, then our tendency to gloss over differences and find refuge in a common existential or ontological condition will be checked. I believe, however, that the gift of deconstruction is that it obliges us to resist universalizing gestures, enabling us to open up a space wherein it becomes possible for us to discern the considerable heterogeneity of the social sphere and the formidable role that rhetoric plays in articulating this heterogeneity. Significantly enough, a reading of

the rhetorical situation that presumes a text whose meaning is the effect of *différance* and a subject whose identity is produced and reproduced in discursive practices, resituates the rhetorical situation on a trajectory of becoming rather than Being. Finally, then, the deconstruction of the rhetorical situation and its constituent elements has taken us to a point where we are able to rethink rhetoric as radical possibility.

This essay has attempted to provide an answer to the following question: How, if at all, can the insights of deconstruction assist in the explanation and understanding of rhetorical events? Speaking generally now, the appropriation of deconstruction by rhetorical theorists and critics can bring intelligibility to the rhetorical event by enabling them to read rhetoric as a divided sign: as the name for both the unwitting and interested gesture that structures any symbolic action *and* the figurality that puts us on its track. Derridean deconstruction does not merely help rhetorical critics analyse texts, in addition, it promotes a rigorous reevaluation and rebuilding of the concept-metaphor "rhetorical situation" that drives and delimits much contemporary critical practice in this field.

This call for the appropriation of deconstructive insights deserves a final word. My attempt to use deconstructive insights as means through which the rhetorical situation can be rethought was not meant to suggest that traditional rhetorical theories and critical practices are indefensible or that they should be replaced by Derridean deconstruction. I take deconstructive practice as one possible way to re-invigorate the field, not as the first step towards a renunciation of it. In short, I believe it is possible to open up the field of Rhetoric by using deconstruction not as a transcendental signifier that will lead the way to truth, but as a *bricoleur's* or tinker's tool—a 'positive lever'⁵²—that produces rather than protects the exorbitant possibilities of rhetoric.

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Notes

1. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, trans. Winston Moore and Paul Cammack (Great Britain: The Thetford Press Ltd., 1985), 76.

2. This is precisely the kind of move that traditional theorists and critics have had to make in analyses of the rhetorical situation. For example see: Lloyd Bitzer, "The Rhetorical Situation," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 1 (1968): 1-14; Richard Lar-

son, "Lloyd Bitzer's 'Rhetorical Situation' and the Classification of Discourse," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 3 (1970): 165-68; K. E. Wilkerson, "On Evaluating Theories of Rhetoric," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 3 (1970): 82-96; Ralph Pomeroy, "Fitness of Response in Bitzer's Concept of Rhetorical Discourse," *Georgia Speech Communication Journal* 4 (1972): 42-71; Richard Vatz, "The Myth of the Rhetorical Situation," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 6 (1973): 154-61; Scott Consigny, "Rhetoric and its Situations," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 7 (1974): 175-86; Alan Brinton, "Situation in the Theory of Rhetoric," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 14 (1981): 234-48.

3. Political theorists have already begun to appropriate deconstruction for the purposes of social critique. For instance, in their most recent book, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe consciously struggle to open up a powerful marxist tradition which they believe no longer helps us to think social struggles in their historical specificity. They point out how from a strict marxist perspective "diverse subject positions are reduced to manifestations of a single position; the plurality of differences is either reduced or rejected as contingent; the sense of present is revealed through its location in an a priori succession of stages" (21). Dissatisfied with the reductionism they see as inherent in orthodox marxism, Laclau and Mouffe recommend a post-marxist perspective which takes as its point of departure the indeterminacy of the identity of social agents. Such a view, of course, refuses the suggestion that economically based class relations determine political relations: there "is no necessary or logical relation between social agents and productive relations." While my own discussion is informed by the work of Laclau and Mouffe, it should be noted that they do not deal explicitly with the role of rhetoric in the constitution of hegemonic groups or formations.

4. While it is not possible here to offer a comprehensive list of essays and books addressing the interface between rhetoric and deconstruction, the texts cited below (in addition to the articles cited above) are particularly useful. Jonathan Arac et al., *The Yale Critics: Deconstruction in America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984). This volume includes essays emphasizing the early work of de Man, Hartman, Miller, and Bloom. Bloom et al., *Deconstruction and Criticism* (New York: The Seabury Press, Inc., 1979). Contributors to this volume include Harold Bloom ("The Breaking of Form"), Paul de Man ("Shelley Disfigured"), Jacques Derrida ("Living On: Border Lines"), Geoffrey H. Hartman ("Words, Wish, Worth: Wordsworth"), and J. Hillis Miller ("The Critic as Host"). Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982). Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979). Paul de Man, "The Epistemology of Metaphor," *Critical Inquiry* 5 (1978): 13-30. Denis Donoghue, *Ferocious Alphabets* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1981). Rodolphe Gasche, "Deconstruction as Criticism," *Glyph* 6 (1979), 177-216. Barbara Johnson, *The Critical Difference: Essays in the Contemporary Rhetoric of Reading* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980). J. Hillis Miller, "Narrative and History," *ELH* 41 (1974): 455-73. Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980).

5. Jacques Derrida, *Glas*, trans. John P. Leavey, Jr. and Richard Rand (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986).

6. Here I would like to set my own argument in counterdistinction to the approach taken by recent theorists advocating a "rhetoric as epistemic" position who, quite correctly, mark the way in which any discursive gesture is contaminated by the patterns of the perceiving subject. However, I wish to move the argument forward one more step by suggesting that the structure of the binary oppositions that engender "subjectivism" itself can be questioned by grammatological reading. As one deconstructivist put it, "The solution is not merely to say 'I shall not objectify.' It is rather to recognize at once that there is no other language but that of 'objectification' and that any distinction between 'subjectification' and 'objectification' is as provisional as the use of any set of hierarchized oppositions" (Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Translator's Preface," *Of Grammatology* [Baltimore: The Johns

Hopkins University Press, 1974], lix.) As will become evident over the course of this essay, it is imperative that we refuse to take the subject as a "given," as something that interprets. To the contrary, the subject must be thought as process, as becoming.

7. Bitzer, 3-4.
8. Bitzer, 4.
9. Bitzer, 5-6.
10. Vatz, 154.
11. Vatz, 157.
12. Cited in Vatz, 160.
13. See essays on the rhetorical situation cited above.
14. Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism*, 88.
15. Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Wade Baskin (New York: Philosophical Library, 1959), 120.
16. Jacques Derrida, "Différance," *Speech and Phenomena and other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, trans. David B. Allison (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 143.
17. Jacques Derrida, "Semiology and Grammatology," *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), 26.
18. See Jacques Derrida, "Of Grammatology as a Positive Science," *Of Grammatology*, 74-93.
19. Derrida, "Semiology and Grammatology," 27.
20. On pages 131-132 of his essay "Différance," Derrida describes his own texts as an "assemblage." He says, "I insist on the word 'assemblage' here for two reasons: on the one hand, it is not a matter of describing a history, of recounting the steps, text by text, context by context, each time showing which scheme has been able to impose this graphic disorder, although this could have been done as well; rather, we are concerned with *the general system of all these schemata*. On the other hand, the word 'assemblage' seems more apt for suggesting that the kind of bringing-together proposed here has the structure of an interlacing, a weaving, or a web, which would allow the different threads and different lines of sense or force to separate again, as well as being ready to bind others together." In the attempt to mark the same sort of subtle operations, I reiterate Derrida's word choice.
21. Derrida, "Différance," 142.
22. Derrida, "Différance," 141.
23. Derrida, "Linguistics and Grammatology," *Of Grammatology*, 63.
24. Derrida, "Linguistics and Grammatology," 62-63; emphasis added.
25. "Translator's Preface," xvii.
26. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Glas-Piece: A Compte Rendu," *Diacritics* (September 1977): 26.
27. Spivak, "Glas-Piece," 26.
28. Jacques Derrida, "The Double Session," *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), 222.
29. Spivak, "Glas-Piece," 26.
30. Derrida, *Glas*, 5a.
31. Derrida, "Semiology and Grammatology," 33.
32. We should, of course, be reminded here that even though *différance* is more 'primordial' than the substance or presence of each element in a structure, it can never be present. It also participates in the radical alterity that makes anything like 'identity' possible. See Derrida, "Différance," esp. 140-143.
33. Derrida, "Linguistics and Grammatology," 70.
34. Derrida, "Différance," 141.
35. Spivak, "Translator's Preface," xlix.
36. Spivak, "Translator's Preface," xlix.
37. Spivak, "Translator's Preface," lxxxiv.
38. Bitzer, 1.
39. Thomas Benson, "The Senses of Rhetoric: A Topical System for Critics," *Central States Speech Journal* 29 (1978): 249.

40. Bitzer, 8.
41. Michael Calvin McGee, "In Search of 'The People': A Rhetorical Alternative," *The Quarterly Journal of Speech* 61 (1975): 238.
42. Bitzer, 6.
43. Cited in Culler, 95.
44. See Jacques Derrida, "Freud and the Scene of Writing," *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978), 196-231.
45. Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," *Writing and Difference*, 278-79.
46. Perry Anderson, *In the Tracks of Historical Materialism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983), 54.
47. Derrida, "Semiology and Grammatology," 28.
48. Derrida, "Semiology and Grammatology," 28-29.
49. Jacques Derrida, "The Voice that Keeps Silent," *Speech and Phenomena*, 84-85n.
50. Derrida, "Semiology and Grammatology," 29.
51. Culler, 162.
52. As Spivak puts it in her preface to the *Grammatology*, "the *bricoleur* makes do with things that were meant perhaps for other ends"(xix).

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