

TIPS FOR THE PRACTICING CRITIC

1. Although some argue that “everything is rhetorical,” a definition that excludes nothing is useless. Certainly, every message has some element(s) that may be interpreted as rhetorical. But in early critical work, it will be best to use the lists of characteristics provided in Chapter 1 (especially the “five basic moves” and “three features” that make a message rhetorical) to determine whether the message in question fits our working definition.
2. After determining that the piece of discourse meets these definitional standards, try to isolate elements in the text (specific words and phrases, structural placement/order of ideas, ways of referring to self and intended audience, etc.) that illustrate the rhetor’s purpose and/or bias.
3. Note that in the analysis of the Dalai Lama’s message, we focused on what was most important *in this situation and at this time*. Rather than *simply* reading the text, noting its flaws, and concluding that it “needs editing,” the critic takes into account the emotional power of the essay. This far outweighed any minor editorial problems, which were probably not even noticeable to its intended readers. Keep in mind that close reading of the text is necessary, but not sufficient, for good criticism. Be sure to “step back” and look at the different situational elements of the message. At different times, different features of the message and its environment carry more persuasive force. Later chapters will address individual features in depth (see especially Part II: “General Forms of Criticism”).

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Chapter 2

THE CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE

As our coaches used to say, “OK, people, settle down and listen up.” We have been enjoying a lovely little spate of French-bashing here lately. Jonah Goldberg of *The National Review*, who admits that French-bashing is “shtick”—as it is to many American comedians—has popularized the phrase “cheese-eating surrender monkeys” to describe the French. It gets a lot less attractive than that.

George Will saw fit to include in his latest *Newsweek* column this joke: “How many Frenchmen does it take to defend Paris? No one knows, it’s never been tried.” That was certainly amusing. One million, four hundred thousand French soldiers were killed during World War I. As a result, there weren’t many Frenchmen left to fight in World War II. Nevertheless, 100,000 French soldiers lost their lives trying to stop Hitler.

On behalf of every one of those 100,000 men, I would like to thank Mr. Will for his clever joke. They were out-manned, out-gunned, out-generated and, above all, out-tanked. They got slaughtered, but they stood and they fought. Ha-ha, how funny. In the few places where they had tanks, they held splendidly. . . . [Ivins, 2003]

Texas-based syndicated political columnist Molly Ivins penned these words in early 2003 in response to the anti-French sentiment then sweeping the United States. Although the French were not alone in criticizing what they saw as an American rush to war against Iraq, they had become the primary target for American contempt. Americans were boycotting French wine and cheese and renaming their favorite reconstituted-potato-based fast-food “Freedom Fries.”

Into this rhetorical environment, Molly Ivins issued this wake-up call. Her column begins with a direct, almost confrontational address to her readers, self-consciously borrowing an all-American (and typically male) mode of commanding our attention with coachly authority. Then her tone immediately turns ironic as she reports on the social climate as if it were a season of holiday parties (“we have been enjoying a lovely little spate”). She names two conservative fellow columnists and quotes their anti-French jokes, glossing them with the label of “shtick,” implying a flaccid and facile humor beneath the dignity of these otherwise cogent thinkers. By quoting their put-downs rather than simply glossing them as “French-bashing,” Ivins invites readers to laugh or groan, if they are so inclined. But after mentioning “cheese-eating surrender monkeys,” she conveys her disapproval, forecasting more serious trouble ahead with the assessment “It gets a lot less attractive than that.” And then she brings in the heavy weaponry, both literal and rhetorical. Immediately after quoting Will, Ivins provides a sad, cold accounting of a literal answer to his question (“How many Frenchmen . . . ?”): either 1.4 million or 100,000, depending on when the historical accounting begins.

Sarcasm, according to Harris, is irony with an added dash of critical contempt [2003:22]. Ivins’s next sentence (“On behalf of . . . those . . . men, I would like to thank Mr. Will for his clever joke”) uses sarcasm to invite chagrin, ashamed regret, on the part of readers who may initially have laughed at Will’s line. How risky is Ivins’s strategy here? Is she setting her audience up to laugh, and then chiding them, “Shame on you!”? Aren’t readers likely to be angry at her, for making them feel foolish or berated? After all, such jokes are merely for entertainment, or at most, designed to arouse patriotic sentiments. Or is Ivins really playing it safe? The answer will differ depending on the audience presumed to be reading. Some readers no doubt reacted defensively to her message. But one could argue that her regular readers would have expected her to take strong, unapologetic stands, as she is wont to do. Rhetoric can be complicated stuff indeed.

Rhetorical criticism is the business of identifying the complications of rhetoric and then unpacking or explaining them in a comprehensive and efficient manner. This definition implies several things: Rhetorical texts are complicated; there is an orderly way of describing these complications; and the best criticism describes them elegantly. So when confronting messages, the critic examines such factors as role, language, arguments, ideas, and medium to navigate the complications and reduce the confusion persuaders intentionally or unintentionally create.

Thus, *Modern Rhetorical Criticism* is a guide to insightful interpretation. The book outlines methods for inspecting persuasive messages in order to see what insights about people they might contain. Before considering critical techniques, however, we need to know about the critical enterprise itself, an enterprise designed to expose the clever rhetoric of clever writers like Molly Ivins. This chapter offers such a perspective.

THE PURPOSES OF CRITICISM

In the passage above, Molly Ivins operates as both persuader and critic. As a critic, she dissects Jonah Goldberg’s and George Will’s messages with care and, as a persuader, she accuses them of forgetting history and unjustly maligning old allies. In her column, Ivins did what good critics do: She examined rhetorical texts to account for all of their important meanings, not just those the persuader featured.

Naturally, another critic might argue that Ivins acted disingenuously when transforming simple witticisms into something sordid. In either case, the critic would be doing what good critics do: building an argument about social conditions by observing what people say. Naturally, only a community of informed persons could judge whether Ivins was the rhetorical criminal or hero here. This community of critics would listen to the contrasting arguments, examine the evidence each offered, and then render its judgment. So that is what rhetorical critics do. But why do they do it? There are several reasons:

1. *Rhetorical criticism documents social trends.* Rosenfield [1972:133] sees the critic as a sort of sports analyst who takes part in the swirl of life but who also has perspective on it. Rosenfield distinguishes between the fan who enjoys the game of persuasion and the expert commentator who both appreciates and comments knowingly upon it. Criticism therefore requires special discernment: the ability to stand simultaneously in the midst of and apart from the events experienced. Like the sports commentator, the critic provides an instant replay of the event, pointing out features that the too-involved fan was unable to see because of the immediacy and excitement of the event itself. The critic re-views the scene of the action, calling attention to features of persuasion that the audience saw but did not notice.

The good critic magnifies without distorting, focusing upon rhetorical characteristics that, while humble, may nevertheless be important. Thus, for example, Daughton [1995] noticed that Angelina Grimké, an influential nineteenth-century abolitionist, both enacted her controversial message of female empowerment and reinforced it for her audience in the very sentence structures of her speech. Late in her Pennsylvania Hall address, Grimké specifically turned to her female listeners with the words, “Women of Philadelphia! Allow me as a Southern woman, with much attachment to the land of my birth, to entreat you to come up to this work” [36]. Daughton noted that Grimké’s direct address to the women in her audience, women who could never vote in their lifetimes, was strategically located at the end of the address, where it dignified and defined women as citizens of a particular place, apart from their relationships to men. Daughton argued that Grimké was able to invite these women to join her in working for abolition only *after* she had demonstrated by her own living example that women’s public arguments could have powerful effects.

The good critic notices verbal trends, features that are too regularized to be accidental and too suggestive to be unimportant. According to Farrell [1980], the critic thereby treats messages as symptoms of some larger social fact. The critic says: "I see a bit of *X* here and am willing to bet that there is more *X* to be found in society at large." Marback [2001], for example, studied the impassioned debate surrounding the Oakland, California, school board's adoption of the "ebonics" resolution in late 1996. The resolution granted first-class status (and classroom use) to what had been called Black English, often previously assumed to be a defective form of Standard (= White) English. The purpose of the resolution was to help inner-city African American students learn in all subjects, not to prevent them from mastering the dominant code of Standard English. Despite good intentions, the resolution sparked a national uproar, outraging critics on both the right and the left. Marback analyzed the arguments of supporters and opponents of the measure. Blaming African American teachers and students for poor achievement, he argued, effectively directs public attention away from the ways in which our attitudes about literacy help maintain, rather than change, the unequal economic status quo. Thus, the critic acts as society's vanguard, spotting in today's rhetoric the smoke that becomes tomorrow's fires.

As Brockriede [1974] has said, all rhetorical critics are arguers. Antismoking activists, for example, argue that cigarette advertisements encourage teenage addiction. Many critics thus argue that *regularized* features of rhetoric have become dangerous to society. In other circumstances, it is the absence of regularity that causes alarm: Appeals to national unity drop off in political campaigns and letters to the editor become self-centered rather than community-centered. Combining these perceptions, the critic might posit the rise of a New Narcissism and then speculate about its consequences for society at large. In short, the critic's job is to discover trends and then see where they lead.

2. *Rhetorical criticism provides general understandings via the case study method.* By scrutinizing a small number of texts, the critic restricts the range of available insights. Even if a thousand televangelized sermons were collected for study, the critic would still be examining messages rooted in a peculiar political circumstance, in a specialized medium, and in a unique cultural backdrop. Even with such a large sample, the critic would still only have a sample, a mere whisper of history's religious utterances. Because the critic's focus is therefore tight, the critic's challenge is to tell the largest story possible given the necessarily limited evidence available.

So the critic is a sampler, and samplers must be both modest and cautious. But what the critic gives up in *scope* is offset by the *power* of insight made available. What insures this power? Choosing a provocative text for study, asking important questions of that text, and drawing intriguing conclusions. The critic is indeed a sampler, but that which is sampled—human discourse—is hardly trivial since people embed in their talk some of their most complicated motivations. It is the critic's job to sort through these embeddings, finding evi-

dence of the universal in the particular and yet, as Leff [1992] cautions, respecting the integrity and particularity of each message/event.

The critic therefore operates like the anthropologist who finds in the smallest ritual a complete depiction of tribal history and culture. The good critic never studies a particular text simply because it exists but because it promises to tell a story larger than itself. This means that no message is too modest for careful inspection. If human brutality is indeed on the rise, it might as well be evidenced in the interviewing styles of late-night radio commentators as in the rhetoric of the Ku Klux Klan.

Like all research activities, criticism requires that one (a) *isolate* a phenomenon for special study (e.g., the rhetoric of U.S. space exploration), (b) *describe* special aspects of that phenomenon (e.g., that rhetoric's heavy reliance on metaphors), (c) *classify* features of that phenomenon (e.g., its dependence on frontier metaphors vs. temporal metaphors), (d) *interpret* the patterns noticed (e.g., "the American people are still not capable of thinking in terms of fixed borders"), and (e) *evaluate* the phenomenon (e.g., "Will the U.S. become extra-terrestrial imperialists?"). These five intellectual skills are, of course, central to all forms of disciplined inquiry but they constrain the critic in particular ways, as we will see throughout this book.

3. *Rhetorical criticism produces metaknowledge* (that is, explicit understanding of implicit realizations). There are many similarities between literary and rhetorical criticism. Both require acuteness of perception, both demand textual exploration, and both expose human wants and desires as expressed in symbols. But there is also a difference: While few of us speak poetry in the day to day, all of us, as Moliere reminded us, speak prose. We are all persuaders of a sort, even if our rhetorical successes never partake of literary greatness. Rhetorical criticism therefore broadens the range of what can be studied. Rhetorical criticism is criticism of social life itself.

And so everyone is capable of doing rhetorical criticism without ever reading *Modern Rhetorical Criticism*. By having lived, talked, and listened for years, all of us have done the homework necessary to do criticism. Consider, for example, the following rather ordinary message:

COM 390R. *Seminar in Contemporary Rhetorical Criticism*. May be repeated for credit when topics vary. Semester topics have included dramatic criticism, content analysis, and methodologies for movement studies. Prerequisite: Upper-division standing.

What sort of message do we have here? Without question, a course description from a college catalog. But how is it possible for a reader who has never opened the course catalog of the University of Texas at Austin to make such a perception? And why do we have such *confidence* in that perception? Why could we not possibly mistake this message for a chili recipe or a page from Fodor's latest guide to Austria? Wherein lies the "implicit knowledge" necessary to identify this textual fragment? If we know this much about rhetoric,

what else do we know that we don't know we know? And how do we know such things?

Last question first. We know such things because we are members of life's audience. We know it because each day, without effort or conscious attention, we are voracious consumers of messages. Each day, we swim in a sea of rhetoric: commercials for underarm deodorants, letters from loved ones, *People* magazine. Each year, we process, discard, and reprocess a virtual blizzard of discourse. As we go, we add to our extraordinary catalog of messages, constantly increasing the complexity and subtlety of our rhetorical knowledge. There is not a course description alive that could escape our detection.

Alas, the knowledge just described, although useful, is normally inert. While most people can identify messages accurately enough, few are able to explain *how we know what we know*. Few people pay attention to the details of their rhetorical experience. Upon critical reflection, however, almost everyone can do so. For example, the form of our course description is revealing: incomplete sentences, abnormal punctuation patterns, and inconsistent italicizing all suggest a hurried, businesslike tone, a message uninterested in wooing its reader. In addition, its reasoning patterns are telegraphic. Concepts like "prerequisite" are never explained, creating a heavy demand on the reader to supply the ideas necessary to make sense of the message. The language is also formidable: excessive use of jargon, polysyllabic words, and opaque phrases (e.g., COM 390R).

Also revealing is what is not found in the text. Nobody runs or feels here. No *doing* is being done. This absence of verbs suggests institutionalization, hardly what one would expect from what is essentially a piece of advertising. But this is a special sort of advertising, advertising without adjectives. The topics mentioned are not "new and improved," just topics. And much else is missing. There are no extended examples to help the reader see what the course will be like, no powerful imagery to sustain the student's sense of wonder while standing in the registration line, no personal disclosure by the author to build identification with the reader. It is as if this message did not care about its reader or even itself. It does nothing to invite or entice or intrigue. It does not unburden itself.

Most students know that such course descriptions cannot be "trusted." Students know that they are approved by committees and therefore do not bear the marks of the instructor's personality. Students know that such descriptions are processed by a bureaucracy that impresses its rigidities onto them. Students know that they must sample the rhetoric of their peers and professors before signing up. These latter rhetorics, students reason, will have the detail and humanity necessary for proper decision making. And so course descriptions dutifully sit in college catalogs: unread, unrespected, unloved. A hard life.

Frequently, then, criticism reminds us of what we already know about the world. It asks us to compare each new message to the data bank of messages already accumulated over a lifetime of audiencing. Criticism asks us to make

our implicit knowledge explicit because only explicit knowledge can be used in practical ways. So rhetorical criticism is quite ecological: It invites us to become more active in retaining each day's messages so that they can later be recycled for use in understanding new messages.

4. *Rhetorical criticism invites radical confrontation with others and their cultures.* Perhaps this phrasing is a bit melodramatic, but criticism is a wonderful way to get outside ourselves. Naturally, most of us resist leaving our own perfect worlds to enter the strange, dark habitats of others. Our worlds are orderly, theirs chaotic; ours enlightened, theirs bizarre. But we also have wanderlust, a curiosity about the not-us, which is why vacationing in strange lands is such a prized experience. Rhetorical criticism can be a kind of vacationing, a way of visiting the not-us by examining what they have to say. As with all vacationing, though, criticism requires preparation—attitudinal preparation. We must remember that all persons have reasons for doing what they do (even if their reasons are not our reasons) and that we cannot understand others unless we are willing to leave our own tastes and prejudices at home. And if we are unable to leave them at home, we should at least leave them in our suitcases while exploring.

This is not a moral injunction (criticize others as you would have them criticize you). It is an intellectual injunction: One cannot *understand* others unless one appreciates how they reason and behave. But this injunction is not easy to follow. Consider, for example, the following materials distributed daily on city streetcorners:

- *Jesus and Mary Speak to the World through Veronica Luken*
(Our Lady of Roses Shrine, Bayside, New York)
- *Heard any Good Fag Jokes Lately?*
(National Gay Task Force)
- *Fight Forced Busing*
(National Socialist White People's Party)
- *Smoking in Public: Let's Separate Fact from Friction*
(R. J. Reynolds Tobacco Co.)
- *Dear Recreational Vehicle Owner*
(The Good Sam Club)

Many people's first response to this smorgasbord of texts is: "Only in America!" From the standpoint of criticism, this is a healthy response. At least initially, the good critic examines all rhetoric in a spirit of wonder rather than one of censure: What do RV owners have to say to one another? How does a tobacco company conceal its self-interest in a public service announcement? And who, pray tell, is Veronica Luken?

Questions like these pull us into rhetoric and thereby pull us toward people, people who experience the world in special ways. If done well, criticism forces us outside the comfort of how we think and feel. It asks, for example,

why racists are racists. What experiences have shaped them? Why are they so afraid of integration? What *really* threatens them? Bus-riding? Dark skin? Inferior education? Perhaps. But could it also be rapid change or social mobility or perhaps just life-in-general? All of these are possibilities, and only careful, critical inspection of *Fight Forced Busing* could help us sort through them.

Because the rhetorical critic examines messages meant for other people at other times, it is hard to do criticism and remain provincial. Rhetoric brings us face-to-face with otherness. Thus, when examining texts the critic is almost always an uninvited guest. The good critic remembers this and offers explanations of rhetoric as it was created, not as he or she would have had it created. The critic operates in this fashion not because it is nicer to do so but because it is smarter.

It is often not easy to be a good guest at someone else's party. Critics are people too, after all, who often feel strongly about the public matters they study. So it is useful to remember certain ground rules.

GROUND RULES FOR DOING CRITICISM

- (a) *All public messages make sense to someone.* Because rhetoric is a people's art, it is sometimes easy to feel superior to it. Despite their noxious appeals, however, someone must like the collection of once-athletic men shown congregating in bars during beer advertisements. Someone must appreciate their swagger and love them despite their mangled grammar. It is the critic's job to presume such attractiveness and to discover the basis of its appeal.
- (b) *All criticism is autobiography.* George Bernard Shaw's famous phrase is as true today as it was at the turn of the twentieth century. As hard as they try, critics can never be completely objective about rhetoric. Nor should they be. But they should at least be *conscious of their subjectivity*, aware of the biases they bring to their task and willing to explain those biases when sharing their observations with others.
- (c) *Description before evaluation.* The critical instinct—I like it/I hate it—is a powerful instinct and it rears up in us frequently. But to make sense out of something that is radically other, the critic must first get the lay of the land. Thus, the ultimate challenge is to explain rhetoric with which we disagree or to find flaws in rhetoric to which we are instinctively attracted. The good critic therefore tries to understand the message in its original context before asking: What does this message do for me?

Although these attitudes cannot solve all critical problems, they can be helpful guidelines. Rhetorical criticism puts us in direct touch with humanity because it examines what humans do most artfully—write—and most instinctively—talk. The critic of rhetoric therefore stands in a privileged place.

QUALITIES OF THE IDEAL CRITIC

Not all critics are born equal. There is no Declaration of Critical Independence to insure that each critic will be perceptive. Even when examining a rich, suggestive piece of rhetoric, some fail to appreciate its nuances. The gifted critic, on the other hand, can build a provocative story out of the humblest message. So, for example, Davis [1998] noted that “the rhetorical lives of the ‘everyday’ masses of Black women are neglected” in contemporary scholarship [78]. She argued that “A Black feminist approach to rhetorical criticism celebrates the theoretical significance of the ‘ordinariness of everyday life’ to reveal Black women’s ways of crafting identities within an oppressive [society]” [77]. Because the rhetoric upon which Davis built her case was quite ordinary, she had to be especially creative to find the truths hidden in its informality. But perceptiveness and creativity are not completely inherited. They can be nurtured. It is possible to become more perceptive critics if we (1) adopt a useful set of attitudes and (2) ask the right sorts of questions. Later chapters will suggest some of these questions but first we will examine the characteristics of the ideal critic.

1. *The good critic is skeptical.* The good critic does not take life at face value. Skeptics treat life on their terms, not on life's terms, and most assuredly, not on the persuader's terms. The good critic is one who stands back and watches, who will not be drawn into the pyrotechnics of rhetoric until fundamental questions about the rhetor's motives have been resolved. Skepticism, however, need not lead to cynicism. The skeptic is one who insists on taking a second look at everything simply because there is always more to a story than first meets the eye. The cynic, on the other hand, is a skeptic gone sour, one who refuses to take even a first look because of past disappointments.

Two key presuppositions of the skeptic are that all rhetoric denies itself and that good rhetoric denies itself completely. There are, of course, a few forthright persuaders to be found—the used car dealer, the streetcorner evangelist—who tacitly admit to their status as persuaders. But even here there is sleight-of-hand. The used car dealer agrees to take less for the automobile because he “was young once too and remembers his first car.” And the evangelist is never motivated by personal ego when buttonholing passersby but is “compelled from afar to do the work of the Lord.” These people do not wish to be seen only as persuaders; they wish to be seen as something more exalted in addition.

Still others deny the rhetorical function entirely. Adams [1986] tells us that newscasters, for example, look to a geographical region's popularity with American tourists before deciding which natural disasters to report. These reporters-turned-persuaders seek direct, but unacknowledged, influence. They use their supposed objectivity to escape critical detection by holding up signs emblazoned with the statement “No persuasion here. Look elsewhere for

objects of criticism.” The good critic does not look elsewhere. The good critic does not even blink.

As Fisher [1989] and others explain, persuaders often use narratives to throw critics off the persuasive scent. Storytelling, as Ronald Reagan well understood, signals a time-out: “Listen to this story as a story. You need not worry about argumentative propositions being advanced here.” Most of us relax in the presence of narratives. Thus a “mere” story, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, became one of the most potent pieces of civil rights rhetoric the United States has known. And thus business executives sell stock options during cocktail parties, those “time-out” events that advance rhetoric by denying its possibility. In some senses, then, the nonpersuader is the best persuader and the non-appeal the ultimate appeal.

2. *The good critic is discerning.* One need not be a genius to be discerning. Sherlock Holmes was not brilliant but he was discerning. He knew when to pay attention (when others were not around), how to pay attention (by looking to the left when others looked to the right), and where to pay attention (by looking in the kitchen rather than in the formal dining room). Holmes’s eyes took in no more information than did those of the local constable. But unlike the local constable, Holmes had better categories for sorting and storing the information he collected. Both noticed the brown shoes on the body of the deceased but Holmes also noticed the absence of scuff marks.

Holmes did so because he had a theory of scuff marks. To the constable, shoes were shoes, but to Holmes the way people scuffed their shoes was a function of the purposiveness of their walk, which was a function of their lifestyle, which in turn was a function of their social habits and, ultimately, their mental habits. And that is why a man wearing unscuffed shoes would never have died a natural death while roaming through the moors. *That* sort of person detests moors.

Like Holmes, the good critic is hard to distract. Concentration is a precious gift for a critic since persuaders try so hard to divert their audiences’ attention. As a result, the good critic pays attention to textual details that most audiences ignore. Thus, by simply noticing the raw frequency of certain word choices, Hart [1986] concluded that Ronald Reagan’s first inaugural address was more ideological than was normal for a ceremony, a kind of rhetorical hangover from a very ideological campaign. Of course, Ronald Reagan himself did not assume that his choice of individual words would be of much interest to his audience. He no doubt presumed that his lectern-thumping would be muffled by the pleasant stories he told. That is why, when examining the Reagan speech, it proved useful to look elsewhere.

Most good critics look elsewhere. To understand the routines of social power in the United States, for example, Whittenberger-Keith [1989] inspected neither economic charts nor voting patterns but manners books. To determine the extent of contemporary racism, Rainville and McCormick [1977] looked not at open-housing laws but at the descriptions of black and white

athletes provided by sports commentators. In both cases, the critics assumed that: (1) All texts are filled with data, even if some of these data seem irrelevant at first blush; (2) what is not present in a message is often more important than what is present; and (3) how an idea is phrased may sometimes be less important than the fact that the idea is mentioned at all. The good critic therefore asks questions of texts that audiences and poor critics rarely ask. But discernment should not be confused with eccentricity. Few critics ask how often the letter “E” is used in a passage because nobody has yet generated a *good reason* for doing so. Rather, the good critic has a sense for significance, a sense that matures as more and more discourse is examined. This was Sherlock Holmes’s kind of sense.

3. *The good critic is imaginative.* Almost anyone can gather facts about a message. But it takes a good critic to know what to do with them. For example, most people in the 1970s had seen the late night public service announcements urging safe driving. Murray Edelman [1977] had observed them, too. But because he was skeptical, discerning, and imaginative, Edelman thought harder than most people about this ostensibly innocent rhetoric. Although controversial, his conclusion about the safe-driving advertisements was provocative: Such campaigns place responsibility for highway safety completely *on the driver* and therefore deflect attention from a major source of highway carnage—automobile manufacturers. Not only did Edelman see rhetoric where there appeared to be none, and not only was he able to zero-in on just the right features of the texts he analyzed, but he was also able to link his observations to a larger story about how entrenched economic interests use persuasion to maintain positions of privilege.

One need not be a leftist to appreciate how Edelman operated here. The larger story he told—his theory—enriched his inquiries. He did not investigate public service advertisements because he enjoyed them (who does?) but because when watching them late one night he was struck with a general idea about how political pressure operates in the United States. Naturally, this one analysis by Edelman could not establish some grand new law of political influence, but his case study did raise several general questions that he, and others, could try to answer by collecting more evidence. But it was the imaginative leap from data to theory that made Edelman’s observation such an important one.

4. *The good critic is not timid.* Nothstine, Blair, and Copeland [1994] remind us that, because rhetoric is so powerful, the good critic cannot shrink from judgment. That is, good critics form authoritative assessments based on evidence in the artifact. Each day, powerful individuals use rhetoric to feather their nests and to deny others their rights. There are, to be sure, countervailing rhetorics but it takes a critic to know one from the other. Gaining such knowledge transforms criticism from an intellectual game to an engaged lifestyle and the student of rhetoric into a footsoldier in an age-old political battle. To engage in this battle, we must be able to think like the enemy.

THE REASONS FOR CRITICISM

A message is worth analyzing if it tells a story larger than itself. This means that the good critic always has a rationale for examining a text. These rationales take many forms: (1) the study may be worth doing because the rhetor has dealt with a **classic dilemma** (e.g., How can a president apologize for backing misguided legislation without losing his authority?); (2) the rhetor may have dealt imaginatively with **unresolved tensions** (e.g., How can a president appeal to the farmers without losing the urban vote?); (3) the rhetor may have addressed **projected problems** (e.g., How can a president make the nation comfortable with life in a financially uncertain world?); (4) the rhetor's situation may be a **parallel instance** of a continuing one (e.g., How did early presidents change citizens' health habits?); or (5) the rhetor may have been the first to confront some **unique circumstance** (e.g., What persuasive tools can a president use during an impeachment trial?).

There are, of course, countless such good reasons for doing rhetorical criticism. Notice that in all of the above instances, however, the critic has addressed issues of general interest. Concern for the larger story, therefore, should animate each piece of criticism written.

GUIDELINES FOR DEVELOPING A CRITICAL RATIONALE

- (a) *No message is inherently worthy of study.* Just because a given text fascinates the critic does not mean that studying it will be worthwhile. Often, criticism becomes eccentric and too specialized because the critic fails to develop a clear reason for doing criticism. This produces scholarship-by-whim. Thus, when picking a text, the critic should be asking: *Why* does this message intrigue me? "Just because" is not a sufficient answer.
- (b) *The past speaks to us constantly.* Examining the rhetoric of the past, even the distant past, can be quite useful because it gives us perspective on the lives we live today. Naturally, as Wichelns [1972:43] reminds us, all rhetoric is "rooted in immediacy" and we therefore must be careful not to distort the past in a headlong rush to find within it contemporary relevance. But people are people. Cultures are cultures. And rhetoric is rhetoric. The past has much to teach us if we but open our ears to its voices.
- (c) *People who are larger than life may not be life-like.* "Tabloid scholarship" [Hart, 1986a:293] presumes that persuasion by "great" persons will be especially worthy of study. This is a poor assumption. It is easy to become distracted by high profile rhetors like presidents and popes, people who say interesting things but are far removed from the lives most people lead. The good critic remembers that the messages of ordinary people are often highly suggestive because they better represent how persuasion-in-general functions.
- (d) *Imitation is not the sincerest form of flattery.* All too often, critics fail to go far enough in their analysis because they merely "translate" a message rather than explain it. This is especially true for the beginning critic who is

tempted to latch onto an existing critical system and then superimpose it on an unsuspecting piece of rhetoric. The result is criticism that succeeds only in finding new examples of old persuasive strategies.

No set of guidelines will ensure brilliant criticism. But the guidelines above will ensure that we ask *why* criticism is being done in the first place. Skepticism and discernment are central to good criticism, but unless the critic makes an imaginative leap from text to idea, and then to judgment, criticism becomes wasted time and wasted paper. Persuasion is too interesting and criticism too productive to be overturned by unasked and unanswered whys.

THE STANDARDS OF CRITICISM

Evaluation seems to leap out of a word like criticism. Most people are critics in this sense when they complain about the local transit system or the tardiness of mail delivery. Normally, however, these everyday evaluations are not reflective. Few people are willing to actually visit the offices of the transit company, do a time-and-motion study of its operations, interview its personnel, pore over maps of urban geography, calculate the economies of scale produced by different routings, and then do the massive data synthesis necessary to determine whether there is, in fact, sufficient reason to be perturbed by the late bus at the corner of Maple and First. So it is important to distinguish between general complaining and *reflective complaining*, better known as criticism. Equally, it is important to distinguish between the knee-jerk compliment and the *reflective compliment*, which is also criticism. The judicious critic is therefore one who knows when and how to render an evaluation.

Most faulty critical statements result from premature evaluation, from judging the goodness of a rhetorical message before having carefully inspected its parts, before having collected data sufficient to sustain the critical judgment. Another type of faulty evaluation occurs when the critic fails to specify the standards used in the evaluation. We react differently to a critic who says "My mother is a terrific cook because she only buys food in yellow containers" than we do to one who argues "My mother is a good cook because she prepares tasty foods low in cholesterol." The first critic seems to be using absurd standards for judgment while the second seems more reasonable—reasonable, that is, in the eyes of other, reasonable people. In this connection, Black [1978a:7] makes the critic's obligations clear:

The person who hears a speech and says, "I like it," is not making a critical statement. [That person] is reporting the state of his [or her] glands; [s/he] is speaking autobiographically. If we happen to like the person or if we are curious about the state of his [or her] glands, we may be interested in [this] report. Certainly his [or her] psychoanalyst would be interested in it. But neither the analyst nor we should confuse the statement with criticism. It is not criticism because, although it may be stimulated by an object, it is not *about* an object; it is a statement about the rhetor's own feelings, and nothing more.

Rhetorical critics have used quite a variety of critical standards to evaluate the rhetoric they have studied. Debate over the proper role of politics, activism, and theory in rhetorical criticism has enlivened many a journal [Darsey, 1994; Hart, 1994a; McGee, 2001; Kuypers, 2000b; Cloud, 2001; Black, 2002; Campbell, 2002]. Although we shall not detail every conceivable standard here, it is interesting to note their variety, any one of which can be used intelligently or foolishly. The judicious critic is one who knows which standard to use and why. And the exceptionally judicious critic is one who gives fair attention to the many alternative standards by which persuasion may be evaluated, some of which are:

1. *The Utilitarian Standard.* Given the limitations of the situation, did the message do what it was intended to do? Did people react as the rhetor hoped? Compared to other rhetors on this topic in situations like this, did this rhetor do as well as could be expected?
2. *The Artistic Standard.* Was the use of language or other symbols exceptional? Did the artifact meet the highest standards of beauty and formation? Did it so stimulate the imagination that it brought new ideas to life?
3. *The Moral Standard.* Did the message advance “the good” and encourage public virtue? Did the rhetor provide sufficient moral instruction to move the audience toward worthy, not just convenient, goals? Did the artifact meet acceptable standards of right and wrong?
4. *The Scientific Standard.* Did the message represent reality fairly? Did the rhetor’s arguments have a factual base and did conclusions follow directly from the evidence presented? Could the claims in the message be independently verified?
5. *The Historical Standard.* Is it likely that the ideas presented and the values endorsed will outlast the rhetor? Did the message set processes in motion that resulted in major social changes?
6. *The Psychological Standard.* Did the message purge the emotions of the rhetor? the audience? Did it calm important fears? Were people so motivated by the message that social energy and personal commitments were renewed?
7. *The Political Standard.* Did the message advance the goals of the social groups the critic endorses? Will the “right” sort of people be advantaged by it? Will any harm be done to the most deserving people in society because this message was created?

Two things should be clear about this list of standards. First, it is no doubt incomplete—each critic can, and should, freely supplement the list. But whichever standard the critic selects should be defensible as “appropriate.” A second important point is that messages which meet one standard may fail miserably in light of another. So, for example, a speech at a religious revival may succeed

in increasing donations to the church (utilitarian standard) and, because its description of the afterlife is so masterful (artistic standard), the congregation’s guilt over their indulgent life-styles may be relieved (psychological standard).

On the other hand, in describing sin the revivalist may have grossly distorted the extent of the national drug problem (scientific standard) by making it seem as if it were only a problem for minority groups (political standard), thereby making it unlikely that anyone in the future would have much respect for the remarks he made (historical standard). Clearly, one must operate thoughtfully when choosing critical standards as well as when deploying them. Rarely do we have trouble deciding whether we like a thing or dislike it. Explaining why we feel this way takes something else. It takes a judicious critic.

CONCLUSION

Criticism is complicated, yes, but also highly rewarding. To look carefully at what people say and how they say it is to take the human enterprise seriously. Rhetoric is an attempt to build community by exchanging symbols, and since the building of community is what makes us most human, listening to what people have to say is to pay them the ultimate compliment. This is true even if we, as critics, sometimes listen more carefully than is normally expected—or desired. And in paying this much attention to what people say, we also pay attention to ourselves, which makes criticism a journey of self-discovery as well.

There is nothing magical about good criticism. Good criticism is the art of developing and then using **critical probes**: specific, intelligent questions to be asked of a given text. Dozens of these **critical probes** are distributed throughout this book. By using them in criticism, the critic cannot help but become more discerning. Also, because the subject matter here is rhetoric, this book will no doubt add to the reader’s supply of skepticism. And because the work of professional critics will be examined throughout, the reader will be presented with many examples of judiciousness. It is our hope that the variety of subjects and methods presented here will spark the imagination of the next generation of critics.

TIPS FOR THE PRACTICING CRITIC

1. Use the discussion of Ivins’s column as a model for attempts to be “very hard to distract” as a critic. Do not look elsewhere for persuasive messages simply because Ivins seems “merely” to present a history lesson. Just as no message is inherently worthy (or unworthy) of analysis, no *genre* of messages is inherently worthy or unworthy of critical attention. If a piece of discourse calls itself “harmless,” all the more reason to pay attention. Do not let the creator of a message dictate how to “read” that message; the

motives or reasons for speaking that the rhetor gives are hardly ever the *only* motives behind the communicative act.

2. Do not be discouraged if you are at first unable to do more than say “I like it/I hate it.” Ask *why* you are reacting this way to this message in particular. Do specific words or phrases trigger certain positive or negative associations? If unable to immediately identify a single feature of the message that prompts this reaction, the critic is probably reacting to a combination of subtle elements, such as the tone of the message. Try rewording part of the message to see the effect. For instance, if a politician says, “My fellow Americans, I come before you today with a heavy heart. . . .” imagine instead, “I want to talk with you today about a very important problem. . . .” The first version may sound pompous, formal, or melodramatic, while the second may seem direct, informal, and down-to-earth. Why? What makes the first sound pompous and self-important? How does the simple and immediate language (“I want to talk with you”) in the second manage to change the rhetor’s image? Do this several times throughout the message. Gradually, you will be able to discover what it is about the organization and presentation of the rhetor’s ideas that invites a particular response (“I like it/I hate it/It’s funny/It’s boring,” and so on). Keep track of answers to the question “Why do I feel this way about this message?” and you will soon have a set of notes about the message. You will have made your implicit knowledge explicit. Now you can start to use it.

Chapter 3

ANALYZING SITUATIONS

[I wish I could sing!] I speak to you as an American Jew. As Americans we share the profound concern of millions of people about the shame and disgrace of inequality and injustice which make a mockery of the great American idea. As Jews we bring to [this] great demonstration, in which thousands of us proudly participate, a two-fold experience—one of the spirit and one of our history.

In the realm of the spirit, our fathers taught us thousands of years ago that when God created man, he created him as everybody’s neighbor. “Neighbor” is not a geographic term; it is a moral concept. It means our collective responsibility for the preservation of man’s dignity and integrity.

From our Jewish historic experience of three and a half thousand years we say: Our ancient history began with slavery and the yearning for freedom. During the Middle Ages my people lived for a thousand years in the ghettos of Europe. Our modern history begins with a proclamation of emancipation.

It is for these reasons that it is not merely sympathy and compassion for the Black people of America that motivates us. It is above all and beyond all such sympathies and emotions a sense of complete identification and solidarity born of our own historic experience.

[Friends], When I was . . . [in] . . . the Jewish community in Berlin under the Hitler regime, I learned many things. The most important thing that I learned in my life, and under those tragic circumstances, is that bigotry and hatred are not the most urgent problem. The most urgent, the most disgraceful, the most shameful, and the most tragic problem is *silence*. A great people which had created a great civilization had become a nation of silent onlookers. They remained silent in the face of hate, in the face of brutality, and in the face of mass murder.