A Note on Theory and Practice in Rhetorical Criticism

EDWIN BLACK*

The subject of theory and practice mandates attention to the "problem of mediation," to the intersections between thought and action, idea and will, conception and execution. One cannot deal cohesively with the relationship between theory and practice without focusing on the psychological process of criticism, on the critic's own motives, means and ends, on his relationships with his characteristic perspectives on the one hand, and with the critical object on the other. Hence, these observations concerning theory and practice in rhetorical criticism must be concerned at least as much with critics as with criticism.

It is commonsensical to hold that the character of a critique is shaped by its theoretical presuppositions. Virtually all the essays contiguous to this one demonstrate, in one way or another, how fateful a theoretical commitment is to the activity of criticism. The burden in this essay, therefore, is not to document further that already well established connection. Instead, the intent is to explore a few of the implications attending two conceptions of the relationship between the practice of rhetorical criticism and rhetorical theory: a conception that fuses theory and practice, and a conception that divorces them. The linguist Kenneth Pike provided the textual basis of this exploration in an essay that was principally concerned with the descriptive reconstruction of obscure and remote language systems. His account of two standpoints — the etic and emic — for the description of behavior has proved to have been suggestive in fields other than linguistics, and it may also have a certain limited utility in rhetorical criticism as well.

Pike wrote that "The etic viewpoint studies behavior as from outside of a particular system, and as an essential initial approach to an alien system. The emic viewpoint results from studying behavior as from inside the system."

It can be argued that there are perspectives on rhetorical criticism that correspond rather exactly to the etic and emic approaches to the study of linguistic systems. These corresponding perspectives on criticism are, respectively, the theoretic or etic viewpoint, which approaches a rhetorical transaction from outside of that transaction and interprets the transaction in terms of a pre-existing theory; and the non-theoretic or nominalistic or emic viewpoint, which approaches a

*Mr. Black is Professor and Chairman of the Department of Communication Arts, University of Wisconsin — Madison.

1 The relationship between the rhetorical critic and his or her work has received scant attention. Among the very few statements on the subject are Philip Wander and Steven Jenkins, "Rhetoric, Society, and the Critical Response," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 58 (1972), 441-450; and Lawrence W. Rosenfield, "The Experience of Criticism," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 60 (1974), 489-496.


3 Ibid., p. 152.
rhetorical transaction in what is hoped to be its own terms, without conscious expectations drawn from any sources other than the rhetorical transaction itself.

The etic critic, holding that rhetorical discourses, or at least clusters of them, are essentially similar and that their similarities are either descriptively summarized or archetypally idealized in one or another theoretical formulation, proceeds to the task of criticism a prioristically. The etic procedure presupposes that what is known in rhetoric is embodied in rhetorical theory, and that what is not known — in the case of criticism, the interpretation of a particular rhetorical transaction — is to be apprehended only through what is known.

The emic critic, on the other hand, holding that rhetorical transactions themselves constitute the chief source of knowledge in the field of rhetoric and the sole defensible ground for its theoretical formulations, proceeds to the task of criticism with a willing suspension of will itself, seeking to coax from the critical object its own essential form of disclosure.

One perspective on rhetorical criticism — the etic — holds that theory is to practice as means are to ends. The other perspective — the emic — holds that theory is to practice as ends are to means. This formulation seems fairly to summarize the fundamental difference between the two orientations.

The etic orientation has rhetorical theory constituting the means or objective of the critical enterprise. Hence, an etic critic would undertake a general activity in order to achieve a discrete nominalistic objective. In sum, etic criticism applies general ideas for the purpose of illuminating specific rhetorical transactions.

The emic orientation, on the other hand, has the activity of criticism instrumental to the attainment of rhetorical theory. Hence, an emic critic would undertake a discrete, nominalistic activity for the sake of a general objective. Emic criticism does not view the understanding of particular transactions as the end or fulfillment of criticism. Rather, such understanding would acquire intellectual respectability only as it moved toward or issued in general truths about human experience. To the extent that emic criticism was particular in its implications, to that extent it would be, in its own terms, deficient in importance.

My account so far of the etic-emic distinction in rhetorical criticism has been partial. That is: the distinction is as clean and disparate as I can manage, and I have deliberately left out of this account any consideration of grey areas — any consideration of approaches to criticism that might compromise or reconcile or consolidate the etic and emic. The omission is in part for the purpose of inquiry, but it is also in part because these two approaches to criticism are not very easy to amalgamate. The distinction between them is considerable. Nonetheless, I have to grant that just as Pike regards the etic and emic viewpoints in linguistics as shading into one another, so too — at least in principle — there are circumstances in rhetorical criticism when the two perspectives may be assimilated to one another. I happen to believe that such circumstances are comparatively rare, but that is another argument. For the present, each of the approaches solicits our consideration. First, the etic, or "theoretic" approach.

---

1 I must apologize for the phrase "etic critic." It sounds like something invented by a cicada. The term "etic" is not derived from "theoretic," although they are related in the present account. Pike wrote, "I coined the words etic and emic from the words phonetic and phonemic, following the conventional linguistic usage of these later terms" (p. 152).

5 Ibid., pp. 152 and 157.
It seems that there are two sets of problems associated with the etic approach to rhetorical criticism — associated, in other words, with the decision to interpret a rhetorical transaction in terms of a pre-existing theoretical formulation — say, neo-Aristotelianism of fantasy theme analysis or argumentational analysis or Marxist analysis, or whatever. Irrespective of the particular theory to which the would-be critic adheres, there is one set of problems bearing on the practice of criticism, and another set of problems bearing on rhetorical theory.

A problem of applying any pre-existing theory to the interpretation of a rhetorical transaction is that the critic is disposed to find exactly what he or she expected to find. The epistemological constraints imposed by a theoretical orientation inhibit critics from seeing new things, from making new discoveries. Such criticism tends much more to be a confirmation than an inquiry. It is, in the strictest sense, a prejudice.

It is significant that there is not a single case in the literature of our field in which a rhetorical theory has been abandoned as a result of having failed an application in criticism. Etic criticism never discredits theories. It only confirms them. And that may be because the etic approach to rhetorical criticism is continuously attended by the fallacy of question-begging. The critic begins with a fixed idea about how a rhetorical transaction is to be apprehended; apprehends it in accordance with that fixed idea and in no other way; and then, the apprehension having been achieved, the fixed idea is regarded as having been confirmed. The system is infallible. But it is also sterile. It is detached from the phenomenal data of our field. Like some medieval dispute among deductionist clerics, it speaks to no one outside the fraternity. And in the long run, rhetorical theory itself is ill served by etic criticism.

Consider the limited ways in which a rhetorical theory may be grounded. A rhetorical theory may be grounded in logically necessary propositions, as I suppose Perelman has tried to demonstrate, or Johnstone. These are significant achievements, but such theories have a decidedly limited relevance to criticism because they typically — and perhaps necessarily — deal only with a few features of rhetorical transactions, and then more in terms of constraints than of explicable recurrent patterns. Or, a rhetorical theory may be grounded in a view of the psychological regularities that bear upon rhetorical transactions, as fantasy theme analysis purports to be, or the old James-Lange theory of persuasion as adapted to our field by Winans. But inasmuch as rhetorical transactions are themselves a major source of information about such psychological regularities — and about situational regularities as well — it seems as though criticism would stand much more to inform this sort of rhetorical theory than to be informed by it. Or, finally, a rhetorical theory may be grounded in and its constituents be general propositions

---


about the mass of rhetorical transactions that occur in the world. But if that is to be our conception of a rhetorical theory, than theory is something that logically and temporally follows criticism — it does not precede it.

And, that brings as to emic criticism — to criticism that interprets its object on the object's own terms. Here let me be explicit that I am confining my remarks about the emic approach to the interpretive phase of criticism only. I don't believe that a critic should evaluate an object emically, but an emic interpretation may be an avenue into a fair and full etic evaluation.

A complication with emic criticism arises in connection with the good faith of the critic. Here is an approach to criticism in which, as a prerequisite to the interpretation of an object, the critic will undertake to see the object on its own terms — to see it with the utmost sympathy and compassionate understanding. This sympathetic explication is, of course, only a phase in the process of critical engagement. The emic critic may, and probably will, proceed from sympathy to distance, from the suspension of judgment to the rendering of judgment. But at some moment — probably early — in his or her engagement with an object, the emic critic will aspire to so sympathetic an account that the critic's audience will understand that object as, in some sense, inevitable. Only then will the emic critic be in a position to judge the object, for only then would the critic have fully disclosed what it is that is the subject of judgment.

Perhaps it would be suggestive to view the paradigmatic figures for etic and emic criticism as, respectively, the jurist and the psychoanalyst. The jurist has available a body of law and precedent, corresponding to the theoretical referent of etic criticism, to which he subjects matters that are presented for adjudication. That body of law and precedent is preordained, and although there is room for a clever jurist to be supple and innovative in applying the law — and, indeed, the law itself offers some latitude, i.e., leaves some things to his judgment — the jurist still is obliged to see events juridically, to conform his perceptions and interpretations to the body of pre-established law. Analogically, the etic critic seeks to conform the interpretation of a rhetorical transaction to the shape of his theoretical stance. The critic may, in principle, modify the theory by his application of it, just as a jurist may sometimes make "new law," but in each case, a mosaic of established precedents is imprinted on the object of judgment.

The psychoanalyst, on the other hand, seeks motives that he anticipates will be contingent, will pertain to the particular case because they are discovered in the particular case. The psychoanalyst's training and experience instruct him in where to look, but not in what to see. His hypotheses about where to look (e.g., at formative early experiences or parental relationships) give impetus to his explanation, but what he is to see requires disclosure and ultimate confirmation from the subject of the analysis, the analysand. Analogically, the emic critic may well have topoi in which to begin his exploration, but the critical object is the source and ultimately the confirmation of the form that the criticism may take.

---

Psychoanalysis is, of course, a theory. But it is a theory whose cornerstone is a myth — the oedipal myth. The law, on the other hand, is a code, a network of shalt-nots. I hope it is not too pretentious to suggest that the two paradigms represent two ways of understanding human experience. In the story of Moses coming down from Sinai with the Law, we have a fusion of the two modes and a demonstration of their complementarity: the transaction between Moses, as the representative of Israel, and God is the myth; the Tablets of the Law contain the code. And the story lends itself to emphasis of one or the other mode — to the covenant between Israel and God, or to the Law on which that covenant hinges.

If we had to give names to these two modes of understanding, we might well call the mode that subsumes etic criticism the enthymematic, and the mode that subsumes emic criticism the mythic. The enthymematic mode, which is categorical and static, has judgment as its subject and the syllogism as its form. The mythic mode, which is provisional and kinetic, has history as its subject and the syllogism as its form.

There have been serious efforts to embody the mythic mode in a theoretical formulation for purposes of criticism, notably in Burke’s dramatism, and Bormann’s fantasy theme analysis. Considered solely as instrumentalities for criticism, both efforts have had mixed results. Each begins promisingly with the expectation that a static taxonomy will not suffice to account for phenomena so mutable and unstable as rhetorical transactions, and each ends by sponsoring a taxonomy. Burke’s dramatistic theory yields a finite inventory of ratios: a pentad that Burke, the improvisatory critic, rarely uses, but that would-be Burkeans have applied all too literally. And fantasy theme analysis, by anticipating prior to inspection the course of a belief, and by imposing on all of its subjects a categorical scheme that is reductive in its power of description, sometimes has yielded criticism that seems formulary and predictable. Both theories excited great interest by taking drama seriously as a modality of criticism. Both theories converted generative insights into taxonomical schemata, and so did not take drama seriously enough.

Perhaps a reconciliation between the etic and emic approaches to criticism can be found not in the direction of formulating emic criticism into an etic theory, but rather in focusing on some implications of each approach to the critic. The same crucial issue applies both to the relationship between the critic and his method and to the relationship between the critic and his subject. That issue is the degree to which the critic has temporarily effaced himself and become the faithful instrument of transmission either of a method or of a subject. If the etic critic — or, perhaps, the critic in an etic phase of criticism — is excessively detached from his method, the critique may be mechanical, unsubtle — deficient as criticism. And if the emic critic — or the critic in an emic phase of criticism — is excessively detached from his subject, the critique may be uncomprehending, doctrinaire — deficient as criticism. In either case, the deficiency may be rectified only by the critic’s extending himself, risking himself, not possessing a method but being

10 Bormann.
11 This theme is expanded upon in my “Author’s Foreward,” Rhetorical Criticism: A Study in Method (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978), pp. ix-xv.
possessed by it: mastering a subject by yielding to it.

It is the nature of rhetorical discourses that they demand commitments — sometimes total commitments — commitments about what is real and what is good and what is obligatory and what is necessary. And that is why rhetorical criticism is not an enterprise for triflers. To the extent that a rhetorical critic works in good faith, he abandons himself to the requirements of an idea or to the texture of an alien experience. In more senses than one, the critic is an actor.