

CRITERIA FOR ADEQUACY IN RHETORICAL CRITICISM

SONJA K. FOSS

Based on some of the presuppositions of rhetorical criticism, four standards for criterial adequacy in this method of inquiry are suggested: (1) Justification of claims; (2) presentation of the choices available to the rhetor and assumption of responsibility for the critic's own choices; (3) coherent presentation of theoretical framework; and (4) capacity to incorporate other perspectives.

Reliability and validity as standards for criterial adequacy in quantitative research are well established—so much so that I frequently encounter students who, when they first study the methodology of rhetorical criticism, feel it is an inferior research method because these standards are not relevant. In their attempts to write their own or to evaluate other essays of rhetorical criticism, these students are struck by the contrast between what is viewed as appropriate in essays of qualitative as opposed to quantitative research.

Their uncertainty is manifest in a number of questions: What makes one essay of criticism superior to another? By what standards does an instructor judge students' essays of criticism? How much and what should be included in an essay so that the reader will accept the interpretation being offered? The desire to provide answers to these questions, combined with my discovery that criterial adequacy is a topic generally not dealt with comprehensively in our textbooks and journals, provided the impetus for this essay.¹

I see this essay as only one of many possible responses to the

Sonja K. Foss is Assistant Professor of Speech Communication at the University of Denver.

¹Among the essays that deal with criterial adequacy in rhetorical criticism is that by Philip Wander and Steven Jenkins, "Rhetoric, Society, and the Critical Response," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 58 (December 1972), 441-50; and the symposium by Cronkhite and Liska, Fisher, Scheidel, and Delia and Grossberg in *Western Journal of Speech Communication*, 41 (Winter 1977).

question of standards for criterial adequacy in rhetorical criticism. In some instances, I have summarized ideas that have been espoused by many rhetorical critics, but I am not asking everyone to agree with this particular point of view. Neither do I posit that the four criteria I will suggest comprise an exhaustive list. I see this essay and the four proposed criteria as one strand of a discussion of this topic, and I hope other criteria will be uncovered or these will be modified in future discussions.

PRESUPPOSITIONS OF RHETORICAL CRITICISM

My list of standards of adequacy is limited in part because I chose to focus only on three presuppositions on which I believe rhetorical criticism is based. There are many others, certainly, but those I have selected look at three different elements in the process of rhetorical criticism: one views the data of criticism, one focuses on the nature of the human being as subject and critic, and one is concerned with the nature of rhetorical criticism per se. The examination and tracing of the implications of other assumptions underlying rhetorical criticism would yield other criteria as well, although the ones selected here seem to me to be among the major presuppositions of this method of inquiry. The three presuppositions I will examine are: (1) data cannot be verified objectively; (2) the human being has freedom of choice; and (3) contribution to theory is a major goal of rhetorical criticism.

Data Cannot be Verified Objectively

Inquiry in rhetorical criticism rejects the view that objectively verified acts and conditions exist and that knowledge about data is simply an accurate representation of such acts and conditions.² When engaged in rhetorical criticism, the critic is not concerned with finding the one correct interpretation of the symbolic activity because he or she recognizes that it does not constitute a reality that can be verified objectively.

A view of knowledge that is foundational to rhetorical criti-

²See Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1979), 163, 170.

cism seems to be one that acknowledges the primacy of symbolicity to the human being. Knowledge about data is more accurately seen as symbolic, where we know data only through symbolic constructs.³ Thus, our relationship with data is not between us and the symbolic activity we study, but rather between us and propositions about those data.⁴

If knowledge of data is symbolic, the terminology the critic uses will yield various interpretations. Burke calls the vocabulary that provides one's perspective a terministic screen;⁵ it also could be called one's paradigm, framework, or theory, and while I recognize the specialized way in which *theory* is often defined, I will use these as synonymous terms. The terministic screen selected affects what and how we perceive data, as these examples demonstrate:

The rules of baseball define what will be seen as a "ball" or a "strike," much as the rules of psychoanalysis define what is to be apprehended as a "repetition compulsion." Physics, too, creates its "forces" and "vectors," much as sociology brings "role conflicts" or "trained incapacity" to consciousness.⁶

If we agree that data cannot be directly conveyed and that all representations of them are symbolically mediated, the study of a speech or any symbolic act always is from the viewpoint of something else. A useful way to see knowledge, then, is as metaphorical.⁷ Whatever perspective we select as the means to view data, it treats the data *as* something, thus creating them and making them objects of our experience.

This metaphorical view of data requires the critic to recognize that many descriptions of data are available from many per-

³See Richard H. Brown, *A Poetic for Sociology: Toward a Logic of Discovery for the Human Sciences* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1977), 29, 33; and Rorty, 182-83.

⁴A view of data as symbolic does not deny another kind of awareness is possible—the ability to respond to stimuli in a signaling manner as animals do. Rorty differentiates between this type of awareness, discriminative behavior, and awareness as justified true belief, p. 182.

⁵Kenneth Burke, *Language as Symbolic Action: Essays on Life, Literature, and Method* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1966), 44-62.

⁶Brown, 77.

⁷Brown suggests that knowledge is metaphoric, p. 77.

spectives and that there are as many sets of truths or realities as there are vocabularies from which to conduct inquiry. Consequently, there is no one correct view of data; all are equally real. One critic's view is simply one way of seeing, but it is not necessarily *the* correct way. Although no perspective on data has priority over another in that any interpretation creates a reality, however, not all perspectives are of equal value for the critic. That there are criteria for choosing among the various perspectives is the central concern of this essay, and such standards will be suggested later.

Closely related to the notion that knowledge of data is a symbolic construction is the concept that the major source of the data is the critic. The critic cannot be objective, impartial, and removed from the data because he or she only can know the world through his or her interpretations of it.⁸ Because the critic brings to the inquiry his or her own frame of reference, with concomitant values, history, and the like, the study of data actually is more a study of the critic's representational system than of the data themselves. This presupposition seems to suggest that rhetorical criticism cannot escape total relativism. Again, standards will be suggested later to help insure that the view of the data presented is one that others outside of the critic can recognize as valid.

The Human Being has Freedom of Choice

If reality does not have a particular essence, the truth of which can be known objectively, neither can the human being be known objectively through a single descriptive framework. To work toward such objective knowledge of the individual and to believe its attainment is possible reduces the possibilities for human choice because, in such a view, the person has no choice but to accept things as they are "in reality." The techniques

⁸There are rhetorical critics who suggest the critic should be as objective as possible. Black, for example, offers praise for objectivity and believes some critical methods—the neo-Aristotelian one in particular—constitute "a methodology that, independently applied by different men to the same object, can yield the same conclusions." Edwin Black, *Rhetorical Criticism: A Study in Method* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1978), 76-77.

of rhetorical criticism do not (or should not) attempt to define the human being from only one perspective.

Not only is there choice in rhetorical criticism of the framework used to describe the subjects of the study, but they are seen as having the freedom to choose their actions. Implicit in rhetorical criticism is the assumption that humans are self-defining, initiating, flexible, capable of choosing alternative vocabularies with which to view the world, and thus diverse in interpretations and motives. The symbolism created by humans who have choice, then, cannot be reduced to the status of things that one can know, control, and predict with certainty.

CONTRIBUTION TO THEORY IS A MAJOR GOAL OF RHETORICAL CRITICISM

My third presupposition is concerned with the process of rhetorical criticism itself. It posits that the critic desires to connect his or her investigation of particular data to a larger scheme—that is, to relate the results of the investigation to theory.

A typical view of the process of theory development, often concomitant with the view of reality as capable of objective verification, is that we have theories *about* data. We examine the data and come to understand them; then we formulate a theory that explains them. But if we accept the notion that things are not knowable apart from our symbolic perspective or theory, then data cannot be separated from theory.

That any essay of rhetorical criticism cannot not contribute to theory is evident in the very process of criticism. When we approach our data, we bring to them our particular paradigm, a form that allows us to apprehend content of those data. In other words, we see the content of data only through the form we have selected. Our knowledge of the content has the potential to cause us to revise the theory or form in light of our experience with the content.⁹ Thus, whether the process is conscious, intentional, or addressed directly, the critic is involved in relating data to theory.

With this view of theory development in rhetorical criticism, knowledge and progress cannot be measured in terms of linear

⁹Brown, 40-43.

accumulation, which assumes that a single vocabulary or metaphor is used by all critics so that pieces of knowledge are built on previous ones. A better metaphor for the process seems to be a conversation.¹⁰ Our knowledge about data is attained by continual adjustments of ideas or words in a discursive pattern between critics who function as conversational partners. Given that data cannot be verified objectively, our aim becomes to continue the conversation about the data rather than to discover the truth about them.

The interactants may choose to duplicate inherited or traditional vocabularies in their conversations. Such duplication occurred in the first decades of the formal practice of rhetorical criticism, when the neo-Aristotelian framework became virtually the only one employed for analyzing discourse. In other instances, however, the interlocutors may create new frameworks, discussing data in "abnormal"¹¹ ways that are not commensurate with the traditional frameworks of the conversation. They invent new metaphors, which facilitate a recognition of the data in new forms and a new assessment of the data. Thus, contemporary issues in rhetorical criticism well might be viewed as topics at a certain stage of a conversation that never will end with the attainment of truth, but that will continue as the conversation generates further abnormal discourse.

STANDARDS FOR CRITERIAL ADEQUACY

One way to approach the formulation of standards for criterial adequacy in rhetorical criticism is to explore the implications of its presuppositions, allowing them to suggest what standards best might preserve them. Again, in adopting this approach, I am not suggesting that these are the only possible standards of criterial adequacy for criticism, nor am I suggesting that these are new and never have been formulated previously. I posit four standards for adequacy, the first of which is justification.

¹⁰Several view the attainment of new knowledge via the metaphor of a conversation. See Rorty, 319; and Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (1960; rpt. New York: Seabury Press, 1975), 351.

¹¹Rorty uses this term to describe investigators' breaking away from traditional perspectives, p. 387.

Justification

If the data of criticism cannot be verified objectively and can be known only according to the symbolic perspective assumed by the critic, he or she cannot be required to describe the data being studied so the description corresponds to how the data are in reality. Instead, the critic must be able to justify what he or she says, provide warranted assertibility, offer reasons, or argue in support of his or her claims.¹² Our focus then shifts from a criterion devised to insure correspondence between the explanation and the data to a criterion that deals with the symbolic level at which we approach reality—choosing among alternative standards of justification. A claim to knowledge becomes a claim to have justified belief, and discussions of truth become discussions about justification.¹³

The critic may justify his or her claims about data in a number of ways. For contemporary critics, the process likely would include acknowledging—at least implicitly—that alternative interpretations and competing claims exist, rather than asserting that his or her claims are the only ones possible. The critic might want to consider the circumstances under which the claims being made might be inadequate and to consider to the extent that it is possible other perspectives from which the claims would be seen as inappropriate. In addition, the critic probably would want to ground his or her claims in the data themselves—not to argue that the claims represent the way the data are, but to show what was seen in the data that led to the conclusions drawn. The critic also might be expected to put his or her claims together in a narrative that explains clearly and thoroughly the data from his or her perspective so that both make sense to the reader.

But what determines if the means of justification are adequate in the writing of a critical essay? The community or context

¹²Among those who suggest that argumentation plays a central role in rhetorical criticism or inquiry in general are: Wayne Brockriede, "Rhetorical Criticism as Argument," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 60 (April 1974), 165-74; David Zarefsky, "Criteria for Adequacy in Claims About Communication," paper presented at the Speech Communication Association convention, Anaheim, California (November 13, 1981), 9; and Rorty, 278-80.

¹³Rorty, 282.

in which the justification occurs sets the standards for appropriate practices of inquiry, including standards for proper form and acceptable premises of content. Thus, the precise behaviors in which the critic should engage as he or she justifies claims only can be established in light of social practice, the social context, or consensual judgments by the relevant audience. Just as the critic's view of the data will be determined by his or her framework, so his or her method of justification will be judged by the framework of the particular community in which it occurs.

This view of standards for justification as set in a particular community is consistent with the view of theory development as a conversation. A conversation about data must take place in some community with designated rules governing inquiry, such as those that determine when a critic has justified a claim sufficiently to allow its introduction as a major topic of the conversation. The critic's work is shared with the community in the hope that the responses of the members of that community—the interactants or in this case, the readers of the essay—will sharpen his or her insights, spur their own critical thinking, and thus generate further conversation on the topic.

Justification within a particular community does not mean, however, that any audience the critic can find to agree with his or her claims constitutes adequate justification for them. A constraint on the criterion of justification according to the standards of a particular community is that the arguments must be acceptable to the audience when that audience is engaged in critical thought. The audience should be one that has examined the research procedure and has not as yet been successful in deriving from the data claims that are more plausible than the one the critic is offering.¹⁴ In other words, the critic's process of inquiry and claims are scrutinized carefully by the audience, just as interlocutors do when they are engaged in a serious discussion.

The relevant community, however, cannot be expected to agree totally on the validity of the critic's claims about the data. Because each person within that community approaches

¹⁴This constraint on the criterion of justification according to audience standards was suggested by Zarefsky, p. 4.

the critic's work from a somewhat different perspective, what the critic and the audience can expect from each other is not total agreement, but compatibility, satisfaction with each other's rationality, and some insight into how each arrived at his or her view of the data.

Presentation of and Assumption of Responsibility for Choice

The second presupposition discussed was that human beings have freedom of choice in their symbolic activity. Despite a general recognition of choice as basic to human nature, however, many critics find themselves writing as though their subjects are objects and expounding on their own claims as though they have no choice about what conclusions to draw. This criterion attempts to deal with both of these tendencies so that the critic allows choice both to the rhetor being studied and to him or herself as the investigator.

Choice for the rhetor can be recognized explicitly in a number of ways in an essay of criticism. The critic, for example, can describe the range of choices that plausibly were available to the rhetor. One of the best examples of this technique can be seen in Bormann's essay on the Eagleton affair, where he presents some of the options available to McGovern that he did not choose.¹⁵

Another means to recognize explicitly the notion of choice is to allow the rhetors being studied to express themselves in their own terminology and context as fully as possible. This contrasts with the researcher who keeps his or her subjects silent either by not quoting them directly or quoting them without supplying adequate context. Subjects also can be silenced by giving them voice only through the critic's language—through particular categories of proof, for example—resulting in means of expression that are the same regardless of the setting, subjects' intentions, or their conceptions of their actions. In contrast, when the subjects' symbolic activity itself is allowed into the body of the critical essay and is used to determine in part what approach will be used to study the symbolic act, the critic has not deper-

¹⁵Ernest G. Bormann, "The Eagleton Affair: A Fantasy Theme Analysis," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 59 (April 1973), 143-59.

sonalized the subjects and has recognized them explicitly as possessors of choice.¹⁶

The explicit recognition of the freedom of the human being to choose is necessary in criticism not only in the critic's approach to the rhetor being studied, but in the critic's own writing of the critical essay. If the critic truly sees the individual as having choice, then he or she will not present his or her claims as being the truth about reality, but rather as one way of describing the data. To see only one interpretation as correct is to give up the freedom to discover another vocabulary or alternative perspective.

Not only must the critic avoid seeing his or her claims as the only correct ones, but he or she also must make choices about or evaluate the symbolic activity of the rhetor being studied. Admittedly, there are some rhetorical critics who do not believe that criticism must be evaluative; some say it seeks not to judge but to explain¹⁷ and that it does not imply a prescriptive mode of writing or any judgmental necessity.¹⁸ As a result of analyzing a symbolic act, however, the critic must have ideas about what could have been done to make the act function more effectively. To avoid making an evaluation as a result of the inquiry, then, is to denigrate human choice by refusing to make a choice when given the opportunity.

Coherent Presentation of Theoretical Framework

The last two criteria for adequacy suggested are developed from the assumption that contribution to theory is an inevitable result of rhetorical criticism. My third presupposition was that the critic cannot escape involvement with theory because he or she employs some theory or perspective in the study of the data, and the data cannot be known outside of this theory. This convergence of data and theory suggests two criteria for adequacy—one relating to the internal aspects of the theory (the data) and

the other relating to its more external aspects (its form or the theory itself). I am separating these to discuss them more easily, recognizing that such separation is impossible. I will begin with the internal criterion dealing with coherence.

If we abandon the notion that the truth about data can be verified objectively, we also must abandon as a criterion for adequacy how well the theory corresponds to the data as they are in reality. Left with examining relations among pieces of the framework through which we view the data, then, the criterion these suggest is coherence, or the cogent integration of the diverse phenomena of the framework. The critic must order, arrange, and present the various aspects of his or her perspective on the data so that they are congruent and consistent. The result is closure, with the elements of the theory reinforcing one another and strengthening the total system. But if parts of the theory are inconsistent, the result is likely to be contradiction and ambiguity.

Coherence requires some rules by which aspects of the theory are organized and apprehended, and these rules are determined by the critic's purposes and theoretical perspective, acquiring "its life," as Gadamer has explained, "only from the light in which it is presented to us."¹⁹ The result of coherence, based on a particular theory or metaphor, should be enhanced perception for the reader. The critic makes the data from his or her perspective accessible and allows the reader partial entrance into the world he or she has created. Accepting the critic's metaphor, presented in a coherent form, we come to see the data partially from the critic's perspective and interpret them accordingly.

Capacity to Incorporate Other Perspectives

With this criterion, we judge a theory by its external aspects and focus on its range, or its power to incorporate or be translated into other symbolic vocabularies.²⁰ Certainly not all essays of rhetorical criticism must have wide-reaching range, but a minimum standard for adequacy seems to be that the data must

¹⁶Brown, 65-69.

¹⁷Theorists of both views are cited by Stephen E. Lucas, "The Schism in Rhetorical Scholarship," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 67 (February 1981), 10-11.

¹⁸Mark S. Klyn, "Toward a Pluralistic Rhetorical Criticism," *Essays on Rhetorical Criticism*, ed. Thomas R. Nilsen (New York: Random House, 1968), 147.

¹⁹Gadamer, 252.

²⁰The concept of range is suggested by Brown, 102-07.

be presented as more than raw data; the critic should see them as generalizable to a theory of some sort or meaningful within another metaphor or perspective. The perspective on the data should be able to be elaborated into sub-metaphors or should serve as a metaphor of a larger domain.

That the critic must relate the data studied to something is inevitable, of course, because the theory is the form of the inquiry. What I am advocating is that the critic make a conscious effort to make the data significant in some way by expanding the initial perspective as a result of the study of the data. The more translation the critic is able to achieve out of the initial perspective into new ones, the greater the contribution the essay will make to knowledge about the data studied and to continuation of the theoretical conversation.

CONCLUSION

On the basis of the presupposition that data cannot be verified objectively, I have suggested the standard of justification of claims. The presupposition that humans have choice led to the second criterion, presentation of and assumption of responsibility for choice. My third presupposition, that contribution to theory is a major goal of rhetorical criticism, contributed two standards of criterial adequacy, coherent presentation of theoretical framework and capacity to incorporate other perspectives. These suggested standards of criterial adequacy often are followed in current essays of rhetorical criticism. What might the implications be of following such standards more rigorously?

One implication of these standards seems to me to be that they insure that rhetorical critics will continue to generate new thinking and alternative methods of criticism because they discourage adherence to only one method as we saw was the case with neo-Aristotelianism for many years. The recognition that there is no one correct form with which to view data, that humans with freedom of choice will continue to come up with new perspectives on symbolic activity, and that the critic's own purposes serve as an organizing principle for a coherent essay seem to me to insure that we will not accept one interpretation of or perspective on criticism as the true one.

Second, these criteria, based on and developed out of pre-

suppositions at the foundation of rhetorical criticism, encourage the critic to view inquiry as an integrated and interrelated process, whereby assumptions are interrelated with questions asked, tools employed, standards for criterial adequacy, and insights gained. They encourage critics to develop research methods in which all elements of the process have been questioned and developed into a consistent system.

Finally, these criteria reinforce the notion that rhetorical criticism has no need to copy the research methods of the quantitative paradigm. The metaphor controlling rhetorical criticism is art, not science. Data are dealt with more as the artist deals with experience than as the scientist does, and the insights derived from this metaphor are no less valuable than those produced by other metaphors.