Applied Phenomenology and the Return of the Unalienated Self?

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This text is sermonic. Some will say reactionary. It is certainly a counter-statement to what the author takes to be contemporary rhetorical and critical theory, which she characterizes as relativistic, fetishistic, narcissistic, agonistic, inauthentic, and fundamentally hopeless. Placed end to end, these characteristics lead rhetoric to the dilemma of "trying to use language as if it can be truthful while believing that it cannot be." Couture argues that contemporary rhetorical and critical theories "prevent us from describing truth as a function of development, change, and growth and, as a result, prevent us from assessing truth as an essentially human phenomenon." Thus, she would use phenomenology to restore truth to writing. The truth she would restore is that human being—that is, the condition of being human—biologically and spiritually necessitates that we are engaged in a collective enterprise that is a dynamic, intersubjective process of enfolding truth seeking. These are her words; I am only reassembling them for the sake of brevity.

The list of modern dogmas she would counter is long. She would replace skepticism with faith, autonomy and individualism with human being, historicism and social determinism with free will, difference with universality, and resistance with acceptance/submission. By inverting these hierarchies, Couture would refashion rhetoric from an immoral art designed to promote individual domination over others into a teleological enterprise in which we all seek universal truth. As she says, "We have been seduced into thinking that only a rhetoric of resistance and contention, a rhetoric that conquers and subdues, will lead us to knowledge, truth, and personal recognition" when in fact such a rhetoric can only ever lead us endlessly nowhere.

The critique of contemporary theories upon which she rests her own theory consists of questioning the three tenets upon which she says relativistic criticism and rhetoric rest: "A historicist interpretation of human will as it is determined by ideology; an essentialist interpretation of objective truth; and a fundamentalist interpretation of human activity as it progresses over time." Against these dogmas she offers the
possibility of an unalienated self working in concert with others to live a dynamic process of truth seeking through self discovery and expression of lived experience: applied phenomenology.

As you may recall, the phenomenological project was an attempt to introspect the essences of things as they exist in themselves. Husserl asserted that a pre-suppositionless, pre-theoretical understanding of consciousness was possible, and that one could acquire such an understanding through careful attention to lived experience. Phenomenology plays a dual role for Couture, I think. On the one hand, it offers a theoretical underpinning for the idea that meaning is intersubjectively derived and thus is a collective enterprise rather than an illusion, or a linguistic effect, or an object. On the other hand, phenomenology supports the idea that one can think past the structures and confines of one's place in history and society to directly encounter one's experience of being human, which affords each of us contact with all others (rejects the incomensurability arguments) and the hope of communal understanding. Phenomenology thus provides us with the hope of getting past local and contingent differences to what is fundamentally the same in all of us because we are human beings engaged in the endlessly ongoing project of being human. This ongoing project is carried out in the process of making meaning—that is, in the intersubjective process of discovering who one is and presenting one's discoveries to the world, not so as to control the world, but to participate in it. Similarly, when one encounters another's perspective, because one has understood the phenomenological project, one tries to discover how the world of human being must accommodate the other's perspective, being ready to modify one's own in order to make the adjustment. One must, in other words, submit one's self to the process of communal truth-seeking if one wants to be a good rhetorician.

Rhetorical invention, as I understand Couture, thus becomes an intersubjective process whereby one tries to capture the meaning of a text (or event, or situation) by interweaving what one takes the text to mean with what others have said it means in order to encounter a wider—she would say "enfolding"—universal interpretation. This is not, I take it, a matter of simple pluralism, much less liberal "I'm-okay-you're-okay humanism," but rather a practice of discovering an ever-fuller interpretation. Through our disagreeing, for example, about the meaning of a text, we could come to a third understanding, one that incorporated some aspects of your understanding and some of mine and some that we discovered and revised about ourselves in the process of comparing notes. In the "old" rhetorical model, we would either reject each other's meaning as incommensurable, or each of us would immediately set about trying to prove the other wrong. Phenomenological rhetoric is more diplomatic. It is also more deliberative in the sense that
it recognizes both of us as engaged in a common enterprise, the success of which will benefit both of us, and thus we will strive to make the best decision, even if that does not lead us to the decision we would most immediately gravitate toward. Sometimes a change for the better can be made against you. And sometimes you have to change yourself in order to better understand yourself. As Couture says, “The pursuit of truth directs us toward common consciousness or spirituality, through which we achieve ultimately a mutual understanding of what is truth. Phenomenology becomes a practice that drives us toward this end, primarily through regulating the conflicts that arise when we confront the differences in our individual or socialized perspectives and surrender to a cooperative, progressive enterprise to seek a common truth.” Thus, rhetoric becomes a process of surrendering the self to become part of the greater truth.

From here I think it is abundantly clear that Couture has aligned herself with the Platonic strain of rhetorical theory—not that she’s a Platonist. Certainly, the emphasis on lived experience that she gets from phenomenology protects her from that accusation. The word *phenomenology* comes from the Greek word for appearances and thus suggests that this is a philosophy of the world as it appears, which makes it different from a Platonic rhetoric. Nevertheless, it is clearly an idealistic, teleological rhetorical theory, and therefore we can usefully say it is in the, or at least of the, Platonic tradition. I couldn’t help but think of Richard Weaver as I read this book, and of Booth’s *Modern Dogma*, a text that smashed at many of the same idols that Couture smash at. As a counter-statement to simple-minded historicism of the incommensurable worlds type, which leaves us alone in our own little universes, and as a critique of those who would fashion a simple-minded notion of empirical truth and then on that basis dismiss truth as a concept and a purpose, *Toward a Phenomenological Rhetoric* is clearly effective. But as a positive statement of what all rhetorical theory always ought to be about, I find the text much less compelling.

It would seem that Couture wants all rhetorical theory to be a dialogic search for collective knowledge about the self and the lived world that is always geared toward ever refining a “totalizing” (her word) notion of “our lives in this world, both as individuals and as members of the common family of humankind.” Thus, the “common project of humanity” that she refers to becomes an “endless truth-seeking dynamic . . . a continuous willful effort . . . to discover the unknown, to understand the misunderstood.” I simply find it hard to believe that pursuit of truth and knowledge characterizes human being, that to qualify as a human being you have to pursue truth. This strikes me as, well, narcissistic. Academics, perhaps, dedicate their lives to the pursuit of truth, and humanities scholars to the truth through writing. But most other people either take the truth for granted, as written in The
Book, or they figure it’s got nothing to do with them. They have problems to solve, hardships to overcome, pleasures to relish, and pain to endure—but endless truth to pursue?

To be fair to Couture, she develops this theory as one that can be applied, and she offers an example of its application in the form of a tricky political situation at the university where she worked while she was writing this book. The situation consisted of a deliberative rhetorical situation in which the affirmative action desires of a dean had to be accommodated to the traditional hiring practices of an English department. Couture explains how as chair she negotiated this Scylla and Charybdis by writing a document that managed to accommodate the seemingly incompatible needs, and she was able to write this document because she employed a rhetorical invention that included the sort of soul searching and modifying practice that her phenomenological rhetoric promotes. Had she used the agonistic, procedure-bound rhetoric of traditional disputation, she says, she would have created great animosity on all sides and accomplished nothing.

So as a practical rhetoric, the invention strategy of this phenomenological rhetoric can be seen to work. And certainly any rhetorical theory that would deny the importance of empathy, of soul searching, and of openness to changing one’s mind, must be considered pugnacious and ultimately unacceptable on its own. And yet at the same time, if this phenomenological rhetoric were one’s only rhetorical theory, one could talk oneself into dangerous positions. Resistance is an appropriate response to some situations. And an aggressive defense of one’s own self interests may also be necessary from time to time. Or so I still believe, Couture’s arguments to the contrary notwithstanding. I simply can’t give up either autonomy or resistance as at least occasional values. Maybe that’s because I was raised a male. All the same, to hear someone assert with great conviction that we must submit to a totalizing, universal human project, that indeed we are biologically and spiritually compelled to accept this project, makes me very ill at ease. If it were true that we are biologically and spiritually compelled to accept this project, then we don’t need the argument to correct our progress. If, on the other hand, we do need the argument, then we are somehow biologically and spiritually corrupt. Our inner vision must be corrected, our souls realigned. This is why I say the text is sermonic. And it is this feature of the text which I find objectionable.

The difficulty I think, is not Couture’s alone, but rather the problem that arises whenever one would make a philosophy of rhetoric. As an invention strategy, Couture’s phenomenological rhetoric is an important counter-statement, and an approach to thinking that everyone should read and employ. But to turn an invention strategy into a way of life, to assert in fact that it is The Way of life, is to attempt to control life by controlling discourse, which is rhetoric at its worst.