

## LEARNING TO READ

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**M**ichael Leff was my teacher. I share this good fortune with many others, of course, and of his charity and wisdom in that role I can offer little by way of unique testimonial. His knowledge of rhetoric was both encyclopedic and fluent, yet he tended to inspire more often than intimidate; in the classroom, he could deliver lectures of remarkable historical and theoretical sweep, yet he also could instigate discussions of such focused intensity that he sometimes would have to interrupt a lively seminar to urge his students to attend to the *next* sentence of a text; he was a textual critic of unmatched subtlety and power, but when reading even his students' most faltering drafts he was generous, patient, and encouraging. I believe that just about everyone who had the pleasure to be Leff's student, whether as undergraduate, graduate, or colleague, would recall similar impressions.

But when I first encountered the work of Michael Leff, I was someone else's student. Tom Rosteck—another of Leff's students, as fate would have it—was teaching rhetorical criticism at the University of Arkansas in the spring of 1991, and on his syllabus was Leff's iconic 1983 Van Zelst lecture, "Rhetorical Timing in Lincoln's 'House Divided' Speech."<sup>1</sup> I wasn't especially interested in Lincoln, nor in the history of public address. I had no knowledge of 1850s politics, and wasn't looking to learn more.<sup>2</sup> In my second semester of graduate school, I lacked the ability to appreciate the skill with which Leff

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positioned his reading of the speech against those provided by historians. I missed entirely the significance of Leff's insistence that Lincoln's speech should be considered a "masterpiece of oratorical eloquence" (4) as I was entirely ignorant about ancient and ongoing disciplinary squabbles.<sup>3</sup> And as I had but scant understanding of the rhetorical tradition, the neoclassical foundations of Leff's approach were utterly obscure to me. But it was clear, even to me and even then, that in reading his essay I was being taught something quite significant about the art of rhetorical criticism.

I want to attend closely to Leff's essay with the purpose of finally setting down some of the reactions I had to it when I first read it but have only learned how to articulate after many subsequent readings of it together with some reading of other things. In particular, I want to try to understand the pedagogical implications of Leff's essay, to understand it as an object lesson in the art to which I have devoted my professional life. I think this is fitting because I believe that Leff's scholarship is animated by deeply pedagogical motives, so that any adequate tribute to his work and its influence should take this into account.

### Praelectio

After a few introductory remarks, Leff's essay begins with a lengthy quotation from Lincoln's speech. With this, he immediately establishes his priorities: in this work of criticism, the text will be given pride of place. He does follow up this quotation with the rationale traditional to studies of public address—Lincoln's text is significant, extant readings are insufficient—and he does provide a thorough yet efficient review of the historical context for the address. But the text comes first. The effect is to present his reading as an unmediated encounter between critic and text, with no theoretical apparatus, no description of method, and only the slightest intrusion of jargon. This is a fiction, of course, as Leff later acknowledged: "I have discovered," he would proclaim in 1992, "much to my own surprise—that ... my work does not simply promote a direct encounter with rhetorical texts, but that it involves something very like a 'theory' of rhetorical reading."<sup>4</sup> Even his surprise sounds suspiciously like a fiction, for it is unlikely that a reader as savvy as Michael Leff could be deceived by his own critical practice. In fact, in the "House Divided" essay itself, Leff reveals something of his theory by noting that the distinguishing feature of a *rhetorical* criticism (as opposed to a historical one)

is attention to “style” and “organization” (6). But no matter. This is a useful fiction, pedagogically, and I have no interest in debunking it. It teaches that the art of rhetorical criticism begins with the text.

Lincoln’s address guides the form of Leff’s critique, so that as he moves through the text, his insights are revealed to his reader in the same order that Lincoln’s arguments were revealed to his audience. It is as though we are overhearing Leff as he points out features of Lincoln’s text in passing—the biblical references, the implications of the central “house” metaphor, the slowing effect of repetition, the startling word choices, the divisions of the text, and most importantly, of course, the ways that Lincoln’s text “structure[s] the perception of time in the public world to which the discourse refers” (7). That later in this essay Leff cites Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca’s *New Rhetoric* does not dispel the fiction, or the lesson; these references are brought in only to clarify a point already being made, not to make a point in their own terms. In rather stark contrast to the vivid personality we remember from conferences and social gatherings, in this essay, as in most of his critical work, Leff seems to be attempting to vanish into his text.

Some might even be forgiven if they misread this fiction as fact, suspending their disbelief so completely that Leff’s work appears merely a sort of descriptive effort at explaining the way a particular text creates meaning through its disposition. But something more radical actually is occurring, with its roots deep in the rhetorical tradition. Through a complex play of mimesis and critique, Leff is borrowing from Lincoln some of Lincoln’s own tactics and employing them in his own analysis of Lincoln’s address. What this essay is demonstrating, in other words, is the inexorable interdependence of rhetorical criticism and rhetorical production.

Of particular importance is the way that Leff’s essay manipulates time in a way that is both similar and complementary to Lincoln’s speech. His textual analysis begins simply, using words that his students will recognize from his seminars (and which, in this context, subtly emphasize the importance of time and timing to the analysis): “It is now time to turn to the address itself and to a careful analysis of its internal structure” (7). He then proceeds to spend approximately 1,200 words to discuss the first ten sentences, or 215 words, of Lincoln’s speech. Although it probably took Lincoln’s immediate audience only a few minutes to listen to those opening remarks, it takes Leff’s reading audience several times that to read his analysis of them. Leff notes that at strategic points in the speech Lincoln “suspends time,” slowing the forward momentum of his address to invite his audience to survey the

textual landscape he is inventing (9). Leff also suspends time, inviting his audience to peruse minute details that they otherwise would have missed.

Leff argues that “the pace of the ‘conspiracy’ section accelerates as it unfolds,” and to emphasize this point he palpably accelerates his own analysis (14). He skims over much of this section, the longest and most complex of Lincoln’s speech, sketching its bare outlines in enumerated lists. Leff pauses briefly after the first such list to note where Lincoln’s “narrative halts” and our attention is drawn to a critique of Stephen A. Douglas’s doctrine of popular sovereignty, arguing that Lincoln’s critique “gains special force coming at the end of Lincoln’s narrative” (11). After the second enumerated list, Leff again pauses, this time to present a long quotation from Lincoln’s speech that shows how the “[p]revious anticipations and suggestions are now fulfilled and elaborated” (14). In this way Leff’s own argument is enhanced through his manipulation of time, propelling his readers forward and then depositing them emphatically at the points he wishes to emphasize.

Thus, Leff does not merely posit that the “conspiracy” section accelerates, nor does he merely supply a painstaking analysis to support his assertion; in addition to making his case in those two ways, Leff’s own rhetorical performance enacts or embodies his critique, making use of rhetorical tactics present in Lincoln’s speech to massage his own audience’s experience of time in a way that invites their concurrence with his own argument.<sup>5</sup> Leff argues that Lincoln’s speech deploys a “recoil effect,” in which the “intricately planned overstatement of the ... [conspiracy] section” increases the likelihood that Lincoln’s audience will accept the less hyperbolic argument presented in the third section of the speech, that Stephen Douglas “and his policies are incompatible with the Republican cause” (18). Leff’s own argument, his own performative hermeneutical rhetoric, also manipulates time, stretching and compressing it to increase the persuasive appeal of his analysis. The sections of Leff’s essay act upon one another: the long delay of the first part of the analysis emphasizes both the acceleration and pauses of the middle section. And then the seeming lack of temporal manipulation in the conclusion make Leff’s claims there seem almost a mere reporting or observation, an effect similar to that achieved by Lincoln. Of course, this essay was written for oral presentation, which surely exaggerated the effect; one might imagine, for example, the extent to which Leff’s audience might have welcomed the sudden sense of acceleration in the middle portion of the analysis after those long minutes of close reading.

But Leff’s reading does not precisely parallel Lincoln’s text. Where Lincoln’s

opening lines paint his argument with broad strokes in a tightly compressed space, Leff's analysis of those lines features an expansive attention to minute detail. Where the middle part of Lincoln's speech, the "conspiracy" section, builds methodically through an accrual of evidence and speculation, Leff's analysis of this section hurries to the essential passages. Leff's and Lincoln's texts only converge near the end, where they both present their arguments in "real time," without the whiplashing expansions and contractions that have characterized the rest of their texts.

Leff's essay becomes a sort of shadow text to Lincoln's speech, a second address that is itself an exemplar of rhetorical artistry. Leff is not saying the same thing as Lincoln, of course, but neither is he saying something else entirely. Leff's text is dependent upon Lincoln's, as all rhetorical texts are dependent upon previous rhetorical texts, but it isn't the same as Lincoln's. He has used Lincoln's text as a resource for his own, responded to it both as critic and as rhetor, drawing upon its most salient features as a model for his own rhetorical production. In other words, Leff has engaged in the time-honored and productive strategy that has occupied a central place in rhetorical pedagogy for millennia: *imitatio*. As Leff himself describes it, "*Imitatio* is not the mere repetition or mechanistic reproduction of something found in an existing text. It is a complex process that allows historical texts to serve as equipment for future rhetorical production."<sup>6</sup>

Pedagogically, imitation entails analysis and production in an intimate symbiosis, marking "the most obvious intersection between the reading of texts and the production of persuasive discourse."<sup>7</sup> An exemplar of rhetorical discourse is examined closely to allow the student to discern those elements of it that are most worthy of imitation, and then the student produces a new discourse that incorporates some of those elements. The analysis is fueled by the need to produce a new discourse, and the new discourse is informed by the old. Reflecting on his own critical practice in a later essay, Leff suggested that "the interpreter attempts to assimilate a text that is distant or alien into his or her understanding, but the discourse the critic produces is always other than the discourse that is being studied, and the critic's understanding can never replicate another person's understanding of the world."<sup>8</sup> Still later, making the analogy more explicit, Leff suggests that the critic engaged in close textual analysis "occupies the position Cicero assigned to the orator, and equipped with general knowledge, including a practical command of the precepts of the art, he or she studies paradigm texts."<sup>9</sup> "The use of models," he notes, "of paradigms of eloquence, proved more useful than abstract precepts because

a paradigm embodied the organic integrity of eloquence as it displayed itself in response to concrete issues and circumstances, and thus the paradigms could show what the precepts could not tell.”<sup>10</sup>

The purpose of this sort of study was “the development of the oratorical faculty, the flexible capacity possessed by an individual to engage situations as they arose.”<sup>11</sup> The purpose of rhetorical criticism within such a system, it seems clear, exceeds either the appreciation or the production of eloquence. Its purpose, rather, is to foster within the student the development of interpretive habits fundamental to the production of rhetorical discourse. The purpose of rhetorical criticism, in other words, is the production of rhetorical critics.

## Conclusion

Leff’s critical work, then, is more than a virtuoso hermeneutical performance. As he describes the classical tradition within which he situates his own critical project, “the goal of criticism is to enhance the reader’s inventional skills as writer or speaker rather than to treat the text as a privileged locus of meaning.”<sup>12</sup> In this tradition, a critical essay would be analogous to the *praelectio*, the preliminary lecture of analysis that played a prominent role in the mimetic pedagogy so closely associated with the rhetorical tradition. The purpose of this analysis was to draw the students’ attention to particular aspects or characteristics of a model text, to aid in their imitation of it. As Quintilian describes the process, “[n]othing must pass unnoticed” in this demonstrative lecture, “every noteworthy point of Invention or Elocution is to be observed” (II.v.6–8).<sup>13</sup> Such a lecture prepares students for the production of their own hermeneutical rhetorics by demonstrating not only what is of value in the model text but also the interpretive strategies through which this value might be extracted. Students are shown what is useful in the model and how to make judgments about what is useful. Similarly, Leff’s essay illustrates vividly Lincoln’s inventional tactics, the interpretive processes through which those tactics are revealed, and the productive process through which they can be deployed in a new discourse.

What Leff’s work recognizes, it seems to me, is that rhetoricians learn how to be rhetorical through the close study of other rhetoricians in the process of being rhetorical.<sup>14</sup> Leff shows us that writing rhetorical criticism is a fundamentally mimetic art, in that public address presents a living archive of the stylistic and dispositional tactics upon which rhetorical critics draw.

Rhetorical texts are produced by rhetorical critics. It is not possible to compose an effective essay of rhetorical critique without intimate knowledge of how such essays are constructed, and it is not possible to understand how such essays are constructed without the close analysis of exemplary texts. “As the embodied utterances of the past are interpreted for current application,” Leff explains, “their ideas and modes of articulation are reembodyed, and old voices are recovered for use in new circumstances.”<sup>15</sup> Leff’s task was to engage in rhetorical mimesis with regard to Lincoln’s text, to discover some of the strategies that Lincoln used in constructing his text and then to reembody those strategies in his own text.

But our task is not to imitate Leff. I believe that Leff believed that the way one learns to produce rhetoric—critical, vernacular, political, material, hermeneutical, or any other kind—is by attending closely to the ways that rhetoric is produced. The way that one learns how to write in a compelling style is to describe closely the compelling styles of others; the way that one learns how to arrange a coherent rhetorical text is to attend to the ways that coherent rhetorical texts are arranged. If the purpose of rhetorical criticism is to encourage the production of rhetorical critics, then its task must be to demonstrate how discourses are crafted. As Edward P. J. Corbett notes, it is perhaps unfortunate that our English word “imitation” has been made to stand in for the complex notions associated with *imitatio* in the rhetorical tradition; he suggests “*emulate*” instead, as “a more precise word to designate what the rhetoricians hoped to accomplish by imitation, since *aemulari* meant ‘to try to rival or equal or surpass.’”<sup>16</sup> Quintilian himself is clear that he intends the work of his students to “rival and vie with the original” (X.v.4–5). I never felt that Leff expected his students to imitate him. He was a consummate teacher, a designation that remains a fundamental component of being a master rhetorician, and as such he had no interest in cloning himself. Rather, within this tradition, our task is to continue to seek out exemplary rhetorical texts as resources for our own critical rhetorical invention, to continue collectively to advance the practice of our art, an art about which Michael Leff taught us so much. It may be true that imitation is the sincerest form of flattery. But emulation is the deepest form of respect.

## Notes

1. Michael C. Leff, “Rhetorical Timing in Lincoln’s ‘House Divided’ Speech,” *The Van Zelst Lecture in Communication* (pamphlet), (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University School of Speech, 1983). Subsequent references to this text will be by parenthetical page numbers.
2. I did eventually learn more through working with Leff and with David Zarefsky while in the Ph.D. program at Northwestern.
3. Leff provides an engaging narrative version of these squabbles in Michael Leff, “The Habitation of Rhetoric,” in *Argument and Critical Practices: Proceedings of the Fifth SCA/ AFA Conference on Argumentation*, ed. Joseph W. Wenzel (Annandale, VA: Speech Communication Association, 1987), 2–3.
4. Michael Leff, “Things Made by Words: Reflections on Textual Criticism,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 78 (1992): 223
5. In an earlier essay, Leff self-reflexively describes himself as making a point about argumentation in rhetoric through the very form of the argument he has just composed. Michael C. Leff, “Concrete Abstractions: A Response to Anderson and Skopec,” *The Pennsylvania Speech Communication Annual* 38 (1982): 21–24.
6. Michael Leff, “Hermeneutical Rhetoric,” in *Rhetoric and Hermeneutics in Our Time*, ed. Walter Jost and Michael J. Hyde (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 201.
7. Michael Leff, “The Idea of Rhetoric as Interpretive Practice: A Humanist’s Response to Gaonkar,”

in *Rhetorical Hermeneutics: Invention and Interpretation in the Age of Science*, ed. Alan G. Gross and William M. Keith (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 97. In a short essay published after the Van Zelst lecture but a decade before his reply to Gaonkar, Leff appears to draw a somewhat brighter line between performance and analysis within the rhetorical tradition: Michael Leff, "Acting and Understanding: A Note on the Relationship between Classical and Contemporary Rhetoric," *Federation Review* 8 (1985): 6–10.

8. Michael C. Leff, "Cicero's Redemptive Identification," in *Critical Questions: Invention, Creativity, and the Criticism of Discourse and Media*, ed. William L. Nothstine, Carole Blair, and Gary A. Copeland (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), 324.
9. Leff, "Things Made by Words," 228.
10. Leff, "Things Made by Words," 227. See also Michael Leff, "Isocrates, Rhetoric, and the Idealization of Civic Education," in *The Philosophy of Communication*, ed. Konstantine Boudouris and Takis Poulakos (Athens: International Center for Greek Philosophy and Culture, 2002), 124.
11. Leff, "Things Made by Words," 228.
12. Leff, "Hermeneutical Rhetoric," 199.
13. Quintilian, *The Orator's Education: Books 1-2*, ed. Donald Andrew Russell (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 303; see also Donald Lemen Clark, "Imitation: Theory and Practice in Roman Rhetoric," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 37 (1951): 11–22; and Richard McKeon, "Literary Criticism and the Concept of Imitation in Antiquity," *Modern Philology* 34 (1936): 1–35.
14. I am borrowing the idea of "being rhetorical" from David Fleming, "Becoming Rhetorical: An Education in the Topics," in *The Realms of Rhetoric: The Prospects for Rhetoric Education*, ed. Joseph Petraglia and Deepika Bahri (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 93–116.
15. Leff, "Hermeneutical Rhetoric," 203.
16. Edward P. J. Corbett, "The Theory and Practice of Imitation in Classical Rhetoric," *College Composition and Communication* 22 (1971): 244.