

Introduction: Rhetoric as Liminal Practice

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In liminal spaces we find ourselves on a threshold (or *limen*), caught between practices, cultures, frames for knowing the world, and modes of communication — between, for instance, the divine and secular, university and workplace, private and public, linguistic and non-linguistic. This is an interstitial place, the place of in-between. Anthropologist Victor Turner theorized liminality (borrowing it from Van Gennep’s *Rites of Passage*) in his work on festival and *communitas*, liminality referring to those marginal social spaces outside of everyday constraint that liberate participants from routine activity.¹ Liminality comes out of social rupture or discontinuity (pilgrimages, carnivals, religious conversions, life transitions, holidays, etc.) and, while not always neat and tidy, the event is transformative and generative.

Equally generative is the theoretical concept of liminality, itself. Writers from many disciplines have found Turner’s concept useful for understanding cultural identity, or gender subjectivity, or lived space. Postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha, for instance, in his collection *Nation and Narration*, argues that national consciousness must happen in the “*in-between* spaces through which the meanings of cultural and political authority are negotiated”² and that meaning is to be considered in *transnational* spaces. Sociologist Rob Shields studies liminal spaces, too,

¹Victor Turner, ed., *Celebration: Studies in Festivity and Ritual* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution P, 1982).

² Homi Bhabha, ed., *Nation and Narration* (New York: Routledge, 1994) 4.

in the phenomenon of the nineteenth-century seaside resort; with its meeting of land and water, private and public status, etc., this physical and social liminal zone contested previous notions of territory and ownership.³ Judith Butler, arguing for a *transgressive* understanding of gender and sexual identifications, contends that “identity categories tend to be instruments of regulatory regimes, whether as the normalizing categories of oppressive structures or as the rallying points for a liberatory contestation of that very oppression.”⁴

The concept of liminal space is useful, too, for understanding rhetoric as practice, generally, and for reading this collection, the inaugural issue of *Rhetor*, in particular. Liminality entails a position on the margins: on the edges of society, the coast of a continent, the borders of one’s body, the end of one stage of life and the beginning of another, etc. Rhetoric, especially in popular discourse, finds itself quite casually and habitually marginalized. Randy Harris puts it succinctly and well: “When someone calls an utterance rhetorical, they mean — to use a few of Roget’s choicest synonyms — it is rant or bombast or twaddle. They mean, ‘it stinks’.”⁵ A bit of a free-floating ion on the margins of the disciplinary schoolyard, rhetoric finds itself attaching to different partners — composition, speech communication, and literary studies, to name a few.

The discipline of rhetoric in Canada, as many of us know, finds itself betwixt and between, lacking a strong, clearly defined tradition or place in the university. According to Maurice Charland, in his recent article, “The Constitution of Rhetoric’s Tradition,”⁶ rhetoric in Canada and the U.S. finds itself “within or between several traditions.” This interstitial status, he

³ Rob Shields, *Places on the Margin: Alternative Geographies of Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

⁴ Butler, Judith, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” *Inside/out: Lesbian Theories/Gay Theories*, ed. Diana Fuss. (New York: Routledge, 1991) 13-31.

⁵ Randy Harris, “Rhetoric of Science Notes,” *IF Homepage* 25 March 1997, 30 August 2004 <<http://www.ece.uwaterloo.ca/~jgwilden/if/winter97/mar25/notes.html>>.

⁶Charland, Maurice.,“The Constitution of Rhetoric’s Tradition,” *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 36.2 (2003): 119-34. I would like to thank Tania Smith of the University of Calgary for bringing this article (and this quotation in particular) to my attention.

maintains, allows for autonomy and diversity in one's field, even if it also means rhetoricians work without a traditional net:

To figure oneself as a rhetorician is an act of self-ascription that in the first instance enables refusal. One may refuse reigning orthodoxies, be they Platonic or post-structuralist. One may figure oneself as within or between several traditions. In other words, what rhetoric is is up for grabs. "Rhetoric" thus can serve as alibi for eccentricities, for interdisciplinarity and the violation of disciplinary boundaries, and for the development of alternate intellectual strategies and rogue practices, even as it also permits a return to — and refiguring of — classical sources and humanist thought. As Hariman has observed, rhetoric's marginal standing and consequent lack of coherence is a potential source of strength (1986).⁷

The interdisciplinarity Charland points to is evident in recent book and journal titles, where rhetoricians contemplate the relationship of rhetoric with other disciplines. Rhetoric has always engaged with philosophy and social theory, but recent collections are studying in greater detail the implications of new and developing unions. *At the Intersection: Cultural Studies and Rhetorical Studies*, edited by Thomas Rosteck, explores how rhetoric and cultural studies might be brought together in a dialogue that makes sense. Books like Glenn Stillar's *Analyzing Everyday Texts: Discourse, Rhetoric and Social Perspectives* put discourse analysis, social theories, and rhetoric in the parlour together — and the conversation is rich and full. Online, one finds scholarly journals like *Kairos*, which locates itself at the intersection of rhetoric, technology and pedagogy and explores such fields as "technorhetoric," or computer-mediated

⁷ Charland, Maurice, "The Constitution of Rhetoric's Tradition," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 36.2 (2003): p. 121.

writing. At annual conferences like that of the Canadian Society for the Study of Rhetoric, one meets classical rhetoricians, contemporary rhetoricians, professional writers, historians, musical scholars, discourse analysts, composition professors, cultural analysts, literary theorists — the list goes on.

It is this kind of eclectic, dynamic community that creates the kinds of energies, intersections, and moments of rhetorical interrogation one encounters in this journal. All of the papers here engage — even if implicitly and subtly — with the concept of liminality. And they do much more besides.

Liminality Performed: The Papers of the Collection

Christine Mason Sutherland's paper, "Augustine, Ethos and the Integrative Nature of Christian Rhetoric," in keeping with this liminal theme, convincingly demonstrates how Augustine of Hippo's rhetoric mingles the secular and the theological. According to Sutherland, Augustine's rhetoric is *integrative*, bringing together classical rhetoric with a more theologically inspired Hebraic tradition. Critical of the sophistic models of rhetoric, where power and glory lay with the orator and exchange was agonistic and competitive, Augustine, in *On Christian Doctrine* and *Confessions*, complicates the familiar power relationships between rhetor and audience. In his thinking, glory goes to God, not to the speaker; the individual members of the audience, inhabited by the Holy Spirit and the final arbiters of what is right and true in the discourse, are to be *taught* — not persuaded — and shown care as sanctified human beings — not coerced.

Diana Wegner, in "The Development of Transitional Writers: The Role of Identification Strategies in Workplace Writing Competence," focuses on another liminal space: that of student

writers moving from university writing to workplace writing — and the accompanying demands of a different community of practice. The liminal space between school and workplace, Wegner points out, brings many challenges: students may not be fully immersed in the practices of the workplace and its ineffable expectations or they may find themselves caught between different genres and drawing on inappropriate ones. Working within the field of rhetorical genre studies, Wegner concludes that the identification strategies student writers use in their workplace writing depend, in large part, on their enculturation in that community of practice. Her discussion not only describes the challenges of this rhetorical liminal zone, but also suggests ways we might think about our writing pedagogies to respond to these spaces of the in-between.

Sylvain Rheault's paper, "Rhétorique de la rupture dans les textes de poilus," exemplifies the theme of *rupture* central to understandings of liminality as discontinuity in history. Rheault looks at the rhetoric of a different kind of liminal space: war, a space of violent and bloody transition, rupture, and suspension — an interruption of the relatively mundane running of everyday life. In his essay, Rheault argues that the First World War was so bloody and intense that it created a rupture in history and in the literature surrounding it. This rupture operates on the soldier in two ways: he experiences comradeship and community with his fellow fighters, but feels increasingly alienated from the larger collectivity. Both attitudes permeate the soldierly writing of the time. One kind of writing entails the literature of non-battle, of contemplative *waiting*; another type is the writing of the soldier, who, feeling betrayed by and disgusted with the perceived bourgeois conspiracy that put him in the trenches, experiences alienation from the rest of society. Then there's the writing of the non-champion, the soldier who sees himself as a victim in a dirty war that encourages soldiers to save themselves by being cowardly. This latter

literature, Rheault maintains, explores the seemingly unlikely identification that occurs between enemies who become non-enemies and countrymen who feel divided from each other.

Shannon Purves-Smith beautifully illustrates the concept of liminality in her study of the 17th century French prologues of Philippe Quinault and Jean-Baptiste Lully in their *tragédies lyriques*, operas approved and paid for by Louis XIV. The opening prologue, or *exordium*, of these operas, Purves-Smith tells us, has been compared to the vestibule of a building, or (to use Gérard Genette's term) a *seuil* or "threshold," the quintessential image and etymological root of the word liminal. The prologue constitutes a liminal position in the organization of the opera, certainly; but its themes and figures enacted liminality, too, in the mingling of the sacred and the divine (i.e. God and King). For the 17th century audience, the prologue, with its musical themes, and "quasi-liturgical repetition of words," recalled the Catholic mass in its praise of the monarch and served as a kind of celebration rite for the audience. (The mingling of the ecclesiastical and ideological is a topic taken up in Schmidt's essay too.) Purves-Smith argues that the operatic prologue was not merely a place for light arias and entertainment, but that the allegories, the hyperbole, the poetic maxims, the sumptuous feast for the eyes, the numerous epideictic figures, etc. served as "forms of proof" of the wealth, glory, power, and deific status of the monarch.

Josef Schmidt, in his essay, "In Praise of Kenneth Burke: His 'The Rhetoric of Hitler's 'Battle' Revisited,'" reconsiders Burke's well-known piece, arguing that contemporary readings bear out Burke's claim that Hitler corrupted religious patterns for militaristic purposes. Schmidt's paper locates itself in the liminal zone between past reception and contemporary understandings of Burke's analysis of Hitler, and shows how many of Burke's insights not only held true, but had larger implications than even Burke might have realised at the time of writing. The paper extends Burke's observations about Hitler's bastardization of religious symbolism,

documenting, for instance, how the fascist leader mimicked religious congregation spaces in the architecture designed for mass rallies (including a lichtdom, or pseudo-religious light dome, that was made of military search lights). The article concludes with a cautionary note concerning the corruption of religious discourses in current-day, particularly American, politics.

Recalling Sylvain Rheault's discussion of rupture, Mirela Saim's paper looks at another social and political discontinuity, this one a shift in the political discourse in Restoration France and its relation to the newly created chair of rhetoric at the University of Paris, Sorbonne. Saim studies the Demosthenian representation in this discourse, focussing on a little known memorial text of Abel-Francois Villemain, who delivered a series of famous lectures on rhetoric in the 1820s. Examining the contextual elements of Villemain's text, Saim's article proposes a re-evaluation of some current rhetorical theories of the political public space in the context of the French "apprenticeship of democracy." The paper is part of a larger project of research in the comparative history of rhetoric in the Nineteenth century that aims at a recovery of the inner dynamic of rhetoric and eloquence in Modernity.

Robert Seiler and Tamara Seiler explore liminality in at least two ways in their contribution to this issue, "Presenting the Self in Everyday Life: Personalized License Plates as Rhetorical Phenomenon." First, their cultural approach articulates the link between rhetoric and popular culture (along with social semiotics and pragmatics). Second, their rhetorical artefact constitutes a liminal space in and of itself: the personalised license plate, which, as the paper points out, is a site of "negotiations of highly constrained and overlapping spaces, public and private, civic and commercial." The authors study a sample of vanity plates they collected during one year's observations in Calgary, Alberta, Canada. Interested in understanding the ways motorists construct their *ethos*, Seiler and Seiler acknowledge the polysemic nature of these

texts, many of these plates reinforcing hegemonic ideologies in a society of conspicuous consumption, while at the same time possibly — within the limitations of its compact form — subverting or playing with these ideologies.

Of all the papers considered here under the theme of liminal space, Kathleen Venema's paper is arguably the most explicitly about *space*, both physical and discursive. “‘As we are both deceived’: Strategies of Status Repair in 19thC Hudson's Bay Company Correspondence,” part of a larger project about masculinity and imperialism, shows to what extent the delicately negotiated rhetoric of letters (what Venema nicely calls “epistolary energy”) made manifest the fragmented and geographically far-flung workplace of this hugely successful commercial empire. The paper examines the rhetoric of two HBC Officers — James Hargrave and Alexander Fisher — both of whom saw their status threatened when rebuked by the powerful Governor-in-Chief, Sir George Simpson. These two officers had to negotiate, within the constraining and enabling structures of the letter, a balance between self-regard *and* self-abnegation. Their textual enactments of solidarity, respect, explanation, and status repair in the face of threat would have consequences for their success or failure in the rhetorically maintained hierarchies of the Hudson's Bay Company.

Then, of course, there are the wonderful rhetorical readings that dwell in the spaces between different modes of discourse, whether the approaches of visual rhetoric, the rhetoric of object placement, or the rhetorical study of music. Marie-Francoise Delaneuille-Shideler, in “La rhétorique visuelle du thème de *l'écorchée* dans les autoportraits de Frida Kahlo: outil de thérapie ou d'accusation?” discusses several pragmatic aspects of the aesthetic theme “l'ecorchee” in Frida Kahlo's self-portraits: persuasive, therapeutic, forensic, etc. Delaneuille-Shideler's piece demonstrates how Kahlo's aesthetic decisions cut across international

boundaries and communication media and engages in an intense visual dialogue that defends women by means of ethical, emotional, and logical appeals according to persuasive tenets. The self-portraits aim to present a visual and coherent argument against abuse. They constitute together an eloquent aesthetic collection which doubles as an effective tool or organon of justice. According to Delaneville-Shideler, the audience is invited to be judge and jury on several other cognitive levels besides enjoying art for the sake of it.

In his article, “George Frideric Händel’s Musical Treatment of Textual Rhetoric in His Oratorio, *Susanna*,” Michael Purves-Smith offers a fascinating study in the rhetoric of music, showing the various means through which Händel incorporated classical rhetorical elements into his musical discourse. Pointing to the fact that both music and language operate in *time* and in *sound*, Purves-Smith traces Händel’s expression of rhetorical figures in selections of rhythm, tone, use of pedal, and vocal arrangement. For instance, one character’s dilemma between two unsatisfactory choices is represented, musically, in “ambiguously resolved harmonies.” In another example, falsity in character is communicated through “slippery chromaticism,” “ambiguous harmonies,” and “halting broken music.” Musical metonymy, metaphor, *hypotyposis*, and *synechdoche* — all find expression, the article shows us, in Händel’s word-by-word musical interpretation. If present-day musicians consider such things as the rhetorical connection between text and music, Purves-Smith argues, their musical performance of a piece will be more sensitive and detailed — and more in keeping with the composer’s ways of thinking about his piece.

Clearly, the theme of liminality is a useful way of thinking about these ten papers and their interpretative energies. This introduction is a liminal zone, too, acting as threshold for, opening to, and intermingling of all the textual interpretations and rhetorical applications in this

first issue of *Rhetor*. I invite you to enjoy these pieces and the vibrant spaces that resonate between them.

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