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Patrick James Putnam
Roger Williams University

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The Collision of tao, rhetorike, & Orientalism

Patrick James Putnam, Communication '07

It all started in Las Vegas. A lone figure adorned with a floral pattern silk shirt hunched maniacally over a fire-engine red IBM Selectric typewriter in the gray Nevada dawn, a macabre journalist typing away in the squalor of his once luxurious hotel suite convinced that he is a “monster reincarnation of Horatio Alger” (Thompson, 1971). My own personal research into the American author/propagandist, admittedly originally inspired by Hunter S. Thompson, led me to a cultural/rhetorical investigation of Eastern and Western poetry.

I set out with the naive intention of analyzing pieces of poetry from different cultures and performing an analysis of the rhetorical devices employed by the authors. Realizing the staggeringly ambiguous nature of this query, I then sought to narrow my focus and settle on those works that were written directly before, during, or after periods of social/political instability, more specifically revolution, occupation, civil war, etc. With this common denominator, I analyzed the rhetorical devices employed by the authors and discovered some surprising similarities between the pieces, as I expected that, because of the different attitudes towards rhetoric in “Eastern” and “Western” cultures, the devices would be grossly different from each other.

In true Socratic fashion, I found that the answer to one question generated a host of new questions. Is the existence of these universals an anomaly or an indication of a need to re-evaluate the way the West looks at rhetoric, both internally and externally? Could this evidence of universals be explained by post-colonial repercussions? Could the poems be a manifestation of sophistry, which George A. Kennedy (1998) asserts in his book *Comparative Rhetoric* develops during political, social, and moral change, and if so, could the same be said for rhetoric?

This essay will not focus on my analyses of the poems that were the original impetus of my study, but instead on what I discovered when researching the rhetorical traditions within which the poems are situated. My argument hinges on this question: Why did no gross disparities between rhetorical traditions emerge in my initial research, and why is this absence significant? My analysis draws on the works of George A. Kennedy, Robert Oliver, and Edward Said, in addition to the post-colonial studies of Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin.

While Western rhetoric existed and developed for nearly a century before it began to be regarded as an independent entity, it was not until Aristotle, who defined rhetoric as “the art of discovering the available means of persuasion for the given situation,” that it was systematized as we see in his work *On Rhetoric*. The means of persuasion obviously vary depending on the context of the situation, be it social, political, etc. Western rhetorical tradition, rooted in the Sophistic and philosophical writings of the Golden Age, relies heavily on logic, classification, and definition. Classical rhetoric is adversarial, supported by the three facets of the rhetorical triangle: pathos, logos, and ethos, which are appeals made to emotion, logic, and the speaker’s character, respectively. As Western cultures

tend to be more individualist, it can be argued that there is traditionally little ethical consideration in the employment of Western rhetoric, which has generated serious repercussions both politically and socially.

Contrary to early assumptions that arose as a result of a multitude of language barriers, Eastern rhetoric emerged and developed in the same time period as its Western counterpart. Philosophically, ancient Eastern cultures shared an emphasis on unity and harmony, which manifested itself in an Eastern rhetorical tradition. The reason early Western “experts” found nothing to confirm the existence of rhetoric in these cultures is that there were not exact translations for much of the terminology employed in literary criticism at that time. The lack of reliance on logic and the absence of debate, both socially and politically, also misled early Western anthropologists to believe rhetorical practices are solely a Western phenomenon (Oliver, 1971, p. 1). This misconception is akin to the analogy of the three blind men who encounter an elephant: the first touches the trunk, the second the leg, and the third touches the elephant’s side. They all came across the same animal, but identify it as a snake, a tree trunk, and a mountain. The mere absence of a word that equates to the word “rhetoric” led to centuries of misconceptions, but as Shakespeare once said, “That which we call a rose/By any other word would smell as sweet.”

Collectivist Eastern cultures, influenced by Taoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism to name a few, are grounded in notions of unity and harmony to the same extent that those in the West are centered on definition and classification (Oliver, 1971, p. 10). It is pertinent to note, particularly within the context of this investigation that early Chinese and Indian literary criticism, and its terminology, dealt exclusively with poetry. The reason for this is that the majority of the “classical” texts in both China and India were written in some form of prose or another. The *Upanishads* and Lao Tzu’s *Tao the Ching* were some of the most widely circulated and therefore studied texts for several millennia.

With what are currently considered to be the differences between Eastern and Western rhetoric outlined, the next logical consideration is to define those similarities that do exist. Robert Oliver (1971), like most Western scholars, considers rhetoric to be universal “only in the sense that ‘philosophy’ and ‘religion’ are universals” (p. 11). In *Comparative Rhetoric*, George A. Kennedy (1998) expands on the traditional Western view of rhetoric, going as far as describing it as an instinctual survival mechanism that all animals possess. The basis for his reasoning is that it is far more efficient, in terms of energy consumption, to communicate verbally than it is to rely on force. Thus, Kennedy dubs rhetoric a “conservative” faculty (p. 51). This is best illustrated by way of an example: if it were somehow possible to convince you the reader that you had come into contact with a lethal, fast-acting poison just by physically handling this paper, that would certainly elicit a rapid and instinctive response. When time is a factor, survival hinges entirely on our ability to communicate expeditiously.

There are four possible explanations for the similarities, arguably mistakenly labeled universals, which I observed when researching these rhetorical traditions: the repercussions of Orientalism, the impact of Western Imperialism, the shortcomings of

Western understanding of rhetoric, and a theory of my own entitled *Rhetorical Evolution*. The first three issues are rather closely related to one another, while the latter is relatively unique.

Edward Said's ground-breaking book *Orientalism* (1979) carries some frightening implications about how the Western world (Occident) views the Eastern world (Orient) and why that is the case. Orientalism itself is so complex that Said outlines three possible meanings of the word in the opening pages of the book: “a way of coming to terms with the Orient that is based on the Orient's special place in European Western experience”; “a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between the Orient and (most of the time) the Occident”; and “a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (pp. 2-3).

In short, Orientalism is the way the Occident ascribes stereotypes and misconceptions to the Orient. As the roots of this problem lie in Western imperialism, the origins of this motive will be examined at a later point. The third definition, in particular, implies that Orientalism isn't an issue of misunderstanding; instead, it is a conscious act perpetuated with countless political and economic interests in mind. The Occident spent centuries establishing the inferiority of the Orient by which European nations strengthened their respective identities. The collective identities of the Occident were solidified by the stark contrast of, what they perceived to be, the Orient identity (Said, 1979, p. 3). Orientalism explains why the Western world failed to see that Eastern rhetoric existed so long before its “discovery.”

These strategies of representation are, by no means, a thing of the past. In a recent interview Said gives a poignant example of how they manifest themselves in Western media, highlighting the newspaper headline “A Match Made in Mecca” on the cover of the *London Sunday Times* that described in Orientalist terms the romantic relationship between Princess Diana and Dodi Al-Fayed (Jhully, 2002).

Said goes on to argue that the media in the United States, particularly Hollywood and the news media, are the biggest culprits in perpetuating these misconceptions and welding them to Western consciousness. In film, for instance, Middle Eastern people are portrayed as either radical terrorists or fanatical, activist fundamentalists. Terrorists and religious fanatics are especially frightening in Western cultures because they represent the absence of reason; they are instead infused with either faith or conviction, or both. In terms of rhetoric, it is clear that someone is working very hard to persuade viewers that the East is a threat and that their governments will protect them. One illustration of what Said called “Orientalism in Action” is the media's coverage of the Oklahoma City bombing. In the wake of the explosion, police put out an APB on three Middle-Eastern men who were wanted for questioning. The news reports immediately following the bombing speculated about *jihad* and the myriad of other politically loaded terms that have come to be inseparable from the Muslim identity in the eyes of the West. However, as soon as the culprit was determined to be a male Caucasian veteran, the terrorist subject was immediately dropped (Jhully, 2002).

Orientalism, in the context of my investigation, is the result of the Occident refusing to yield to the Orient when the two intersect. Said (2002) asserts that in order to produce a body of knowledge about a cultural group, “you have to have the power to be there and to see in expert ways, things the natives themselves do not see” (9:10). The dynamics of imperialism create that power imbalance and linguistic limitations prohibit the group labeled as the ‘natives’ from changing the opinion of the Occident in an expedient enough manner to combat the stereotypes that become irrevocably associated with them—although recently post-colonial theorists have begun to unpack the construction of the East by Western powers.

As a direct result of imperialism, Eastern cultures were altered by the infusion of Western culture, and much like the way a rock will alter the surface of a pool of water, the ripple continues to spread, albeit with increased subtlety as time goes on. In *The Empire Strikes Back*, Bill Ashcroft (1989) and his colleagues describe the discussion of post-colonial literatures as the “the process by which the language, with its power, and the writing, with its signification of authority, has been wrested from the dominant European culture.” Post-colonial scholars acknowledge the power language holds as it “becomes the medium through which a hierarchical structure of power is perpetuated, and the medium through which conceptions of ‘truth’, ‘order’, and ‘reality’ become established” (p. 7). This power is harnessed by the colonizing nation, which imposes its native language on its colonial subjects, leaving them bereft of a voice and on the disadvantaged side of a drastic power imbalance.

Given such linguistic imperialism, it is not surprising that similarities exist between the rhetorical traditions of the East and the West. It is effectively impossible to separate the purely Eastern culture from that which is a product of the combination of East and West. This outside influence left little or no room for the development of a truly independent Eastern rhetorical tradition. Essentially, the colonized were unable to “escape the implicit body of assumptions to which English was attached,” and this manifested itself in their rhetorical tradition, amongst other places (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 1989, p.10).

The disparity could also be explained by the limitations of the narrow Western view of rhetoric. The long-standing Western view of rhetoric as an independent field of study, as well as the Cartesian propensity for isolating and subsequently analyzing the components of anything new and unfamiliar, partially explains a Eurocentric lack of consideration for the contexts in which a rhetoric is grounded. However, persuasion does not occur in a vacuum; a speaker sways his/her audience by making appeals that draw strength from the speaker and audience’s mutual existence within the same social, historical, religious, philosophical, and/or political contexts. Any rhetorical work taken out of context is simply an arrangement of words; the real meaning of a rhetorical piece is the sum of both the literal and connotative meanings.

The linguistic obstacles are formidable, though. Much of the terminology used in classical rhetorical theory has no exact corollary in languages outside of the West. The importance of contextual factors, particularly philosophical traditions, has not been considered when Eastern rhetoric is evaluated in terms of Western standards. Though its

success has been contested, comparative rhetoric attempts to address this problem. For instance, Oliver (1971) equates this mentality to the Chinese anecdote of the monkey and the fish caught in a flooded river. The monkey is able to pull himself to safety and, out of concern for the fish's well-being, he pulls the fish out of the river and sets it on the bank. Needless to say the fish is less than appreciative of the assistance (Oliver, 1971). Kennedy (1998) suggests that, instead of imposing Western values in the East, “[c]omparative rhetoric... offers us a unique opportunity to test the applicability of Western rhetorical concepts outside the West” (p. 5).

Thus I conclude with the idea of Rhetorical Evolution. Kennedy (1998) claims that “Sophistry in some form seems to be a regular development...when political, social, and moral conditions are undergoing change” (p.159). In this context, sophistry means a philosophical stance by which one is skeptical about those who claim access to truth, particularly claims made by bureaucrats (Kennedy, 1998, p. 159). If there is such a pattern in ancient Greece, China, and India—as Kennedy suggests—and sophistry develops during these times of change, then it is not illogical to conclude that the same could be said of rhetoric. And if, in fact, rhetoric is generated by these chaotic times, then it would appear that the socio-political context of a piece of rhetoric is the most influential factor of its existence.

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