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AFTERTHOUGHTS:  
WHO MADE NON-FICTION A NEGATION?

When I wrote "The Writing of Scientific Non-Fiction: Contexts, Choices, Constraints" in the early 1980s I was beginning to walk a line, a line I perceived then as so narrow and delicate I was afraid of falling — or being pushed — off. The line was between the marauding bands of radical relativists and what they claimed were the entrenched forces of positivist domination. Since then that line has become a broad and familiar path, passing through many locales, and intersecting with many other roads. At the same time, having walked with science studies so far through a changing landscape of representations, I no longer see simple battle lines formed between a well-disciplined band of radical relativists and hegemonic forces of scientific tradition. The relativists not only are divided among themselves, several (despite denials) are venturing into the intersection between material experience and processes of social interpretation and use. Moreover, as I have looked into the history of science, I have seen scientists and philosophers of science recurrently grappling with issues of individual perception and social representation. The legend of a fearsome positivist phalanx is a legend only, fostered by a small number of interested parties on both sides of a line they have mutually constructed.

Some of the interested parties in this construction of the positivist terror, curiously enough, have come from literary culture, which has categorized all texts which are not poetry, novels, or short stories as non-fiction. Non-fiction is a negative term, and therefore a term of marginality and exclusion.

Until the nineteenth century the term fiction — referring to made-up, deceptive, or lying discourse — was the marginal term. Following the romantic construction of the imagination as the privileged mode of knowing, the recognition of a body of texts which were admirable precisely for their fiction gave legitimacy to the term fiction in the nineteenth century, but still set against the more general body of texts assumed to be responsible for the quality of representation. Non-fiction as a term does not appear in general currency until the twentieth century. The term non-fiction appears neither in the original *Oxford English Dictionary* or the 1933 supplement. The 1976 supplement finally lists it with a first use as a noun in 1909 and as an adjective in 1903. Early uses of the term arise out of book distribution through libraries and publishers. The later adoption of non-fiction as a technical term of literary study, denoting a category of literary prose, excludes from study the wide body of texts that do not reflect literary values even while it readmits that small body

of texts whose literary values designate them as subordinately part of literary culture and worthy of critical attention. This move seems to reflect the interests of an academic literary community needing to establish a privileged domain of discourse set against a perceived threat of scientific discourse delegitimizing all other areas of culture and knowledge. Defining fiction as the privileged category carves out a protected socially important domain, even at the expense of demeaning the value and interest of all other forms of discourse.

The fiction/non-fiction divide reinforces the social definition of science as positivist and asserts that the shadow negative is in essence uninteresting from a literary perspective and therefore transparent as discourse. Non-fiction is simply a matter of fact, unless it is redeemed by looking a little bit like fiction. Thus the whole tradition of the complexity of representation is obscured to those people who study secular texts in the academy. The representational impulses of fictional texts are cast into the background, and texts which are predominantly representational vanish. In recent years when philosophically oriented literary theory reminded literary studies that representation was troublesome and could not be taken for granted, this cultural memory was immediately translated through the new cultural dichotomy of privileged literature and marginalized non-fiction with the result of an imperial assault of fiction upon non-fiction.

Because I now more clearly reject the whole fiction/non-fiction dichotomy, if I were rewriting this article today, I would no longer draw the rhetorical battle lines along that divide, not even to carve out a demilitarized zone of negotiation. When I revised material from this article to appear as a chapter in *Shaping Written Knowledge*, I replaced issues of non-fictionality with discussion of reference and accountability of representations to empirical experience. Indeed the substance of the article, even in the earlier form, concerns the ways in which the writer actively constructs reference through linguistic and material activity and uses this referential activity as a resource in persuasive scientific accounts. The referential activity, however, is persuasive only because it is constrained by resistances from empirical practices that pervade the entire process of the construction of representations — resistances that are reliably reconstitutable by other participants in the disciplinary practice. A. H. Compton, the scientist under study, through behavior in the writing process revealed in the notes and drafts, enacts this process of empirical accountability. In the surrounding chapters of *Shaping Written Knowledge*, accounts of experiments are placed within complex social matrices of institutions, relationships, and practices. Texts are not treated as fundamental accounts of truth in themselves but are seen as active parts of social processes of the production and reproduction of representa-

tions useful in the evolving discussion of the world we live in. Empiricism, which was the explicit project of modern science, is the issue which is to be understood in the texts and not non-fictionality (which is the discarded half of the post-Romantic literary project).

What was an issue in science studies a decade ago is no longer so poignantly an issue there, but has become increasingly an issue in literary studies and rhetoric. Some of the same impulses toward questioning the perceived hegemonic authority of modern science that led the strong program radical relativists in the sociology of knowledge to question the grounds on which texts claimed to stand, have led literary and rhetorical theorists to point toward the textuality of texts. Rhetoric of science and philosophy has again become an explicit issue as vigorously as it was in the eighteenth century, when Hume, Locke, Smith, Priestley, Vico, and many others wondered what it meant to create accounts of our experience. Our social position and the politics of knowledge are now different, but I hope we do not remain blinded by local battles so as to define these most serious issues too narrowly. As long as we desire to live in this world in ways that take account of the people, and life, and phenomena around us, we need to inquire how we can talk (and through our talk come to knowledge) about that which surrounds us.

## 8 : NEO-ROMANTICISM AND THE HISTORY OF RHETORIC

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I can no longer resist the urge to take up my pen, having been incited to this act by reading the words of yet one more literary critic who is writing about rhetoric.

This time the critic is Jonathan Culler, an otherwise sensible interpreter of contemporary critical movements. In an essay on metaphor Culler allows that our "illustrious forebears" in rhetoric, while they would be delighted with a revival of interest in their discipline, would be puzzled by "the extraordinary privilege accorded to metaphor" in current literary criticism.<sup>1</sup> No doubt our forebears in rhetoric would be less surprised at Culler's limiting rhetoric to an aspect of *elocutio*—this very limitation having been imposed on rhetoric as several intervals in her history—than they would be astounded by his list of illustrious rhetoricians: Quintilian, Puttenham, DuMarsais, Fontanier. (At this point I took my copy of Kennedy's *Classical Rhetoric* off the shelf to confirm, as I suspected, that of the four names in Culler's list only Quintilian's appears in the index.)

We might attribute Culler's aberrant notions about rhetoric to the virtual absence of rhetorical training in graduate work in English in this country. Or we might place responsibility at the door of French criticism, from which much recent American critical thought takes its cue. In their introduction to *Rhetorique generale*, for example, the authors (known as Group *Mu* in homage to the Greek account of metaphor) puzzle themselves over Chaim Perelman's embarrassing habit of calling his work "rhetoric" when it deals with, of all things, a theory of reasoning.<sup>2</sup> While Group *Mu* heartily disavows Peter Ramus' influence on their work (except to hope that, like Ramus', their work will have a "revolutionary impact"), they are furthering the tendency begun by Ramus and continued by seventeenth-century French rhetoricians toward limiting rhetoric to a theory of communication, that is, to a theory of style (p.