

Ad Astra Per Audax

Remembering Alan Gross's Contributions



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At least as long as I have known him, Alan Gross has always been a scholar of preternatural confidence. While it could sometimes seem to be arrogance, especially in public settings, he possessed a sureness to his vision of quality scholarship that served as a beacon light to a younger generation. He arrived at the National Communication Association (then the Speech Communication Association) in the mid-1980s with the essays, many already published in the *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, that would become *The Rhetoric of Science* (Gross, 1990). Alan's approach to rhetoric in science mirrored the philosophers he had been working with informally at the University of Chicago and Northwestern University: He was neither tentative nor defensive, but confidently internalist in his analyses. A remarkable characteristic of this work, in retrospect, is how little time it spends making the case for a rhetorical approach to science. The proof of the pudding is in the eating, they say, and most of the pieces meet the test for exacting and insightful analysis. His analyses were marvels of hermeneutic practicality; his rhetorical apparatus was overall very classical, yet that vocabulary would expand in all sorts of unexpected directions as the situation demanded.

The day before the beginning of the SCA conference in 1987, in Boston, a group of about twenty convened to talk about the rhetoric of inquiry and rhetorical epistemology. (This practice would lead to the institutionalization of AARST [now ARST] in 1993.) One thing stands out for me about what we talked about in that session: the need to get away from a "Philosophy 101" approach and start studying cases. (This was a direct swipe at "rhetorical epistemology.") The model for this study, all seemed to agree, were the sorts of case studies that Alan was writing. At the time, I was in my second year out of graduate school, and at the break for lunch, Alan sought me out and asked me to eat with him and, flattered, I readily agreed. Once we were settled, Alan leaned forward and

declared, in a matter-of-fact tone, “I can see you’re not stupid...” To this day, I’m not quite sure how I got into this category, but this turned out to be part of Alan’s regular practice of expressing his disgust with what he felt was a reprehensible combination of timidity and superficiality in much of the scholarship on rhetoric and science. (We have to remember that, at the time, there was precious little of it, so perhaps this was a bit ungenerous.) I had been steeped in rhetorical epistemology in graduate school, but had never been very sympathetic to it. I was energized by Alan’s *élan* about a bold new direction and his disinclination to take a certain kind of defensive stance about rhetoric. An example might be Michael McGee’s and John Lyne’s contribution to the POROI *Rhetoric in the Human Sciences* conference from 1984 (entitled, “What Are Nice Folks Like You Doing in a Place Like This? Some Entailments of Treating Epistemic Claims Rhetorically” [McGee and Lyne, 1987]). At the same time the POROI group was forging connections by allowing that scholars in many fields were (or could be) doing rhetoric of science, Alan felt little need for a big tent.

At this group’s meeting in 1991 (they would become the American Association for the Rhetoric of Science and Technology in 1992 and just the Association for the Rhetoric of Science and Technology some years later), Dilip Gaonkar showed up and held forth in a somewhat disorganized but absolutely riveting style on some thoughts about rhetoric of science as it was then emerging. I was tremendously excited by these ideas and I asked him where they were, or would be, published. In characteristic fashion, he replied, “I don’t know. You should find me some place to publish.” I talked Keith Erickson, the editor of the *Southern Speech Communication Journal*, into giving me an issue, promising I would solicit very impressive essays for it. Bafflingly, he trusted me. Thus was born the special issue that led to the volume *Rhetorical Hermeneutics: Invention and Interpretation in the Age of Science* (Gross and Keith, 1996). As I was about to approach presses, I felt the lightness of my years and CV, and decided I needed an *éminence grise* to co-edit the volume, and Alan immediately agreed. Already the version of Gaonkar’s essay in the special issue had aroused passionate responses, some of them quite negative. Alan helped me see that we should feature the controversy, with all its pique, in the volume; hence, those who felt that Gaonkar’s essay was an ill-natured attempt to rain on their rhetoric of science parade were well represented in the volume. Alan and I had long discussions about whether unrestrained snark was appropriate, but he was more likely to be worried about inelegant semicolons than insults.

At the end of the day, Alan Gross work was concerned with a certain notion of craft in scholarship: If you were going to do something, do it right, using whatever was necessary. Many kinds of scholarship could be mobilized for rhetorical analysis, and he was fearless about plunging in and learning them. From the history and philosophy of science, to story grammars, to cognitive psychology, Alan managed to connect many disciplines to rhetoric. Yet for the most part he sidestepped Gaonkar's charge, since he never claimed all these things somehow were rhetoric or rhetorical theory, but rather that they were bodies of knowledge of which rhetoric could fruitfully take account. He employed theories and methods, rather than applying them, and this is a distinction with a difference. Rather than showing the phenomenon in question as be restated in the vocabulary of a different theory, as is common in many tiresome pieces of scholarship ("A knee is a patella!"), Alan's approach to interdisciplinarity was functional. These other fields were components in his analyses that, without translation, advanced his argument or set the stage for his argument. Given what we know about psychology, or classical philosophy, or linguistics, what can rhetorical theory and analysis contribute? This still seems to me an entirely healthy and productive stance.

At times, Alan's quest for rigor could seem a bit like science envy, since those not keeping up with the latest developments in the social sciences might be dismissed out of hand. But at his best, his work exemplified a high set of standards, an expectation that the worst scholarly sin is not being wrong, but being shallow or trivial. "Trivial" is an interesting term here. It is really part of the philosopher's vocabulary. Its origin is in logic and mathematics: Any assertion, implication, or proof that is tautologous or obvious (e.g. "How many divisors does a number have? It's trivial that it has 1 and itself as divisors"). Restating one theory in another's terms is often trivial. What is gained by doing that? One can only be wrong if one ventures away from trivial claims ("rhetoric is persuasive") and into, so to speak, more empirical waters. While his career in the rhetoric of science began with case studies, it moved in decidedly more empirical directions --away from generalizing to actually doing a content analysis of 300 years of scientific articles, for example.

While Alan was never shy with his scorn for work he could not respect, he has been consistently a remarkably gentle and supportive teacher and colleague. Those who worked or studied with him held themselves to higher standards for having known him, and their work shows it.

Reference List

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