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Holes, God-shaped and Otherwise: A Response to **Right Talk** and Philip C. Wander

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published according to this credo; he did so at the cost of not being as recognized in the discipline as he deserves to be.

Even in trying to understand and question the tacit policies of our discipline—regarding teaching and publication—we still *present* and *display* our arguments rather than being or even enacting those arguments. In presenting the narrative of his own journey in the discipline, Fleming shows that a book review is as much about the reviewer as it is about the book. In fact, all of our contributions to all the conversations in all of the parlors are as much about us—individually and collectively—as they are about the topics of those conversations. More than ever, it is incumbent upon us as rhetoricians to get that central idea across to our students at all levels through our teaching and our writing. And while the rhetorical tradition provides foundations to what we do in the classrooms, the journals, and our lives as rhetoricians in general, we need to understand it as Corder did, as a way forward rather than as merely an indicator of our current location.

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Holes, God-shaped and Otherwise: A Response to *Right Talk* and Philip C. Wander

Smith's *The Right Talk* is an impotent exposé simply because there's no fucking or god in it (or rather, there is no fucking god at all). Let me explain. The author sets out to debunk common assumptions about the political right, assumptions that are apparently most succinctly represented in Thomas Frank's *What's the Matter with Kansas* (which is really the object of the book's critique): that the Republican party, buoyed by the support of social conservatives and religious people of a certain brand, "have constructed their campaign mainly around social and cultural issues such as abortion, homosexuality, crime, drugs, permissive sexual behavior, and religious expression in public life" (34). To the contrary, argues Smith, the Right has steadily expanded their electorate because of the relentless interpretation of any issue as an economic one. To this end Smith

advances a “model of the place of rhetoric in politics” that is “entirely compatible with the logic of rational choice” (26), a simple elites-framing model that rhetorician Robert Lee Scott would likely describe in terms of “push-pull-click-click.”¹ With the aid of a mound of statistics, poll data, and graphs (and a smidgeon of close reading on the side), Smith grinds through a couple hundred pages on Goldwater, Reagan, Clinton, and the Bushes to conclude with a prediction—brace yourself!—that “political actors will frame many policy initiatives around the prospects for additional jobs, higher growth, and larger incomes” (218). Apparently this is news to somebody.

Professor Wander’s review of *The Right Talk* is generous and on the money. The book is hopeful because it stresses the importance of our subject of study to a wider academic audience (principally political scientists, but also potentially non-academics). Less generously, however, the book is embarrassing because it has all the hallmarks of that scholar who has “discovered rhetoric” but not necessarily the field of rhetorical studies.² Professor Wander’s impulse to go the rest of the way by pointing to Aristotle’s understanding of the good life as a civic one that links ethics, poetics, and politics to rhetoric is perhaps an understated critique housed in an inclusive gesture that suggests just how much one must supplement Smith to get a satisfying understanding of the appeal of conservative, right-leaning discourse.

Aside from the continued closeting of Aristotle’s grand (and in our present pomo-predicament, perhaps even queer) theory of everything human, what is missing from Smith’s rational-choice model of rhetoric is any encounter with the second book of *On Rhetoric*. There is no motor, that thing which makes human expressivity (poetics, rhetoric) and being-for-others (ethics, politics) possible in the first place: affect, feelings, the desire to fondle and be fondled “down there” and the lust for a sorrow-free plenitude after death “up there.” By the end of the book, the causal binary Smith ostensibly sets up in the key of both/and, the cultural and the economic, ironically collapses to a cool either/or choice between affect and signification, between *jouissance* and reason, between prayer and automaton. Insofar as Smith is a social scientist, I suppose one should not be surprised that his analysis of right-leaning rhetoric is James Brownless, succumbing to the sterility of the august account sans bodies, prayer without voice, word without the grunt. Even so, one wonders how a rhetoric so seductive to some and repulsive to others can be reduced to something so banal. There are holes, and Smith is oblivious to holes, even his own.

The Lacanian critic and analyst Bruce Fink makes an observation about academic knowledge production that is helpful at this point. He says that in psychoanalysis speech is the preferred route to knowledge because, on the one hand, it relies on a signifying system, but on the other, this system requires a body to

enunciate it (144). Speech thus betokens “two faces of the subject,” the subject of the signifier or representation, and the bodily subject of affect or enjoyment. In the analytic setting, therapy works not simply because one narrates something traumatic from the past, which by itself would be rather sterile. Rather, the “talking cure” works because the bodily presence of another human being helps to evoke the feelings and affect associated with one’s self-storying. The affect that words convey lead to transformation and change.

In the academy knowledge is usually associated with the subject of the signifier, and the subject of *jouissance* is killed off for the sake of representational knowledge without feeling (Burke’s notion of “motion”), especially when it is dubbed “science” (for example, Jakobson’s theory of phonology in structural linguistics; see Dolan 17–23). Insofar as they are concerned with group behaviors, Fink avers, “sociology and political science would be ill-advised to ignore the subject of [mass hysteria, rioting, pillaging, and so on], the subject of *jouissance*, believing that their fields can be exhaustively accounted for on the basis of the subject of the signifier alone” (145). Unquestionably, political science is dominated by accounting for the signifier in politics, and often in terms of number.³ Yet irrational ecstasy, love, lust, panic, and fear animate and maintain political support and alliances. By drawing our attention back to the interconnectivity of Aristotle’s enterprise, at least tacitly, Wander is reminding us that Aristotle’s understanding of rhetoric-politics-ethics-poetics addressed both faces of the subject, not just logos, but pathos and ethos too.

If “an ancient link between rhetoric and politics” has been allowed to lapse, the name of that link is “affect.” That Smith can dedicate a book to explaining the appeal of a highly charged mode of political rhetoric with no account of Nine-eleven and the politics of mass mourning, no discussion of the libidinal economy of religion and the lust for the spiritual, no mention of the delicious sex scandals that presumably blight our political (ob)scene, no account of the violence of projection and anti-abstract noun crusades (“drugs,” “terrorists,” and so forth), evacuates his rhetorical theory of useful explanatory power. Of course the economic drives the whole damn shebang “in the last instance,” as one structural Marxist once put it. But that doesn’t explain the appeal and repulse of Right-ist discourse. I opened my response to Wander’s review with a rather crude statement: “Smith’s *The Right Talk* is an impotent exposé simply because there’s no fucking or god in it (or rather, there is no fucking god at all).” Persuasion certainly concerns and empties our pockets, but its primary purchase is at the level of your reaction, dear reader, to such a crass claim. Rhetoric is principally pornographic and priestly; broadly construed, it registers at the level of the ecstasy of uhhh, the pastoral palliative of “praise God!” before it begins to make any cents at all.

Notes

¹Bob Scott, my PhD adviser, uses this phrase to describe relatively uninteresting, scientific, or cookie-cutter modes of rhetorical criticism.

²Ronald Walter Greene, for example, has been critiquing the neoliberal rhetoric that concerns Smith for some years (see “Rhetorical Capital”; “Rhetoric and Capitalism”).

³I think we could even argue that in the twentieth century, rhetorical studies adopted such a one-sided approach until Burke was taken up and rhetoric-as-seduction eclipsed argumentation, the supplication of good reasons, and so forth. Even so, attempts to more directly engage emotional appeals and affect have been met with some derision (for example, Brockriede; Corder). For a recent, excellent attempt to engage the affect of rhetoric, see Thomas Rickert’s *Acts of Enjoyment*.

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Response to *Right Talk* and Philip C. Wander

“It’s the economy, stupid.” This statement is simple, concise, repeatedly resonates with voters, and is a position that the Republican Party is astutely aware of. The importance of Mark Smith’s book *The Right Talk* is his illustration of