

Dizzying Up the Discipline

Ryan Skinnell

To everything (turn, turn, turn)
There is a season (turn, turn, turn)
And a time to every purpose, under heaven

—Pete Seeger, “Turn! Turn! Turn!”
(To Everything There Is a Season),” 1962

Can you see it? (Can you see it?)
Or can you feel it? (I can feel it)
'Cause it's time to get dizzy, dizzy, dizzy

—Radical Stuff, “Let's Get Dizzy,” 1991

In his masterwork of political philosophy, *The Republic*, Plato famously reviles the idea that the average person is smart or savvy enough to make good decisions for themselves. Plato's masses are benighted, placated by cave-dwelling shadow puppets, but also far too fragile and credulous to face the light themselves. The people need their shackles and petty diversions, but they also need benevolent puppeteers—rulers and guardians who can make society's tough decisions without falling prey to their own mortal weaknesses.

On the one hand, *The Republic* contains at least the germ of a totalitarian style of government, which it presents as the ideal form of society. In *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, philosopher Karl Popper goes so far as to claim that Plato's political program, “far from being morally superior to totalitarianism, is fundamentally identical with it” (84). Plato's program is one I think we should fundamentally reject.

On the other hand, even granting the charge that Plato was the ur-totalitarian, I don't see any good reason to disregard *The Republic* altogether. If we can bracket Plato's regressive politics for a moment, we can see that his magnum opus is also a crisis text of the sort that might interest rhetoric and writing scholars and teachers undertaking the task of considering where we are in terms of the rhetorical function of crisis.

Written amid the tumult of the Athenian system of direct democracy, which Plato blamed for all manner of ills, including Socrates's death, *The Republic* was, ironically, a call for change. Plato wanted to scrap Athens's direct democracy and replace it with a republic run by philosopher kings. The irony here is that Plato's political philosophy, as Popper points out, was premised on two principles generally opposed to change: naturalism and idealism. Natural-

ism is a return to the natural state of things, or the undoing of all changes that have corrupted society since it began. And “the idealist formula is: *Arrest all political change!* Change is evil, rest divine” (Popper 83, emphasis in original). So *The Republic*, as with so many subsequent totalitarian philosophies, issues from a desire to change back to a state which must never be allowed to change. What Plato’s example illustrates so well is the (sometimes ironic) rhetorical function of crisis as what Kenneth Burke might call a goad to incipient action (*Grammar* 236).

Plato is historically rhetoricians’ best whipping boy, but it’s hardly necessary here to rehearse his flaws. Counterintuitively, Plato helps us recognize the advantages of crisis for assessing our current circumstances and imagining new ways of acting in the world.¹ Crisis rhetoric is always about incipient action. It diagnoses problems in the current configuration(s) of the world and prescribes remedies, the need for which is heightened by imminent threats of danger, and even destruction. Without crisis, there is no possibility of change. The rhetoric of crisis, then, is a sign of possibility.

As demonstrated so helpfully by Plato’s *Republic*, the rhetoric of crisis orbits around three basic questions: Where are we? Are we safe here? If not, how do we get out of this (dangerous) place? It is within the framework of these questions that I think we can begin to truly appreciate rhetoric and writing’s seemingly endless parade of disciplinary crises as a hopeful sign.

Turn(s), Turn(s), Turn(s)

In *Cultural Turns: New Orientations in the Study of Culture*, German literary and cultural theorist, Doris Bachmann-Medick, argues that the twentieth century saw “otherness” installed in the humanities and social sciences as a methodological principle, meaning that defamiliarization and critique moved methodologically from the periphery of academic disciplines to their center (18-21). One consequence, according to Bachmann-Medick, was the proliferation across the humanities and social sciences of turns designed to allow scholars and teachers to see the world differently. Bachmann-Medick sees this metaphorical turning as a net good because it allows us to see over and across theoretical, disciplinary, and methodological boundaries and invent new perspectives for understanding the world and the people within it.

Rhetoric and writing studies exemplifies Bachmann-Medick’s point. We have turned, turned, turned—linguistically, culturally, archivally, globally, and so on—until we’re dizzy. Dizziness is, by definition, destabilizing. Therefore, the proliferation of disciplinary turns might reasonably lead one to wonder: Where are we? Are we safe here? If not, how do we get out of this (dangerous) place?

The metaphor of dizzying turns can be misleading, however, if we fail to notice that each turn in the field is predicated on crisis, and more specifically

on the rhetoric of disciplinary crisis which asks for careful attention to where the discipline is situated. Disorienting, yes. But simultaneously oriented around observing ourselves carefully and considering if we might be better served by turning to new possibilities. Being in crisis is not the same as being untethered.

Take, for example, Iris Ruiz and Damián Baca's "Decolonial Options and Writing Studies." Ruiz and Baca do not explicitly call for a "decolonial turn" in writing studies, but drawing on Nelson Maldonado-Torres's "Thinking through the Decolonial Turn: Post-continental Interventions in Theory, Philosophy, and Critique—An Introduction," they diagnose a crisis in the field: "One of the main problems with [writing studies] is its own colonial unconscious." And they prescribe a remedy: "dismantl[ing] cultural hierarchies still enforced by colonialism" and "rethinking and revising the field's teleological macro-narratives of human progress, with whitened, Europeanized fourth-century Greeks cemented as the field's intellectual cradle" (226).

Far from an indictment of Ruiz and Baca, I selected their crisis rhetoric as an example because it is admirable and emblematic of the rhetoric of our discipline's crises more generally. Readers might reasonably disagree with their diagnosis and remedies, but it's undeniable that they're keenly aware of the questions they're asking and the answers they're proffering: Where are we? In rhetoric and writing studies, a field that has systematically ignored Indigenous, Latinx, and Latin American people and writing practices (among others) for the entirety of its existence. Are we safe here? No. If not, how do we get out of this (dangerous) place? Pursue and enjoy our colleagues to pursue the decolonial turn in the field's research and teaching.

Like Plato, Ruiz and Baca traffic in the rhetoric of crisis. They see danger, even potential destruction, if writing studies refuses to turn away from the colonial legacy. Unlike Plato, however, their goad to incipient action isn't totalitarian, nor is their rhetoric of disciplinary crisis predicated on a rejection of difference and equality. In fact, their prescriptions are something like the opposite of Plato's even if their crisis rhetoric is formally similar.

Let's Get Dizzy

Notwithstanding its philosophical and rhetorical sophistication, Plato's *Republic* contains a relatively uncomplicated call for change. It diagnoses a general crisis (the problem of justice and the forms of government best suited to ensuring it) and prescribes what he sees as an ideal solution: in this case, installing benevolent puppeteers and ruling out crisis and change altogether. I'm writing this in the most environmentally, politically, and economically unstable period in my life (so far), and I'd be lying if I said I didn't see the allure of Plato's vision for cultural stasis. But ultimately, Plato's crisis is a crisis

of the elite, and totalitarian stasis is just as much an illusion now as it was in ancient Athens. We can, and should, turn away from it.

At the same time, we can and should turn toward the rhetorics of crisis proliferating in the discipline. The proliferation of turns and the proliferation of different perspectives for seeing the world will always result in a proliferation of crises and proliferations of crisis rhetoric. Counterintuitive as it may seem, these dizzying turns are a good thing. Our rhetoric of crisis is an encouraging sign of our disciplinary (and cultural) ferment and activity, disagreement and difference. It is a signal of health even if it is also a signal of potential danger.

In the end, crisis rhetoric is always a sign of a genuine crisis, at least in the mind of the diagnostician. Some ask us to invest in futures we wouldn't actually want; others ask us to recognize crises where we might be resistant to find them. All of them ask us to imagine ourselves in danger, maybe even destroyed. But not all crises are created equal. It is incumbent upon rhetoric and writing scholars, in particular, to attend carefully to the incipient action entailed in rhetorical crises and their recommended remedies. This is not easy, and sometimes not even gratifying, work. Nevertheless, I think the discipline should be grateful for the chance to dizzy ourselves up because the alternative is stagnation.

Notes

1. To put my cards face up on the table, here I'm co-opting Plato to rhetoric's cause.

Works Cited

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