

“Transgressing the Boundaries” of Ethical Discourse: Speculations on the Rhetoric of Decorum

D. Robert DeChaine

Communications

This article serves as a preliminary investigation of decorum as a rhetorical resource, and the ethical ramifications of decorum for contemporary society. Recently, academic writing has become the subject of renewed scrutiny regarding the ethical treatment of language and ideas, partly as a result of the controversial publication of Alan Sokal’s “hoax” article “Transgressing the Boundaries: Toward a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity.” In this paper, two questions are addressed specifically: can a particular vocabulary or “jargon” induce adherence to an argument separate from, or even at the expense of, the argument itself? If so, what responsibilities does the use of such a vocabulary entail? It is argued that the events surrounding Sokal’s hoax, while demonstrating the ethical pitfalls inherent in the use of decorum, simultaneously privileges it as a powerful epistemic resource in the framing of a “world of possibility.”

[If] all is rhetoric and language games, then internal logical consistency is superfluous too: a patina of theoretical sophistication serves equally well. Incomprehensibility becomes a virtue; allusions, metaphors, and puns substitute for evidence and logic.

—Alan Sokal

Introduction

The title of this essay contains a twofold significance for the reader. First, and perhaps most obviously, it announces its topic, which concerns the status of decorum. Secondly, and of equal relevance to this study, it “flashes its wardrobe.” By that, it is meant that it purposively alerts the prospective reader to a specific *stylistic mode* of discourse—one which portends a particular academic vocabulary, a particular way of using this vocabulary, and a particular audience to which the vocabulary is addressed. While one’s attempt to grasp the nuances of this comparatively oblique and difficult vocabulary allows access to a specific style or mode of discourse, one’s understanding and use of the vocabulary does not necessarily bear upon the *substantive quality* of the arguments comprising the discourse—or does it? Can a particular vocabulary or “jargon” induce adherence to an argument separate from, or even at the expense of, the argument itself? If so, what is the nature of this “power” of words, and more importantly, what responsibilities does the use of such a vocabulary entail?

Such questions invoke the classic argument concerning *to prepon*, or decorum. Though formally worked out in detail by Aristotle and later refined by Cicero and Quintilian among others, the idea that “style should suit subject, audience, speaker and occasion” (Lanham, 1991, p. 45) assumed a prominent role in the earlier oratory of the Sophists, notably in texts such as Gorgias’ “Encomium of Helen.” In such texts, words and stylistic flourishes served to create a “world of possibility” (Poulakos, 1984) for the hearer; indeed, a traditionally pejorative notion of rhetoric, as Poulakos notes, can be traced to the Sophists and, specifically, to the “linguistic spell” which they cast (*Id.*, p. 218). Sophists recognized words as powerful tools of discourse, tools which they believed could help to frame reality itself.

This paper serves as a preliminary investigation of decorum as a rhetorical resource, and its ethical ramifications for contemporary society. Scholarly discourse in the form of journal articles, books, conference papers, and other academic writing has been the subject of a

recently renewed scrutiny regarding the ethical treatment of language and ideas. An illuminating example of this renewed interest is amply demonstrated in the current events surrounding Alan D. Sokal's article entitled "Transgressing the Boundaries: Toward a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity," which appears in the Spring/Summer 1996 issue of the scholarly journal *Social Text*. Ostensibly written as a speculative inquiry into "the social construction of scientific knowledge" (Sokal, 1996b, p. 62), the article features an elaborate exploration "taking account. . . recent developments in quantum gravity." This is an argument which, according to Sokal, "has profound implications for the content of a future postmodern and liberatory science" (Sokal, 1996a, p. 218). The 15 pages of text comprising the article is written in a fairly dense, academic style and employs a "jargon-ridden prose of postmodernism" (Fuller, 1996, p. 58). It includes elaborate notes and references—22 pages of them—as part of what appears to be a sincere discussion of many current themes in postmodern "science studies."

Upon the article's publication, however, Sokal announced in an article contemporaneously published in the journal *Lingua Franca* (1996) that it was all a hoax: the article had been an elaborate experiment to "test prevailing intellectual standards" (1996b, p. 62). In his self-exposing rejoinder, he states "I offered the *Social Text* editors an opportunity to demonstrate their intellectual rigor. Did they meet the test? I don't think so" (Sokal, 1996, p. 64).

What is perhaps most interesting about the publication of Sokal's article (and rejoinder) is not the article itself, but rather the reactions, both within and outside of the academy, which it has elicited. Stanley Fish, in a *New York Times* article published immediately following the Sokal rejoinder, called it a "bad joke," one which violated both academic and public trust (1996, P. A23). Fish's ethical critique gave way to a flood of subsequent responses, both praising and excoriating Sokal, including an official explanation/reprimand by the *Social Text* editors and a subsequent forum for write-in commentary in *Lingua Franca*. Though Sokal's parody was aimed most pointedly at the loosely defined field of cultural studies, his article and its surrounding controversy calls our attention to ethical considerations in academic discourse as it alerts us to the rhetorical power of language.

Thus, in what follows, I explore the category of decorum and some of its implications for practitioners in the field(s) of communication studies. By way of an examination of the classical roots of the debate over decorum, beginning with its prominence in sophistic texts, and in Plato's subsequent criticism of rhetoric in the *Gorgias* and the *Phaedrus*, I intend to argue that the events surrounding Sokal's "hoax," while demonstrating the potential ethical pitfalls inherent in the use of decorum, simultaneously privileges, even celebrates it as a powerful rhetorical resource. In advancing the above proposition I am not meaning to call into question Sokal's intentions; indeed, I would argue that Sokal's text represents in essence a post/modern recapitulation of Socrates' "First Speech" in *The Phaedrus*, in which Plato's admonishment of rhetoric and its ethical abuses are vividly and forcefully highlighted. In echoing Plato's concerns, Sokal attempts to warn us of an impending, perhaps already-underway "Third Sophistic" of sorts. The responses surrounding Sokal's article provide compelling evidence that decorum remains an issue of vital concern in communication ethics. At the same time, perhaps ironically, we are reminded of the ongoing relevance of decorum as a powerful epistemic resource in the framing of a "world of possibility."

The Epistemic Frame of Decorum

As a context for discussing the implications of Sokal's "transgression," it will be useful to begin with an understanding of how decorum might serve as an epistemic frame for discourse. Lanham (1991) argues for a rethinking of the term in light of its extensive historical treatment. He notes that as a stylistic criterion decorum is ultimately located "entirely in the beholder and not the speech or text" (*Id.*, p. 45). He elaborates his position thus:

No textual pattern per se is decorous or not. The final criterion for excess, *indecorum*, is the stylistic self-consciousness induced by the text or social situation. We know decorum is present when we don't notice it, and vice versa. *Decorum is a gestalt established in the perceiving intelligence*. Thus the need for it, and the criteria for it, can attain universal agreement and allegiance, and yet the concept itself remain without specifiable content. (*Id.*, emphasis added).

In other words, Lanham suggests that our sense of propriety in a text comes not from the text but *from our perception*. If this is true, then decorum becomes not so much a set of universal principles as a "general test of basic acculturation" (Lanham, 1991, p. 46). Another point which Lanham makes is that viewing decorum from a postmodern perspective is to recognize its *creative* and *pious* dimensions; thus, decorum not only reflects but *creates* social reality (*Id.*). Lanham states that

We create, with maximum self-consciousness and according to precise rules, an intricate structure of stylistic forces balanced carefully as to perceiver and perceived, and then agree to forget that we have created it and to pretend that it is nature itself we are engaging with. Rhetorical theory has spent endless time discussing how to adjust utterance to this preexistent social reality without reflecting on how that reality has been *constituted* by the idea of decorum. (*Id.*)

Thus, for Lanham a consideration of decorum entails much more than simply a concern for propriety: it involves looking at ways that our rhetorical choices (invention, style, and so on) frame our reality.

Lanham's argument, however, raises a serious question: given that decorum is ultimately localized in the perceiving intelligence, how, then, to locate it in written texts? Put another way, if *indecorum* signifies some kind of stylistic "invisibility" of a text for some readers (the "appropriately acculturated" ones) and stylistic self-consciousness for others, what function does decorum serve in/for a text *qua* text? This is a question that I should like to return to shortly. For now, permit me to proceed with the assumption that decorum entails at least *some* epistemic dimension. While many versions of this argument have been worked through in modern rhetorical thought (Scott, 1967; Rieke, 1974), examples from classical Greek thought can help to clarify. In the first example, the power of persuasion is stylistically argued by the Sophist Gorgias in his "Encomium on Helen":

But if it was through persuasion's reception and the soul's deception, it is not difficult to defend the situation and forfend the accusation, thus. Persuasion is a powerful potentate, who with frailest, feeblest frame works wonders.¹

In this passage we witness a double inflection: not only does Gorgias attempt to prove Helen's innocence and defenselessness against the "powerful potentate" of persuasion, but he further employs his own rhetoric self-consciously—in his inventional, organizational and stylistic choices—as proof of rhetoric's power. The "reality" which he frames for the hearer/reader is enabled through his use of language, tropes and figures. Through careful and reflexive consideration of decorum, Gorgias thus provided a powerful social reality for his auditors, wrought by the language he used and the ways he used it.

¹ While I am unable to provide source details for this citation, this passage from the "Encomium on Helen" originally appeared in *The Classical Weekly*, February 15, 1913. I am indebted to Thomas B. Farrell at Northwestern University, from whose seminar on classical Greek rhetoric this translated version was procured.

While we cannot know with certainty the precise responses which Gorgias' "Encomium" elicited from its auditors, we can gauge its effects in works such as Isocrates' "Against the Sophists" and, particularly, in Plato's virulent attacks on rhetoric in the *Gorgias* and the *Phaedrus*. Guided by his ideas on cosmology and the origins of truth, Plato's views on rhetoric's false nature are most clearly demonstrated in the *Gorgias* (qtd. in Waterfield, 1994). In it he accuses rhetoric, as practiced by Sophists such as Gorgias, of being nothing more than a "knack," a branch of flattery akin to cookery. Since rhetoric is concerned solely with persuasion (*Id.*, p. 17), and since a practitioner of rhetoric has "equipped himself with a persuasive ploy which enables him to make non-experts believe that he knows more than experts" (*Id.*, p. 24), his job entails nothing more than "a mind which is good at guessing, some courage, and a natural talent for interacting with people" (*Id.*, p. 30). All this adds up to Plato's (through Socrates) conclusion that "Anything bad is contemptible, so in my opinion rhetoric is contemptible" (*Id.*, p. 30).

Plato considers as rhetoric's greatest fault its aim at contingent, situational truth—a truth which is based not on the immutable Forms which stand apart from humanity, but on the circumstances of the moment, or *kairos*. For Plato "False rhetoric is precisely that of the Sophists, rhetoric that relies on *kairos*. . . to determine the provisional truth of the matter under discussion, the probable knowledge available about it" (Bizzell and Herzberg, 1990, pp. 27-8). Plato thus considered the "knack" for constructing a provisional reality based on the situation and crafted through clever use of decorum ethically bankrupt, "contemptible."

Whereas Plato's ideal of "false" rhetoric is clearly displayed in the *Gorgias*, he outlines his ideal for a "true" rhetoric in the *Phaedrus* (qtd. in Hamilton, 1973). Plato views a noble art of rhetoric as one in which the only worthy pursuit is Truth. Rhetoric thus "actually becomes the method whereby the philosopher and his pupil free themselves from the conventional and all worldly encumbrances in the pursuit and eventual attainment of absolute truth" (Bizzell and Herzberg, 1990, p. 28). Plato proposes four concerns which are vital to such an art. First, Plato insists that the speaker have knowledge of the subject on which he is speaking; second, such knowledge must be based on and have as its end the truth which resides in the eternal Forms; third, that a true rhetoric assumes an excellent grasp of technique; and fourth, it requires a philosophical method which allows one to peer into the human soul, and to recognize its individual types (qtd. in Hamilton, 1973, pp. 71-94).

Along with these constituents of a true rhetoric, Plato (again, through the character of Socrates) discusses the question of propriety. He argues that the written word is inferior to the spoken word, on the grounds that the spoken word is incapable of defending itself from posthumous and otherwise unqualified attack. As an example, he likens written discourse to painting:

The productions of painting look like living beings, but if you ask them a question they maintain a solemn silence. The same holds true of written words; you might suppose that they understand what they are saying, but if you ask them what they mean by anything, they simply return the same answer over and over again. Besides, once a thing is committed to writing, it circulates equally among those who understand the subject and those who have no business with it; writing cannot distinguish between suitable and unsuitable readers. (qtd. in Hamilton, 1973, p. 97)

In this passage, Plato provides a clue regarding the question of "locating" decorum in a text. In the above passage he clearly acknowledges the role of the reader as a powerful actuator of meaning. The text cannot ultimately stand up on its own; it is helpless against the reader who "has no business with it." A text needs a speaker to give it meaning and to

accurately reinforce that meaning to the hearer. In this way, in accord with Lanham, Plato ascribes rhetoric's propriety to the "beholder" or reader the text. At the same time, however, Plato is acknowledging the power of the text to improperly sway readers "who have no business with it"; in other words, a text may be decorous and yet be misleading or ill-serve its purpose (which, according to Plato, only the writer can elucidate). Thus, in Plato's *Gorgias* we see decorum, if not literally *in* a text, then at least vital to a text's unfolding its "meaning"—whether properly perceived or misperceived—for the reader.

In *The Phaedrus*, Plato gives a vivid example of the proclivity of rhetoric to overpower logic. After hearing a recitation by his pupil (Phaedrus) of a rather bad speech by Lysias, Socrates delivers an impromptu speech which proposes to correct the former speech's faults. Upon the speech's truncated ending, Phaedrus is disheartened to learn that Socrates has tricked him. Socrates argues that both speeches were "dreadful," "silly and more than a little blasphemous" (qtd. in Hamilton, 1973, p. 44) because they both were predicated upon false (unethical) principles: "both [speeches] sinned against love" (*Id.*, p. 44). Phaedrus had been swept away by the language and style of the speech; he had fallen victim to an ethical abuse of decorum.

In sum, Plato's attacks on rhetoric are founded on the notion that a false rhetoric does not strive for eternal Truth but for contingent truths, based not upon knowledge and virtuous intent but upon selfishness, a little courage, and a simple knack for speaking. Gorgias' "Encomium," while arguably successful and persuasive, would thus have been attacked by Plato on ethical, not stylistic grounds. Logically, his text may make a good argument or it may make a bad argument; for our purposes, that is beside the point insofar as it would require us to fold back into the argument with our definition of "logic." The point is this: if the criteria used to judge a text involves *stylistic* considerations of decorum, its judgment will be rendered based upon quite a different set of criteria than Plato's. These two views of criteria by which to judge the "truth" of a text—sometimes referred to as "absolutist" versus "relativist"—represent paradigmatic world views which in many ways continue to define tensions in our current postmodern social landscape.

The Decorum of Alan Sokal's "Transgression"

Thus far in the discussion I have advanced an argument that decorum serves as a frame for our social reality. Along the way I have pointed to two views of rhetoric which, concomitant with "absolutist" and "relativist" views of truth, define our ability to "find our footing" (Geertz, 1973) in culture. In light of these propositions, it seems to follow that our judgment of the propriety of texts coincides with our basic criteria for truth; either "the good" is *established within* the text and through the process of its creation and interpretation, or "the good" is *measured against* the text and its faithfulness to some kind of assumed transcendent principles (scientific fact or religious doctrine, for example). They simply represent two different sets of criteria. Neither particularly impinges on the other unless we want it to; we may choose to make the issue an ethical one, but that is a choice we make. Either way, the rhetorical power of a text may compel us to adherence regardless of its "truth."

In a less direct way, though, I have also been trying to square Lanham's view that decorum is ultimately located in the perceived intelligence with a more traditional view of decorum as textual propriety. Lanham may be correct in his assertion that the perceiving intelligence gauges propriety, but that may not be the same thing as saying that propriety *resides* in the perceived intelligence. Ultimately, the text contains the stylistic materials—vocabulary, syntax, argument structure—that define the terms of the engagement. It may not be possible to "square" decorum as both a textual feature and an epistemic frame; rather, it may be enough

to acknowledge that more rethinking of the problem is needed than Lanham's argument provides.

It is in light of these observations that the current controversy surrounding Alan Sokal's "hoax" article seems most relevant. As stated in the introduction, "Transgressing the Boundaries" is a scholarly journal article crafted with a vocabulary and style associated with poststructuralist theory, and what has most recently been referred to as "the jargon-ridden world of cultural studies" (Jones, 1996, p. F1). Indeed, one writer cites *Social Text* as "a journal that helped invent the trendy, sometimes baffling field" (Scott, 1996, p. 1). By all accounts, including the journal's editors, Sokal's article fit *Social Text's* stylistic criteria; while the editors claim that from the outset they "considered Sokal's article to be a little hokey," they nonetheless "read it more as an act of good faith of the sort that might be worth encouraging than as a set of arguments with which [they] agreed" (Robbins and Ross, 1996, p. 55). Thus, while they may not have disagreed with the substantive arguments in the article, they deemed it appropriate for their perceived readership.

In brief, "Transgressing the Boundaries" advances an argument for the social construction of scientific knowledge. In it, Sokal (1996a) asserts that "'reality' is at bottom a social and linguistic construct" (p. 217).² Later, he cites "the fundamental silliness" of his article in "the dubiousness of its central thesis and of the 'reasoning' adduced to support it" (1996b, p. 63). The following is an excerpt from the introduction and is typical of the article's rhetorical style:

Here my aim is to carry these deep analyses one step further, by taking account of recent developments in quantum gravity: the emerging branch of physics in which Heisenberg's quantum mechanics and Einstein's general relativity are at once synthesized and superseded. In quantum gravity, as we shall see, the space-time manifold ceases to exist as an objective physical reality; geometry becomes relational and contextual; and the foundational conceptual categories of prior science—among them, existence itself—become problematized and relativized. This conceptual revolution, I will argue, has profound implications for the content of a future postmodern and liberatory science. (1996a, p. 218)

Sokal later states that "I intentionally wrote the article so that any competent physicist or mathematician (or undergraduate physics or math major) would realize that it is a spoof," concluding that evidently "the editors of *Social Text* felt comfortable publishing an article on quantum physics without bothering to consult anyone knowledgeable in the subject" (1996b, p. 63).

What is interesting about the *Social Text* editors' response is the line of apologia which they take. Admitting that they now regret publishing the article, they attack Sokal largely on ethical grounds:

All of us were distressed at the deceptive means by which Sokal chose to make his point. This breach of ethics is a serious matter in any scholarly community, and has damaging consequences. (Robbins and Ross, 1996, p. 54)

²Referring to this assertion in his *Lingua Franca* self-expose (1996b), he quips that "Anyone who believes that the laws of physics are merely social conventions is invited to try transgressing those conventions from the windows of my apartment" (p. 62), noting that he lives on the twenty-first floor.

In other words, the editors' defense and accusations largely ignore the question of propriety, even though it was an important factor in their decision to publish the article. They did not bother to check "facts" or citations, but rather took the article and its author "on good faith," trusting the decorum of the text as a guarantor of its argument.

While not all of the respondents expressed ethical concerns—many had problems with Sokal's argument itself, and the fact that the article could have gotten published in the first place—a significant number, including the editors, cited some breach of personal and/or ethical standards (Robbins and Ross, 1996; Reynolds, 1996; Cutts, qtd. in Yemma, 1996; Seebach, 1996). Others, like Stanley Aronowitz (who also contributed to the special "Science Wars" issue of the journal along with Sokal), could summon only vitriol in response:

He says we're epistemic relativists. We're not. He got it wrong. One of the reasons he got it wrong is he's ill-read and half-educated. (qtd. in Scott, 1996, p. 1)

My point here is not to fuel interdisciplinary quibbling, but rather to highlight the various ways in which most of the responses to "Transgressing" either ignore or do not recognize the implications of decorum. Sokal felt that by writing an article "liberally salted with nonsense" (Sokal, 1996, p. 62) and highlighting his "concern about the spread of subjectivist thinking" (Sokal, 1996, p. 63), he was doing a favor to the scholarly community as a whole. His beliefs and intentions aside, his argument, whether or not one considers it "sound," *did* manage to convince a great many people, including the editorial staff of *Social Text*. One of the resources he undeniably employed in his "prank" was decorum—in his stylistic, linguistic, syntactical and argumentative choices. I would assert that whether or not Sokal believes his own arguments, there is something to be gained in them. And if there is anything to be gained from Sokal's "hoax," it is a recognition that decorum is alive and well in our daily rhetorical exchanges. Not only has it proven once again to be a topic of scholarly concern, but it serves as a reminder to us that our "cultural footing" obtains in our socially-constructed worldviews *and* the texts through which they are constructed.

References

- Bizzell, P., & Herzberg, B. (1990). *The rhetorical tradition: Readings from classical times to the present.*, Boston: Bedford Books.
- Fish, S. (1996). "Professor Sokal's bad joke." *The New York Times*, (May 21): A23.
- Fuller, S. (1996). Editorial. *Lingua Franca*, 6(5): 58.
- Geertz, C. (1973). *The interpretation of cultures*, New York: Basic Books.
- Gorgias. *Encomium of Helen*. [citation unavailable] (see note 1).
- Jones, P. (1996). Academic Jargon. *The Times*, (May 25): F1.
- Lanham, R. (1991). *A handlist of rhetorical terms*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Plato. (1994). *The Gorgias* (R. Waterfield, Trans.). New York: Oxford University Press. (Original text ca. 386 b.c.e.)
- Plato. (1973). *The Phaedrus* (W. Hamilton, Trans.). New York: Penguin Books. (Original text ca. 370 b.c.e.)
- Poulakos, J. (1984). "Rhetoric, the Sophists, and the possible." *Communication Monographs*, 51: 215-26.
- Reynolds, T. (1996). Editorial. *Lingua Franca*, 6(5): 62.
- Rieke, R. D. (1974). "Rhetorical perspectives in modern epistemology." Paper presented at the 1974 *Speech Communication Association*.
- Robbins, B., & Ross, A. (1996). Editorial. *Lingua Franca*, 6(5): 54-7.
- Scott, J. (1996). "Postmodern gravity deconstructed, slyly." *The New York Times*, (May 18): 1.
- Scott, R. L. (1967). "On viewing rhetoric as epistemic." *Central States Speech Journal*, 18: 9-17.
- Seebach, L. (1996). "A bold scientist fights the tyranny of reality." *The Baltimore Sun*, (May 15): 17A.
- Sokal, A. (1996b). "A physicist experiments with cultural studies." *Lingua Franca*, 6(4): 62-4.
- Sokal, A. (1996a). "Transgressing the boundaries: Toward a transformative hermeneutics of quantum gravity." *Social Text*, 46(7): 217-52.
- Weaver, R. (1953). *The Ethics of Rhetoric*. Chicago: Henry Regnery.
- Yemma, J. (1996). "Hokum for high-brows; Physicist reveals hoax that faked out scholarly journal editors." *The Boston Globe*, (May 18): 3.