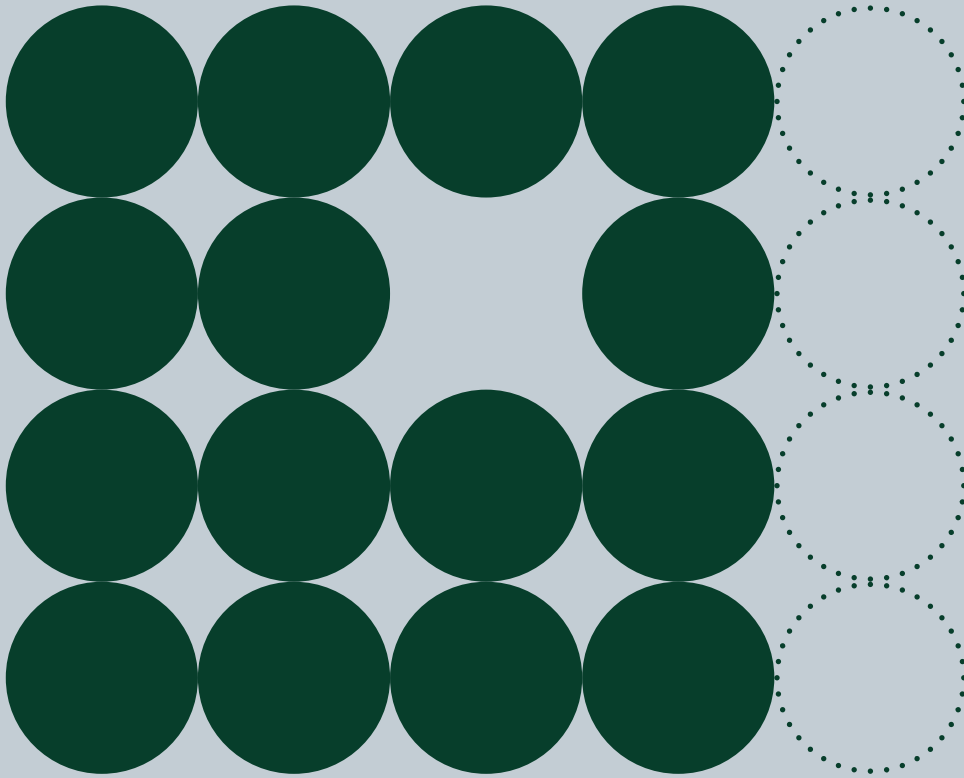# The Future of Invention

Rhetoric, Postmodernism, and the Problem of Change

John Muckelbauer

THE FUTURE OF INVENTION

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THE FUTURE
OF INVENTION

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*Rhetoric, Postmodernism,
and the Problem of Change*

John Muckelbauer

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Introduction

"What shall be the destiny of thought, since we know very well that it must be affirmative invention or nothing at all."
—Alain Badiou, *Ethics*

This book exists at the intersection of several different academic fields, the most prominent among them being rhetoric, continental philosophy, literary theory, and classics. Of course, none of these fields has ever been a settled, homogenous place. Each has always been composed of a vast array of performative actions, including multiple different traditions (some explicit and others less so) as well as many different, divergent lines of inquiry. As a result, it would be more precise to say that in writing this book, I simply followed one of these lines through these different fields, mapping its conjunction with other lines, its interruptions, proliferations, false starts, diversions, and, occasionally, its escapes.

Such an "interdisciplinary" or even "a-disciplinary" itinerary is not without a number of obvious risks. Not the least of these is that rather than accomplishing its goal of offering some intriguing points of intersection to scholars in different fields, it risks appearing largely unrecognizable to everyone. For this reason, I thought it would be helpful to begin by clearly delineating some of the contours of the project and by explaining how the different parts of the book try to fit together.

At the level of the proposition, the argument of the book is not terribly complicated: I begin by claiming that despite the extraordinary proliferation of scholarship associated with so-called postmodern theory, some crucial implications of the postmodern challenge have gone largely unnoticed or unattended. These implications concern what I call "the

problem of change." To put it succinctly, the supposedly distinct scholarly approaches loosely characterized by foundationalism and anti-foundationalism (or humanism and postmodernism, or universalism and relativism, etc.) actually share a common, "foundational" commitment to a dialectical image of change and to the movement of negation that engineers it. That is, whether the stakes are a new concept, a different social structure, a divergent form of subjectivity, a fresh reading, or an innovative technology, difference and novelty only emerge by somehow overcoming or negating particular others—outdated concepts, oppressive social structures, limited models of subjectivity, etc. In other words, for both traditionalists and non-traditionalists, change is always and everywhere the effect of overcoming and negation. My analysis then follows Gilles Deleuze and Jacques Derrida in an attempt to problematize this dialectical image and its negative movement pointing, instead, toward what I characterize as an "affirmative" sense of change. For reasons that I explain in chapters 1 and 2, I turn to rhetoric—and more specifically, to a series of concepts and practices associated with rhetorical invention—in order to elaborate and demonstrate the movement of this affirmative sense of change.

So at the level of the proposition, the argument is pretty straightforward. What makes the situation a bit more complicated is that, from the perspective of an affirmative sense of change, propositions and arguments (including the one I just outlined) are not the most important aspects of scholarship. That is, as I pursued this affirmative sense of change I realized that it challenged my conventional understanding of scholarly inquiry, particularly concerning how one reads, composes, and writes about texts. As a result, the very practices of inquiry in which I was engaged seemed to be at stake through this pursuit. In concrete terms, I realized that in order to pursue this project, I might have to develop a different relation to the scholarly practices of reading and writing than those to which I had become accustomed.

Another way of saying this is that "the problem of change" is not just another theme to add to the litany of contemporary theoretical questions. It is not just one problem among others, to be contemplated, debated, or solved. Instead, it invites us (or perhaps compels us) to rethink what it might mean to respond to a problem in the first place. Not only does the problem of change intersect with a whole host of other, perhaps more familiar, theoretical questions (questions about ethics, questions about the subject, questions about images, etc.), but it does so in such a way that these questions become something other than mere questions, something other than ideas that we might think about, deliberate over, accommodate, or ignore. As a result, engaging these questions has

less to do with simply accepting or rejecting the content of any particular proposition and more to do with altering the style through which we engage in the everyday practices of reading, writing, and responding.

To take one example, Friedrich Nietzsche famously claimed that an affirmative sense of invention structures the very possibility of what it means to read, to write, and even to think (I discuss this point in more detail in the last section of chapter 2). One possible consequence of this structuring is that one cannot simply read, write, or think *about* such an invention. That is, perhaps this affirmative sense of invention cannot be *explained* representationally (as if it were a theme or an idea). Perhaps it can only be *demonstrated* performatively. To speak about it, to try to explain it—as I do throughout this book—is necessarily to speak in an inexact and imprecise language.

Here, the problem of change explicitly intersects with the question of representation: if this affirmative sense of invention cannot simply be represented, or can only be represented imprecisely, how can one engage it? For me, the arrival of this question did not present itself as an abstract thought experiment. Rather, it compelled me to reconsider the ways in which I was reading, writing, and responding to a whole series of texts whose explicit topic was rhetorical invention. How could I read these texts and respond to them in something other than an imprecise fashion? Or, more polemically, if I were obligated to respond in an imprecise fashion, were there different ways of being imprecise, some of which might be somehow more "affirmative" than others?

For the sake of introduction, let me say that my tentative answer to this last question is "yes," or at least that, for an affirmative sense of invention, the particular style of imprecision is extremely crucial. For instance, in the case of the distinction that I just invoked—between "explaining" and "demonstrating"—the necessarily imprecise quality of explanation does not result from the fact that this affirmative sense of change is somehow excessive or sublime and thus eludes language's capacity to represent it. Indeed, this imprecision may not result from any shortcoming or inadequacy in language at all. In a certain sense, such imprecision may not really be imprecise, but actually a very precise, very direct approach to a problem that is simply of a different order than that of representation.

Deleuze and Guattari succinctly explain this dilemma as "the problem of writing": "The problem of writing: in order to designate something exactly, anexact expressions are utterly unavoidable. Not at all because it is a necessary step, or because one can only advance by approximations: anexactitude is in no way an approximation; on the contrary, it is the exact passage of that which is under way" (1987a,

20). In other words, imprecision may be perfectly precise for designating something other than a representation or for indicating the affirmative sense of "that which is under way."

There are several important theoretical and practical consequences to this point. First, while I will continue to employ the distinction between "explaining" the movement of affirmative invention (as a representation) and "demonstrating" it (as a performance), the two are not really so distinct. That is, the practices of explanation are no less performative or demonstrative than a performance or a demonstration. From the perspective of an affirmative sense of invention, the content or the "what" of the propositions that I was reading and those that I am writing may be of less importance than the "how" of the movement through those propositions. So one of the practical challenges I faced was to try to learn to read for the "how" and write toward this "how" (while still not knowing very clearly what this meant) and to do so as much with explanatory prose as with more recognizably performative writing. Conversely, the practices of demonstration began to seem too coarse and too imprecise, as if the "how" of demonstration could quite easily become a recognizable movement and be treated as a "what." So if explanation had to become more performative, then, in some way, performance had to become imperceptible.

My task in developing this project was to try to take these theoretical points seriously, not just as abstract ideas that I might contemplate, write about, or potentially resolve, but as provocations that could alter actual practices of reading, writing, and thinking. That is, if I wanted to respond to "the problem of change" with an affirmative sense of invention and if I wanted to provoke this style of engagement in others, it seemed necessary to invent pragmatic strategies to accomplish this. This book, then, is comprised of a series of efforts to do just that, to explain and to demonstrate the possibility of responding to "the problem of change" in an affirmative sense.

Part I focuses on theoretical explanation and will be primarily of interest to those inclined toward questions related to continental philosophy and literary and rhetorical theory. In chapter 1, I introduce "the problem of change," sketching out its contours and relating it to a certain approach to the "postmodern challenge." I also clarify the connection between a dialectical image of change and the repetitious movement of negation, explaining, along the way, why an affirmative sense of change can be neither the *same as* nor *different from* this dialectical image.

Chapter 2 develops "the problem of change" in the context of contemporary theoretical scholarship on rhetorical invention, noting the

various other questions through which invention circulates (including questions about the scope of rhetoric, the contingency of truth and knowledge, and the role of the subject). The chapter then turns toward the terrain of ethics and transforms the distinction between the dialectical image and the affirmative sense of change into the distinction between two different orientations within any particular encounter. For reasons that I explain in the last section of this chapter, I term these two orientations 1) an orientation toward the extraction of constants (as propositions) and 2) an orientation toward the extraction of singular rhythms (as affirmative movement).

Chapter 3 begins by revisiting the theoretical questions I raised above and briefly discussing Derrida's, Nietzsche's, and Deleuze's takes on this affirmative movement, indicating the stakes of this movement for scholarly practices of inquiry and argument. I then elaborate some of the practical reading and writing strategies that I employed in part II in order to induce an "inventive" response in my reading of a number of "traditional" rhetorical texts on invention.

Part II, then, turns more explicitly to demonstration, offering a series of analyses of practices and concepts associated with the classical rhetorical concept of invention. These chapters both discuss and show how this affirmative invention circulates even within the most mechanical practices and the most traditional thinkers. So in addition to the content of these analyses (in addition to delineating what these practices have to teach us *about* an affirmative movement of invention), these chapters also index my effort to produce and to provoke an affirmative engagement with so-called traditional sources. In other words, they attempt to demonstrate an "innovative" way of engaging "traditional" concepts and practices—one that neither simply repeats the tradition nor attempts to replace it with something different.

Chapter 4 analyzes the connections between classical practices of imitation and those of invention (as articulated in the work of Cicero, Quintilian, Plato, Aristotle, Longinus, and others). Contemporary scholarship on classical imitation tends to approach the practice by dividing it up based on the subjects and objects of imitation. The result of this common procedure has been a solidification of disciplinary lines between rhetoric (the imitation of a traditional text by a student), philosophy (the imitation of the real world by the actual world), and poetics (the imitation of the actual world by an artist). An equally relevant effect has been the polarization of the practices of imitation and those concerned with invention. This chapter seeks to elaborate a different taxonomy with which to approach imitation, one that focuses primarily on the movement that takes place *between* subjects and objects in the

actual practice of imitation. This new taxonomy has important implications for invention across disciplinary lines, including the fact that even the very possibility of taxonomy is structured by a certain untaxonomical, "inspired" (or affirmative) rhythm of imitation.

Chapter 5 offers a close reading of Plato's dialogue "the Sophist" that attempts to both discuss and produce the itinerant movement of the early sophists while also complicating the usually antagonistic structure of the relation between philosophy and rhetoric. By working through Plato's famous conceptual trilogy of Model, Copy, and Simulacrum, I elaborate the question of the sophist as a question of temporality and different styles of futurity (one of which we call "the future," the other of which we call "the past"). In other words, the chapter attempts to reorient the conventional antagonism between Plato and the sophists by following Plato through his own becoming-sophist.

Chapter 6 engages the contemporary debates about situated knowledge and contingency by focusing on the question of audience. In contemporary discussions of audience, the attempt to emphasize "situatedness" often stems from a desire to "be specific" (as opposed to being too general). This chapter shows that such an emphasis on the "specific" inevitably end up being too general, prompting the suspicion that specificity and generality are not as opposed as most seem to think, and that situatedness might simply be something different than specificity. Through the classical concept of *kairos* (which describes a qualitative rather than a quantitative aspect of time), I offer a different, affirmative orientation into the question of situatedness, one that attempts to avoid the persistent oscillation of specificity/generality.

Chapter 7 attempts to account for the confusion that has prevailed since their inception about what classical *topoi* actually are. Most contemporary scholarly engagements conclude that this confusion is, at least in part, a result of the fact that classical descriptions of the concept were often highly metaphorical, and hence, that they did not adequately facilitate understanding. Such engagements then proceed to overcome this gap of understanding in a variety of different ways. My contention here is that the confused, metaphorical definitions of *topoi* may not indicate a gap or an inadequacy at all, but may simply index an inventive movement that isn't particularly concerned with understanding (or with the overcoming of gaps). Through a reading of Aristotle's *Physics* (a source for discussion about classical *topoi* that has been overlooked by many scholars), I describe a topical movement that, rather than focusing on understanding and overcoming gaps, emphasizes immersion, connectivity, and a positive sense of "con-fusion."

Chapter 8 provides an analysis of how the relationship between the twin concepts of tradition and innovation have functioned in relation to invention. The two most prevalent models of this relation are 1) invention as an absolute break from the past and 2) invention as necessarily complicit with the past. I then turn to the classical concept of *doxa*—a terms that indicates the very material of rhetoric—and contend that *doxa* points toward a very different sense of futurity. This other futurity is not primarily subject to the identifying dynamics of linear time (it is not something that comes after something else), but indicates a "common" movement that distributes causality. In other words, to inquire about the "future of invention" need not indicate an attempt to ask "what comes next" for invention. Instead, this chapter takes its title as a demand to rethink the nature of futurity itself through invention, rendering an affirmative sense of the future that is as operative in an engagement with the past as it is in thinking about the day after tomorrow.

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PART I

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Orientations

Everywhere the enterprise of knowledge and research is first of all a programmatics of invention . . . The aleatory margin that they seek to integrate remains homogenous with calculation, within the order of the calculable; it devolves from a probabilistic quantification and still resides, we could say, in the same order and in the order of the same. An order where there is no absolute surprise, the order of what I shall call the invention of the same. This invention comprises all invention, or almost.

   —Jacques Derrida, "Psyche: Inventions of the Other" (46, 55)

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CHAPTER ONE

The Problem of Change

> "Change is far more radical than we are at first inclined to suppose."
>
> —Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution* (1)

Over the past thirty years, the postmodern critique of foundational thinking has become a commonplace in theoretical scholarship across the humanities and social sciences. Even these days, amid various proclamations of the end of theory, it is entirely common for scholars to deconstruct so-called foundational and metaphysical premises or, at very least, to attempt to overcome some pernicious dualism. But despite the massive proliferation of such work, I want to claim that some of the most crucial implications of this postmodern critique have gone largely unnoticed.[1] Indeed, it may be that only now, amid the alleged end of theory and the supposed overcoming of postmodernism that this other postmodern challenge might begin to be heard.

Succinctly put, this other challenge forces us to grapple with what I call "the problem of change."[2] While most contemporary critiques are directed toward realizing some particular change—whether in social dynamics, institutional structures, or even just in intellectual land-scapes—most also fail to attend to the implications of the movement of change that drives such work. Another way of saying this is that despite the incessant and justifiable concern for problematizing a whole series of binary operations throughout the social field, the one binary that has remained firmly intact is that between "the same" and "the different."

Recognizing the persistence of this binary can help to complicate the often antagonistic and usually caricatured relationship between a supposedly innovative, anti-foundationalist postmodernism and an allegedly conservative, traditionalist humanism. Indeed, one of the major goals of this book is to offer a style of engagement that might allow us to reconsider the impasses between these positions (and their many variants) by encouraging us to attend to the very relationship between tradition (the same) and innovation (the different). As we all know, contributors to these debates—both within the academy and without—have engaged in seemingly endless and sometimes vitriolic exchanges about both the means for achieving transformation and the ends to which such transformation should be directed. Very few, however, have paid sustained attention to the movement of transformation itself. That is, despite the fact that these debates have often explicitly focused on the importance of particular ethical and political changes, we seem to have overlooked the possibility that the movement of change itself might harbor important ethical and political implications.

Yet if one focuses on the movement of change, it quickly becomes apparent that the myriad different approaches to contemporary scholarship actually have a great deal more in common than is usually presumed. While the many polarized positions certainly differ on a number of important matters, the one thing they generally share is a fundamental commitment to a dialectical image of change.

While one might quite reasonably devote an entire book to explaining the notion of dialectical change, what I am referring to here is simply a style of engagement in which negation is the generative principle of transformation. That is, whether the stakes are a new concept, a different social structure, a divergent form of subjectivity, a fresh reading, or an innovative technology, difference and novelty only emerge by somehow overcoming or negating particular others—outdated concepts, oppressive social structures, limited subjectivities, or simply undesirable propositions. The important point here is that the negative movement of dialectical change is the generative engine for whatever "difference" or "novelty" results.

To take a familiar example from the field of rhetoric, in his most recent book Edward Schiappa writes that, "The Postmodern challenge is not merely to reverse our evaluation of such pairs as rational/emotional, literal/figurative, truth/opinion, physis/nomos, and Philosophy/Sophistry . . . We do not overcome such binary oppositions by preferring one over the other; we only overcome them by moving beyond the Hegelian framework" (63). The logic of this argument is, I suspect, quite recognizable by now: while reversing our evaluations of such pairs

certainly produces something different, this difference only emerges by repeating the same dialectical negation. For instance, the supposedly innovative position that attempts to reclaim the sophists from their degraded, platonic history effectively repeats the dialectical negation that engineered their degradation in the first place. While such revaluation certainly changes the valence attached to the sophists (once they were degraded and dismissed as individualists or relativists; now they are privileged and engaged as pragmatists or postmodernists), it does so by more or less explicitly reproducing the same oppositional relation between Plato and the sophists.[3]

There are two crucial points that I want to emphasize here. First, while this postmodern challenge is a response to dualism and to binary opposition, it is not simply a logical intervention into a static system of terms or positions. Positions are not inert places; they are constellations of actions (whether potential or actual). And binary oppositions are not a problem just because they are binaries, but because they are active and mobile embodiments of particular power dynamics that act through negation. *What is at issue in binary oppositions is not the abstract existence of opposite terms, but the pragmatic movement of negation through which such oppositions are generated and maintained.* We might better say that binary oppositions such as the ones Schiappa lists above are merely freeze-frame images of particular encounters, schematic diagrams that offer a momentary picture of what are, in practice, active engagements and enacted responses. As a response to binaries, then, this postmodern challenge is a response to the ethical and political dynamics of negation that occur within such active engagements.

Second, this postmodern challenge is not simply a call to change the content of our evaluations—as important as such a project undoubtedly is in particular cases—but to problematize the styles of engagement through which such evaluations emerge in the first place. That is, this postmodern challenge challenges us to somehow question the entire "Hegelian framework" of dialectical negation that enables any particular evaluation or any particular content. Rather than privileging "the same" or "the different" in any given relation, it points to the importance of attending to the movement from "the same" to "the different."

What is at stake here is not any particular claim, nor is it the content of any particular postmodern proposition (about subjectivity, agency, reason, etc.). What is at stake in *this* postmodern challenge is the pragmatic possibility of somehow responding "differently" in any particular encounter. In short, what is at stake is the possibility of inventing a style of engagement that is irreducible to the dialectical movement of negation.