

Hans Carl Finsen:

Die Rhetorik der Nation. Redestrategien im nationalen Diskurs

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Instead of viewing historical and aesthetic changes such as the Enlightenment and Romanticism as revolutionary, modern research has increasingly tended to discuss these changes in terms of continuity. Thus, the continuity of rhetoric in education and practical usage has been demonstrated in many fields. In his book *Die Rhetorik der Nation. Redestrategien im nationalen Diskurs*, Hans Carl Finsen demonstrates the continuity of rhetoric in a rather new way: instead of addressing questions of education in rhetoric and of literary techniques, Finsen focusses on various attempts to define and establish nations in terms of speech. On this approach, then, nationality is determined not so much by political borders as by the mother tongue and the way that language is related to rhetorical ideals. Finsen deals with the continuity and with the changes in the conceptualization of national discourse from the 16th to the 19th century, placing particular emphasis (towards the end of the book) on Germany. By means of a discursive perspective, Finsen pursues the notions of ‘national language’ and the ways they are used to create a national consciousness. In this way he is able to treat even Romanticism, with its ideal of authenticity, in terms of speech, as a *Redewechsel*, i.e. a strategic change from – or even development of – traditional rhetorical ideals.

In the “Einleitung” (pp. 7-15), Finsen takes as his point of departure an analogy between European culture and a cake. The different layers of the cake represent various ‘communities’ of the elite culture of Early Modern Europe. In this *Stratumkultur*, the whole of Europe was tied closely together across national borders – i.e. horizontally – through communities of the learned, of the aristocracy, and of the church. The point of the analogy is that the cake can then be cut into pieces, each piece representing the establishment of a particular nation. The strata are cut through and every nation constitutes its own – vertically defined – entity. Simplified as this analogy is, it serves well to illustrate the development. The question that Finsen asks is: how did this segmented culture develop from the *Stratumkultur*? He argues that the answer lies in “the rhetoric of the nation”.

Die Nation als Imitation (pp. 17-53)

The first chapter of the book deals with the early development of national identity. Via the classical idea of a golden age, Finsen maintains that the nation needs to be built on *imitatio*. Thus, the young nation must make its way from periphery to center, from barbarism to culture, by imitating the *ars* of the golden age, foremost Rome. Political power was not enough; the young nation needed not only an Augustus but also a Virgil to commemorate its glory. On account of this, the European vernacular languages had to be brought to a level where they could be used to imitate – or even replace – the exemplar. Finsen illustrates how a national discourse is modeled on classical notions and on the rhetorical tradition by examining such authors as Du Bellay, Voltaire, and Leibniz. However, he discusses the topics of nation and speech without addressing the question of whether and how ideas concerning

nationality and speech were carried out in practice. The “nation as imitation” is thus not presented here as specific to one nation or another. Italy, France, and Germany all strive to be the new Rome, and the different nations are modeled on the same classical examples, merely in different vernaculars. It is artfulness – *ars* put into practice – that perfects and constitutes the nation. In the sub-chapter, “Die rhetorische Nationalmythos”, Finsen elaborates how the vernacular language was made to function as a civilizing component. According to Finsen, this was the exclusive strategy of moving from the periphery to the center until about the middle of the 16th century, when a rival national discourse arose that would be dominant in the 17th century. In this rival discourse, the nation was defined in terms of urbane speech.

Die Nation als urbane Rede (pp. 55-174)

According to Finsen, while the earlier discourse was centered upon the state, the ruler, and their praise and glory, the new discourse saw the nation as a form of civil community. This implied a new way of viewing and employing *imitatio*, and resulted in a new mode of speech that was as firmly based in the rhetorical tradition as the old one, but drawing on another school, namely what Finsen sees as the ‘Ciceronian ideal’ of *humanitas*. The ideal of speech thus shifts from the elevated style into the middle style, from grandeur into amiability, from monologue into dialogue. From being the object of speech, nation and nationality become a question of the process of speech. In Finsen’s view, then, national identity is now established through the communicative and urbane manner of speech.

The second chapter of the book is introduced by three sub-chapters that explore different aspects of the communicative function of speech. The first of these discusses Plato’s and Aristotle’s different definitions of the term *mimesis*. As could be expected, it is Aristotle’s positive definition that turns out to be the useful one: “Die Kunst ist nicht, wie bei Platon, Repräsentation, sondern ein kommunikativ-kreativer Akt, in dem eine Kultur ihre Konventionen zur Darstellung bringt und in diesem Prozess sich iterativ als Kultur-gemeinschaft konstituiert” (p. 58).¹ Finsen develops the connection between ethics and poetics in Aristotle with reference to Paul Ricœur’s distinction between three instances of *mimesis*, the second of which is the traditional *mythos*, composition. The other instances that Ricœur defines are extra-textual, concerning the relation of the work to pre-existing tradition and collective memory on the one hand (“*mimesis* I”), and the impact of the work on community on the other (“*mimesis* III”). One may object that the extra-textual instances are Ricœur’s invention rather than Aristotle’s, and thus not necessarily to be found in 17th- and 18th-century culture, but at any rate the distinctions prove useful when discussing the communicative character of art.

In the sub-chapter “Topik”, Finsen examines the dynamics between individual and collective, innovation and tradition, i.e. the communicative aspect of topics, which is a species of *inventio*. Finsen here most interestingly discusses modern attitudes toward the topics, contrasting Roland Barthes’ critical view of the topics as an instrument that produces stereotypes with the views of Lothar Bornscheuer, who is more sympathetic to rhetoric. Finsen then seeks the foundation of the discourse of urbanity in Cicero’s *De oratore*. By exploring the conversational ideal presented in this influential work, in the sub-chapter “Humanitas”, Finsen seeks to establish the implications of the ‘Ciceronian ideal’ in the context of the discourse of nationality. Rhetoric is performance: speech and speaker

¹ “Art is not, as Plato would have it, representation, but a communicative and creative act in which a culture displays its conventions and in the process constitutes itself iteratively as a cultural community” (my translation).

cannot be separated. The implication Finsen draws is that rhetorical speech thus must be creative of character, which means that in his communication, the speaker establishes (his) *ethos*. *Humanitas* is seen as the striving to perfect that which is human – perfection being attained through art applied in practice. The communicative task is to gratify by *ethos*, the speaker adapting his mode of speech to the audience and establishing a common field of discourse, i.e. a community. Thus, Finsen understands civilization as an artefact, which by the beauty and ease of presentation should appear to be ‘natural’. One might find provocative Finsen’s way of ‘translating’ Cicero and others into discourse terminology, or the way that he assimilates the nation to discourse, thus making civilization itself appear to be a more-or-less fictional creation. However, I find the theoretical framework to be well suited for analysis of rhetorical thought.

In the sub-chapter “Vom *vir bonus* zum *homme poli*”, Finsen exemplifies how the ideal of urbanity is preserved in Renaissance contexts, in, for example, Castiglione’s *uomo universale*, Machiavelli’s description of the perfect ruler, and in courtly culture. Especially interesting is the function of the French *salon*, which is presented by Finsen as an important transitional element on the way from the *Stratumkultur* to the segmented culture. The horizontal layer of aristocracy, where the conversational mode had been established as *honnêteté*, here meets with other social classes. A new social space of relative equality is established, where the individual is able to constitute himself through strategies of art and discourse. The importance of knowledge and erudite learning decreases, and skill becomes instead associated with the ability to mediate between self and social context. From the exclusivity of the *salon* this mode of communication will emerge and be employed as national discourse, according to Finsen.

The development of a new national discourse is treated in six sub-chapters, ranging from the Earl of Shaftesbury to Friedrich Schlegel. In “Shaftesbury”, the aim is to show how the aristocratic stratum, in England as well as in France, breeds an urbane discourse that offers an alternative to the learned, monologic discourse of the state. Instead of contrasting civilization with barbarism, Shaftesbury defines it in opposition to erudite science and theology. *Politeness* – “moral and conversable” – becomes the ideal of man and nation.

Turning to Germany, Finsen then demonstrates, in “Christian Thomasius”, how the “pleasant form” (*die gefällige Form*) was advocated already before 1700. Thomasius’ journal *Monatsgespräche* (1688-90) clearly distances itself from the learned journals intended for the international community, and instead addresses a national audience. By having four characters from different social circumstances discussing books, Thomasius effectively showcases the discourse of conversation and politeness as a national form of speech. However, as Finsen shows, Thomasius does this by somewhat ambivalently suggesting that the French discourse be imitated. This means a rejection of the learned world – including German learning – in favor of the mundane and more egalitarian refinement.

In “Christian Garve”, Finsen finds a more developed idea of German nationality. To Garve, society and nation should still be an imitation of the conversational mode of speech, but not an imitation of France. Rather, France becomes a rival in the effort to perfect the human being through *ars* and thus perfecting the nation.

In “Die Erziehung zur Nation”, the pedagogical implications of the urbane ideal are illustrated through the young Johann Gottlieb Herder, who considered education to be the road to nationality. The means are again those of conversational dialogue, exemplified by the teacher’s mediating between knowledge and audience.

In “Der Essay: Redemodus der Nation”, Finsen gives several examples of how the essay – tentative, conversational, aesthetic-critical, ‘natural’ in middle style, and loosely composed

– embodies the ideal of the nation. The essayistic and pleasant form does not deny that it is the product of design, but it is a design pretending to be natural.

As Finsen suggests in “Ein nationaler Klassiker”, this urbane ideal of pleasant prose is evident even in Friedrich Schlegel, who shortly after would extol the romantic notion of universal poetry.

However, the national discourse was fragile and Germany could not successfully compete in terms of artfulness. In “Die Fragilität der rhetorischen Nation: Herder”, Finsen interestingly proposes that Herder’s in many ways revolutionary ideas about genius, authenticity, originality, and *Geist* can be seen as a continuation of the rhetorical strategies of urbanity. Herder’s failed attempts to join the international community of the learned as well as the culture of *politesse* in France are taken to be a strong incentive for him to establish a new kind of German national discourse. However illuminating, this piece of biographical explanation seems somewhat out of place in a book that elsewhere explicitly claims to be an examination of national rather than individual self-assertion. According to Finsen, Herder finally accepts that Germany cannot make its way from periphery to center by adopting the urbane mode of speech, and instead he develops new strategies to legitimize the nation. In Herder’s opinion, it is through language itself, and not through urbane speech and rhetorical communication, that the individual is connected to society and that nationality is finally constituted. The speaker/poet, according to Herder, communicates not primarily with an audience, but with the divine. The traditional dialectic between convention and innovation, public consciousness and individual imagination, audience and speaker, is converted by Herder into a dialectic between Essence and Appearance.

Die authentische Nation (pp. 175-192)

In the third and final chapter Finsen argues that the idea of authentic speech was further developed into the notion of German nationality by Adam Müller in the early 19th century. The urbane idea that *ars* contributes to the perfection of the individual and society at large is reduced from being the goal of communication to merely being its starting-point. The isolated speaker/poet, no longer bound by social conventions and limitations, instead establishes a community through transcendent epiphany. The speaker/poet thus speaks in a monologue, and (since he delivers insights about things divine) his role tends to resemble that of the preacher. As Finsen points out, this also characterizes poetic style: the Bible becomes the prime object of *imitatio*. Thus, the key to national self-assertion goes from being communicative *ethos* to *pathos*.

In this way, Finsen claims, the German lack of an urbane manner of communication, which had long been considered a problem, is turned into a virtue. By way of this analysis, Finsen certainly highlights an interesting strategic background to Romantic aesthetics. His observations also shed new light on the fact that religious literary forms ‘spill over’ into profane speech at the end of the 18th century. It remains unclear, however, whether the strategies are to be understood as the cause of the aesthetics or only as related to them in some way.

The strategies of speech that Finsen deals with are constantly defined in terms of imitation, but the object of imitation changes. In the earliest times of *Stratumkultur*, the model was constituted by classical works; and in the urbane national discourse of, e.g., France, the conversational mode of *humanitas* was the ideal. By contrast, in Herder the speaker (or poet) models his speech on the divine act of signifying: he creates symbols. And, in Müller, it is the Bible itself that is imitated. These changes may suffice to summarize a fair amount of the *Redestrategien* that Finsen outlines.

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In *Die Rhetorik der Nation* Finsen's discussion of Herder and what we associate with Romanticism is rather short, but substantial indeed. Herder was of course far from being the first to develop a metaphysical theory (in the Platonic sense) of language, even if he may have exerted the greatest influence on the establishment of a national identity. The Renaissance Neo-Platonists had long since laid the ground, and in the mid-17th century the Swede Georg Stiernhielm in particular developed such theories into elaborate speculations about the particularly national language.

The main issue of Finsen's book is the artful construction of nation and national speech. However, it seems to me that the resistance to artfulness was more important to national identity than appears from Finsen's investigation. In connection with his discussion of Herder and of Petrus Ramus' confining of rhetoric to *elocutio*, Finsen does point to a certain suspicion of flattering and sensual wording, but he seems to underestimate the force of it. I would argue that the suspicious attitude toward artfulness is inherent in the whole of the rhetorical tradition, not least in the description of asianism, which Finsen occasionally refers to. The rejection of artfulness was an obvious way for nations in the periphery to assert themselves, since it implied that French, Italian, and Spanish should not be regularly imitated.

The suspicion of artful representation is present in most 15th- and 16th-century discussions of the vernacular languages as well as in the Protestant critique of Catholicism.² Especially in the 17th century, the rejection of sensual and 'effeminate' speech became a particular means of defining oneself in relation to artful societies (in a strategy reminiscent of Herder's, but long predating him).³ The poem that Frederic II of Prussia wrote in 1757, cited by Finsen on pp. 38-39, should probably be understood in this light. Thus, when Frederic II identifies Germany with the heroic Sparta as opposed to civilized Athens, he not only alludes to the dichotomy between barbarism and civilization. To be sure, Germany and Sparta needed to cultivate civilization, but they implicitly had the potential to be *greater* than Athens since theirs was a harsh, vital virtue, while Athens in comparison was decadent ("der süßen Lust geweiht"). This strategy of national self-assertion, roughly opposed to the ones that Finsen highlights, should not be underestimated.

Often enough, the difference between the 17th century and the Enlightenment has been described as a turn from dissimulation to truthfulness – this, of course, was the claim inherent in the self-understanding of Enlightenment philosophers. In Finsen's account, however, the changes between 17th- and 18th-century modes of speech instead emerge as a development of discursive strategies, all taking place within the broader "*ars-Kultur*". Treating particularly the question of speech and nationality, *Die Rhetorik der Nation* thus supplements the kind of perspectives that were first introduced by Michel Foucault, even if Finsen does not make the connection explicit. When it comes to understanding the historical developments in the conception of both rhetoric and language in general, the

² For recent discussions of this topic, see, e.g., Jacqueline Lichtenstein, *The Eloquence of Color. Rhetoric and Painting in the French Classical Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); and Ernest B. Gilman, *Iconoclasm and Poetry in the English Reformation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

³ See, e.g., Joachim Dyck: "Ornatus und Decorum im protestantischen Predigtstil des 17. Jahrhunderts", *Zeitschrift für deutsche Altertum und deutsche Literatur* 94 (1965), pp. 225-36. Dyck in this article quotes Abram Calov's notion (from 1652) of the pure German language, which involves the explicit rejection of attempts to be elegant and enjoyable (art.cit., pp. 234-35).

body of research represented in Finsen's theoretical framework could have been more substantial. One would have expected to find reference to, e.g., Wayne Rebhorn's *The Emperor of Men's Minds. Literature and the Renaissance Discourse of Rhetoric* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), which specifically deals with representations of speech and power.

Finsen's use of the concept of 'discourse' in his examination of topics proves very useful. However, whereas the sub-chapter "Topik" is highly instructive, there seems to be some ambiguity in his definition of the term. Finsen speaks of invention of words, for example in the formulation "Wie zum Thema 'Nation' die *verba* finden?" (p. 55, similarly pp. 10 and 31), but from a rhetorical perspective, topics belong to the *inventio* of *res*, of arguments and notions, not of words. By the same token, while the perspective is fruitful, Finsen's way of speaking of nation *as* speech (cf. Chapter two, "Die Nation als urbane Rede") seems overly metaphorical. In fact, I would be content to think that the idea of nationality involves ideas of speech, and that speech embodies ideas of the nation. Building a nation will obviously not be identical to creating a national consciousness.

Finsen's endeavor to describe the "reorganization of European culture into national cultures" as a matter of speech is certainly successful. Readers will already be familiar with the periods and currents that are under discussion, but even so Finsen brings to the fore a new and fruitful perspective. The discussion is generally detailed and theoretical; the argument is clear and the examples well chosen, but an index would certainly have been an additional benefit. In being a theoretical contribution to research on the history of rhetoric as well as on the development of the idea of the 'nation', the book is demanding and highly stimulating. *Die Rhetorik der Nation* contains results significant for the understanding both of the rhetorical tradition and of political culture from the 16th to the beginning of the 19th centuries.

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