

Lahcen E. Ezzaher:

*Writing and Cultural Influence: Studies in Rhetorical History, Orientalist Discourse, and Post-Colonial Criticism*

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Appearing as the eighteenth volume in the Peter Lang series Comparative Cultures and Literatures, *Writing and Cultural Influence: Studies in Rhetorical History, Orientalist Discourse, and Post-Colonial Criticism* by Lahcen Ezzaher is an ambitious albeit slim book focusing on rhetorical influences between Eastern and Western cultures, ancient and modern. While the purview of the book extends outside of the field of rhetoric proper – encompassing topics germane to literature, linguistics, and critical theory – it especially contributes to the emerging field called comparative rhetoric. But unlike George Kennedy’s pioneering work in this field (*Comparative Rhetoric: An Historical and Cross-Cultural Introduction*, 1998), *Writing and Cultural Influence* might best be characterized as a revisionist history of rhetoric. In the introduction to the book, Ezzaher makes his priorities quite clear:

Following [John] Schilb’s suggestion that we should move away from a unidirectional view of history, I want to propose a reading of cultural texts bringing to light contact zones and margins so far overshadowed by histories that are caught up in the ideas of order and continuity. This reading is informed by the following considerations: that the Greco-Roman world is a multicultural one; that the medieval tradition is far from being essentially European and Christian; that eighteenth- and nineteenth-century western thought is to a large measure influenced by its preoccupation with the Orient, Africa, and America; and lastly, that today more and more barriers are falling and boundaries are continually blurred among nationalities and cultures. (p. 1)

Rhetorical history, or rather how rhetoricians (mis)represent that history in anthologized rhetorical canons is the subject of the first part of Ezzaher’s introduction. However, nearly a full three quarters of the remainder is devoted to orientalist, colonialist, and post-colonialist discourses without any reference to the chapters in which these topics appear. The introduction, thus, does not in any direct way introduce or reveal the contents of the book’s chapters, which may leave some readers baffled as they instead read the author’s review of works by Deborah Steiner, Frantz Fanon, Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, Homi Bhabha, and Benita Parry. Rhetoric scholars might be hard pressed to see the relevance of these names let alone the chapters in which they appear, particularly chapters four and five. Chapter four, “The Colonial Subject Speaks Back: Chinua Achebe’s Critique of Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*”, indeed has little to do per se with the history of rhetoric. Likewise “Writing in Exile: Constructing Audiences and Identities in Foreign Lands”, the title of chapter five, contributes very little to our knowledge of rhetorical history. Yet, what these chapters do offer is a formidable challenge to what Ezzaher calls the “Hegelian divide

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between East and West” (p. 7). That is, they show historically the pervasive contact and exchange between Eastern and Western cultures, the first involving native writers who critique European colonialist representations of Africa, and the second concerning Middle Eastern novelists whose work engages in critical dialogue with their place of exile in North America.

The first chapter of *Writing and Cultural Influence* covers Classical rhetoric and the impression Eastern cultures left on Greek and Roman rhetoric. The chapter consists of three subsections: “Plato and the Egyptian Myth of Writing”; “Solon’s Egyptian Story”; “Roman Rhetoric and the Controversy over Asianism”. Classical rhetoricians have generally ignored or dismissed any claims of Near East or Egyptian influence on the Greek rhetorical tradition, Plato’s numerous references to Egypt in the dialogues notwithstanding. Though it would be useful for students of rhetoric to grasp the extent of the contact between these venerable ancient civilizations, these few pages on the subject will not be enough to persuade Rhetoric’s literati of an Egyptian role in the formulation of Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*. Much the same can be said of Eastern influence on Roman rhetoric, except that, according to Ezzaher, there is some “explicit indication” of such in Cicero’s philosophical texts and in *De Oratore* (p. 34). Ezzaher notes that Cicero’s prose style was considered by his contemporaries as possessing features of Asianism, a term referring to “the influence of local dialects spoken in Asia Minor on the writings of Greek and Roman rhetoricians who either studied or taught rhetoric in Alexandria” (p. 34). This Asiatic style of oratory thus represented a foreign, Eastern contrast to the presumably “Western” Attic style favored by Latin purists. However, since some rhetoricians of note – namely Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg in their anthology *The Rhetorical Tradition* – acknowledge an Asiatic influence on Cicero’s prose style, the point here, I suppose, is to show how constructs of Western tradition have otherwise systematically marginalized non-Western cultures in the making of rhetorical history.

The second chapter of the book opens with a question that many historians of rhetoric might actually give serious regard to: “What would the students’ perceptions of Aristotle’s treatises the *Rhetoric* and the *Poetics* be if the commentaries of Al-Farabi, Averroes, and Avicenna were part of the curriculum in rhetoric and composition programs in Europe and America?” (p. 43). According to Ezzaher, historians George Kennedy and James Murphy have in fact recognized the importance of Arabic scholarship in the development of the Western rhetorical tradition, particularly in the medieval period when ancient Greek texts were often transmitted to Latin scholars through Arabic. And yet the work of Arab commentators has not found its way into rhetoric curricula or published rhetorical canons. Entitled “From Greek into Arabic” this chapter principally focuses on Muslim philosopher Averroes’ twelfth-century commentary on Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*. In his reading of the short commentary, Ezzaher highlights the unique alterations Averroes makes to the Aristotle text. He notes, for instance, Averroes’ variation from Aristotle’s definition of rhetoric, his greater emphasis on the logical aspects (e.g., enthymeme and syllogism) of the *Rhetoric*, and his expansion of the list of Aristotle’s rhetorical appeals (ethos, logos, and pathos). One of Averroes’ more interesting departures from Aristotle, the author suggests, involves the topic of exemplification as a rhetorical proof (p. 58). Among the four types of examples Averroes uses to illustrate each point in this section of the *Rhetoric*, he provides examples derived from the Arabic tradition, which of course implies some at least modest influence of the East on the West.

Historians of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century rhetoric might find chapter three “Imperial Grammars: The Rhetoric of Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Orientalist Discourse” a useful resource, though the focus there is on grammar textbooks on Eastern languages. Specifically, the chapter presents a close reading of three grammar textbooks: Sir William Jones’ *A Grammar of the Persian Language* (1771), Nathaniel Halhed’s *A Grammar of the Bengal Language* (1778), and Duncan Forbes’ *A Grammar of the Hindustani Language* (1855) (pp. 66-67). Ezzaher’s interest in these grammar textbooks has little to do with language; rather he wants to, as he states, “demonstrate that grammar writing which British orientalist carried out during this period constituted one of the ideological apparatuses of empire” (p. 66). And in this we find the rhetorical, not so much in concepts or theories of discourse but in the politically-charged uses of language, that is, of foreign language-learning textbooks.

All together, these various chapters constitute what Ezzaher calls “the story of orientalism, colonialism, and post-coloniality” (p. 131) – in spite of the fact that chapters one and two hardly fit this paradigm. Ezzaher does, however, add that this story “has turned” on the four categories of race, language, culture, and representation (p. 131), and perhaps that is the best if not only way to conceive of the entire book as making a significant statement about the history of rhetoric. These categories or concepts are often absent in rhetoric historiography, and *Writing and Cultural Influence* is a valiant effort at giving them presence. But the effect is less than triumphant because it sacrifices depth for scope, detailed argument for grand assertion.

In a word, some portions of the book would have fared better standing alone. Then perhaps the author could have offered a more sustained and persuasive appeal for, say, Egypt’s influence on Greek rhetoric (something that Martin Bernal does effectively in a fairly recent book that, oddly enough, Ezzaher does not cite) or the Arabic contribution to medieval rhetoric. And yet, one can understand the motivation behind the author’s global perspective, his desire to show, regardless of time or place, the intimate “cultural relations between East and West” (p. 134). We have heard such critiques before, but perhaps not so resoundingly. Ezzaher’s voice needs to be heard by all who care about the integrity of the discipline of rhetoric and its representation of reality.

Works cited:

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