

Robert Cockcroft:

*Rhetorical Affect in Early Modern Writing. Renaissance Passions Reconsidered*

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The ambitious aim of Robert Cockcroft's *Rhetorical Affect in Early Modern Writing. Renaissance Passions Reconsidered* is to clarify the principles that govern the relationship between "objective perception and emotional response [. . .] both in analysis and persuasive communication" (p. 4). The inextricable connection between our perception of any art form and our emotional engagement with it constitutes the fundamental premise of his study. While recognising the cultural distance between early modern texts and late twentieth-century criticism of these texts, Cockcroft compares the persuasive use of *pathos* in contemporary critical writing with the persuasive use of *pathos* in the early modern texts with which this writing is concerned. His aim in doing so is to explore the transplantation of the perception of, and emotional response to, an early modern text into the deliberate persuasive argument of today's criticism, as well as to investigate the role rhetoric plays in this process of transplantation. Cockcroft's overall goal is to investigate the degree to which we may reconstruct the possible emotional response to early modern texts of its original audience or reader. One measure introduced in order to counter the risk of anachronism inherent in such an approach is to maintain a marked distinction between, on the one hand, the "estimated response" of an original audience or reader and, on the other, the response of today's audience or readers (p. 108).

Cockcroft's method brings together insights on the concept of *pathos* gained from the Aristotelian 'old rhetoric' with those of the linguistically concentrated 'new rhetoric' into a method of double analysis (p. 35). Through the application of the same principles of analysis to the affectivity (i.e. the persuasive use of emotion) of modern critical writing and to the affectivity of the early modern literary texts being critically discussed, Cockcroft claims to be able to evaluate the insights of the former in terms of the latter, and to arrive at more reliable strategies for appreciating early modern affectivity. This is a complicated process, since he has to consider both what he calls the "outer relationships" between writers/playwrights and readers/audiences, and the "inner relationships" between voices, or within single voices, in the texts, as well as the relationships between modern critics and their readers as they engage in a study of the first two relationships.

In his first chapter, "Introduction: Reconsidered Passions" (pp. 1-37), Cockcroft defines the scope and goal of his study, outlines its theoretical foundations, and introduces his method. Convinced that emotion cannot be excluded from critical judgement (p. 4), he traces various concepts of rhetorical emotion, from the distrust expressed in the classical tradition, in which *pathos* is at once forceful and suspect, via Miltonian emphasis on the edifying potential of the higher – as opposed to the baser – modes of passion, to a modern recognition of emotion as the foundation of reason. Upon closer comparison, however, classical and modern conceptions of the rhetorical use of emotion turn out to correspond. Aristotle's three modes of proof (*ethos*, *logos*, and *pathos*) are also seen here to relate to Cicero's *officia oratoris* (pleasing, teaching, and moving), and both are reflected in William Downe's three categories of felt experience

(evaluation, intuition, and emotion).<sup>1</sup> As Cockcroft sums up: “Thus, *ethos*, the proof through character, works by projecting the image of a reliable *evaluator*, who reflects *emotion* appropriate and adequate to the situation (*pathos*), and who reasons in accordance with the audience’s various *intuitions* regarding that situation (*logos*)” (p. 10).

Having established the analogy between old and new rhetorical conceptions of persuasive emotion, Cockcroft proceeds to explain his use of ‘new’ rhetoric. Recent developments within applied stylistics may help discovering what makes language persuasive and link the effective use of *pathos* to interpersonal and logical functions of language (p. 11). With repeated reference to a passage from Milton’s *Samson Agonistes* (lines 1413-1426), Cockcroft outlines five theories and their contributions to his approach (pp. 12-30): (i) Schema theory, which posits that we interpret any new information according to general mental constructs based on past experience, enables Cockcroft to reconstruct how a persuader (poet, speaker, writer) estimates his audience’s receptivity and his own “cognitive engagement” (p. 20) with them, that is, his efforts to exploit the resources represented by schemata. (ii) The theory of ‘footing’ or roles in the production and reception of messages, allows Cockcroft to examine the emotional force of the *ethos* behind a persuasive voice: “[...] for every act of communication, we should consider who is involved, in whatever role” (p. 21). (iii) The functional sentence perspective concerns the stylistic realisation of *pathos*, which depends on so-called Communicative Dynamism – dynamism referring to efficient realisation of persuasive intent. The impact, or dynamism, of words and phrases is affected by syntactical order, and the emotional force and clarity of sentences can therefore, according to Cockcroft, be studied through syntactic analysis. (iv) The phenomena of ‘deixis’, which occurs when language relies on the shared awareness of contexts not verbally expressed, and ‘empathetic deixis’, which involves moral and emotional judgements not explicitly expressed, make Cockcroft more alert to “the emotive potential of the language which locates readers or listeners within real or imaginary worlds” (p. 11). Finally, (v) Cockcroft mentions what I choose to call ‘convergence’ theory, resting on the assumption that people who relate closely in one way or another exhibit linguistic convergence (p. 28), which may be exploited in literary language. According to this theory, we should be alert to language which echoes spontaneous emotional engagement (p. 12).

Before concluding his first chapter, Cockcroft analyses a passage of critical writing from Gary Waller’s introduction to *English Poetry in the Sixteenth Century* (1986), with the aim of demonstrating that the relationship between pleasure and persuasion is still very much alive: “His fusion of an ethical, empowering stance with a deliberate stimulation of feeling, working through intuitive or discursive thought, constitutes the affectivity that we will follow though (*sic*) this book” (p. 33).<sup>2</sup>

Chapter two, “Sable Clouds and Silver Linings” (pp. 38-82), outlines the fluctuating history of *pathos* from Plato to Milton, in an attempt to account for the historical relationship of rhetorical *pathos* to perception, will, and behaviour. Cockcroft attempts to answer the question of how the diverse perceptions of *pathos* can assist and refine our readings of pathetic texts by tracing three indicators of efficient *pathos* – “emotional laser”, “reversal of bias”, and “range of predictable emotional response”, each involving a certain type of persuader-persuadee relationship – and four different “modes of relationship” (p. 76) between the three participants in rhetorical emotion: the persuader, the topic, and the persuadee. Cockcroft concludes the chapter with an

<sup>1</sup> Downes, William, “The Language of Felt Experience: Emotional, Evaluative, and Intuitive”, *Language and Literature* 9 (2000), pp. 99-121.

<sup>2</sup> It is interesting to note how Cockcroft himself exploits the empathic force of an inclusion model towards the end of this chapter, signalled by a repeated use of the words “we”, “our”, and “us”.

analysis of Milton's *Comus*, demonstrating both how early modern schemata (a twentieth-century idea) for the progression of *pathos* ('sin-repentance-regeneration' and 'resisted temptation-spiritual enlightenment', pp. 77-82) may indicate an early modern audience's response to the emotional progress dramatised in the masque.

The final three chapters make use of the theory and method mapped out and explicated in the previous two. Chapter three examines modern critical writing on the material to be analysed in chapter five, whereas chapter four attempts to bridge the gap between these two types of text by indicating the range of *pathos* that exists in early modern writing (p. 117).

Chapter three, "Old Passions, New Purposes: Rhetoric Rhetoricised" (pp. 83-116) employs the rhetorical methods (old and new) previously outlined to examine how modern critics use the *pathos* they detect in early modern texts for their own persuasive purposes in their analyses of these texts, sometimes distorting the original meaning and sometimes expanding it (p. 83). Terry Eagleton's 'shock tactic' of compelling his readers to collude with his view of the witches in *Macbeth* by presenting these readers with the unpleasant prospect of belonging to the category of prejudiced readers if they don't, is an example of the former.<sup>3</sup> David Norbrook's balanced evocation of sympathy for Lucy Hutchinson's wifely plight and antipathy towards the world view supporting such a plight, allowing the reader a certain degree of freedom of response, is an example of the latter.<sup>4</sup> Cockcroft's method claims to provide an "understanding of the processes through which *pathos* is generated" (p. 84), and thus to be able to trace critics' "transmutation and revaluation" (p. 85) of detected early modern emotion, via emotion of their own aroused by their reading, into the *pathos* expressed in their writing, which in turn aims to exploit rhetorically the emotion of their readers.

Having thus habituated the reader to his method, Cockcroft tries to shorten the distance between modern and early modern with an intermezzo on the range of early modern *pathos*. Chapter four, "Going to Extremes" (pp. 117-139), attempts to provide a system of reference for the consideration of early modern rhetorical emotion by drawing up the extreme coordinates of the range of predictable emotional response that early modern writers could exploit. Focusing on the love-hate coordinates within religion, politics, family, and sexuality, Cockcroft analyses expressions of intense feeling in diverse texts (other than the ones that constitute his primary material), searching for traces of the writer's sense of an original audience: "Any attempt to communicate such feelings depends on the capacity and susceptibility of those who are being invited to share them" (p. 118).

Whereas chapter four attunes Cockcroft's reader to the responsiveness of early modern persuadees, chapter five, "Adjusting the Mirrors" (pp. 140-185), returns to the texts which are the concern of modern criticism discussed in chapter three, in an attempt to demonstrate how the persuader's expectations of his persuadees' responsiveness leave traces in the composition. Admitting that a reliable reconstruction of the experience of an original audience is an unattainable goal, Cockcroft here aims to reconstruct some of the mental schemata presupposed by the writer to exist in the mind of his potential audience, basing himself on analysis of the original texts' "emotional engagement" with its readers (p. 141). Such analyses may reveal to us some "shade" of the original audience's or reader's feelings, since they aim to discover which

<sup>3</sup> Terry Eagleton: *William Shakespeare* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1986).

<sup>4</sup> David Norbrook: "Lucy Hutchinson, *Memoirs*", in David Wormersley (ed.), *The Blackwell Companion to Literature from Milton to Blake* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), pp. 182-187.

schemata the texts rely on for efficient emotional persuasion (*ibid.*). In order to discover these schemata, readers are invited to employ Cockcroft's rhetorical method to "link the details of a text to what they know, or can reconstruct, of the contexts which existed in the minds of original audiences and readers" (p. 184). Furthermore, such analyses may in turn provide a platform for a better evaluation of the appropriateness of modern criticism of these texts. The truth-value of modern criticism, according to Cockcroft, depends on whether the schema required for the interpretation can be presupposed in the memories of an original audience.

Cockcroft's purposes are admirable and courageous. His motivation is a wish to increase the historical truthfulness of our emotional responses to, and critical discourses about, early modern texts by developing analytical tools that rest on a reconstruction of the context – a motivation, it may be observed, shared by all literary approaches in the new historicist vein. The originality and strength of Cockcroft's approach result from the rhetorical and textual, as distinct from merely historical, orientation. Believing that the persuader's assumptions about the persuadees' – the original audiences' – mental contexts may be traced in the textual material, Cockcroft aims at reconstructing this very context. Although this is an aspiration impossible to attain, his method is designed to bring early modern and modern writers and readers closer to a form of – limited – rhetorical inter-subjectivity.

Cockcroft's book is primarily aimed at readers of literature. It is one of his hopes that his book will enable readers of both modern and early modern literature, to bring the method he develops to the test of further practice (p. 116) and hence "enliven" modern literary critical debate (p. 185). The book also demonstrates the application value of linguistics, and of literature for linguistics, and signals perhaps a 'literary turn' in linguistics (as seen in corpus-based linguistics and systemic functional grammar). Cockcroft's primary concern is after all the study of rhetoric as a 'missing' or underestimated link between literature and language: "Rhetoric is the interface between literature and language, both as they are written and spoken, and as they are studied, and it should draw its resources from both sides of that zone of interaction" (p. 184). His study is therefore of considerable value for the history of rhetoric. The exploration of rhetorical emotion, *pathos*, in relation to literature and linguistics is insightful, and the evaluation of old rhetoric through the new, and vice versa, is original. Cockcroft's use of the same method on both texts and criticism is daring, but intriguing. Schema theory seems most adaptable in this regard, but Cockcroft might have been better able to demonstrate the full benefit of his approach if he had concentrated on fewer examples of entire texts analysed in depth. As a consideration of efficient use and reception of *pathos*, in old and new texts alike, this book manifests the applicability of studies in rhetoric and the history of rhetoric.

The danger lies in going too far in asserting continuity with the past. Paradoxically, Cockcroft's ambition of countering anachronism is opposed by the risk inherent in the use of new rhetoric on old material. The very stimulating experiments with functional sentence perspective on short extracts of texts is not unproblematic, not least in view of the fact that the theory was originally developed from and for the Czech language, and that the core concept, Communicative Dynamism, presupposes a consideration of entire texts or discourses for efficient distinction between new and known information. Cockcroft's blend of modern criticism and early modern texts, although intriguing, also makes it difficult at times to distinguish analysis from polemics.

*Rhetorical Affect in Early Modern Writing. Renaissance Passions Reconsidered* is a challenging but rewarding read. It presupposes in its readers a highly developed readiness of perception and understanding, as well as intimate knowledge of the early modern material under scrutiny. It requires, as it were, successful activation of many extensive schemata, and is as such not for

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the novice. This is not a weakness. It must be said, however, that the structure of the presentation of the material could have done more to enhance readability. The five chapters are conveniently divided into subsections, which facilitate the activation and cataloguing of the many elements in Cockcroft's difficult theoretical material. But the reactivation of his intellectually challenging approach in the empirical analyses would have benefited from a clearer internal structure within the subsections. Besides, it is not altogether easy to sympathise with the author's choice of inverting the historical order in the presentation of new material before old. Some technical details, such as a valuably sectioned bibliography, a comprehensive and precise index (of both names and concepts), and a comfortably moderate use of endnotes (most of what the author has to say finds a place in the text proper), are exemplary. Proof-reading, however, leaves something to be desired, especially since the study demonstrates the value of linguistic precision.<sup>5</sup>

Cockcroft's book is refreshing and original. To this reader at least, his fundamental aim of providing a reliable platform for a more objective and historically correct investigation of early modern texts is a welcome contribution to the current epistemological debate.

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<sup>5</sup> Errors are plentiful, ranging from missing words ("Melanchthon goes on indicate that", p. 65; "As we already seen repeatedly", p. 110) via misspellings ("scorn and revulsion again *him*", p. 130; "topogaphia", p. 170; moreover, on p. 97, Ms Cook is called both "Susan" and "Suzanne"; and on p. 104, the word 'The' is rendered "[he]") to faulty punctuation ("integration with *ethos* Whether the text", p. 110) and open-ended parentheses (on pp. 75 and 110).