
Paul Goring:

The Rhetoric of Sensibility in Eighteenth-Century Culture

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Paul Goring's *The Rhetoric of Sensibility in Eighteenth-Century Culture* opens with a sentimental scene that aptly captures the gist of his book. In a letter, dated 29 October 1746, to his friend, the theatre critic Aaron Hill, printer and novelist Samuel Richardson relates his reaction to Hill's *The Art of Acting*. Richardson is so affected, both physically and psychologically, by Hill's rendering of the dramatic passions that he cannot read the essay through. By studying different kinds of text from the eighteenth century dealing with enacted emotions and bodily reactions suitable to them, Goring investigates the polite rhetoric of the era. The body is pivotal to this discourse, which is consequently elocutionary (that is, focusing on *actio* as the main part of rhetoric): "My argument will suggest that the bodies of orators and actors were important to the growth of politeness because they occupied supremely public positions in eighteenth-century life, and thus were ripe for taking on the symbolic function of embodying civility and for dispersing this quality through a broader public" (p. 25). In five chapters and an epilogue Goring unfolds the cultural history of the polite body of the sentimental period.

The first chapter is entitled "Spectacular passions: eighteenth-century oratory and the reform of eloquence" (pp. 31-59). As Wilbur S. Howell (1971) has shown, the main inspiration for the elocutionary movement in England was the English translation of Michel Le Faucheur's *Traitté de l'action de l'orateur* (Paris, 1657). Goring's reading of Le Faucheur offers several interesting insights, for example into the social importance of body language: "In a project designed to encourage techniques of mass persuasion for the purposes of effective religion and stable social stratification, a propriety of nature itself seems to be being advanced. Social ideals and nature are being brought together in the act of persuasion through natural, but controlled, gesture" (p. 51).

The rest of the chapter is dedicated to *An Essay on the Action Proper for the Pulpit* from 1753, attributed to James Fordyce. Contrary to Howell, Goring sees this essay as expressing a liberal attitude toward the classical rules of *actio*, especially those found in the works of Cicero. If the orator himself feels the passion that he endeavors to express, he will be able to make those feelings visible to the audience. Therefore, Fordyce tells his students, the orator must cultivate a "quick and strong Sensibility" and be the owner of "a warm and worthy heart" (quoted in Goring, p. 57). Ancient rules for positioning the arms could not regulate how such strong feelings were made visible. However, Fordyce recommends that the orator should let a "manly tear" fall whenever compassion swells his heart. In Fordyce, Goring finds an example of the new *actio* style of sensibility; at the same time, he argues that this freer attitude towards the ancient rules did not mean that the orators of the second half of the eighteenth century could abolish every notion of *decorum*. The rapport between orator and audience should still be marked by politeness.

To indicate where to draw the line between a wild, erratic *actio* and a socially acceptable *actio*, in the second chapter Goring introduces a couple of what he terms "unruly bodies": "Bodies on the borders of politeness: 'Orator Henley', Methodist enthusiasm, and polite literature" (pp. 60-

90). According to Goring, any society needs examples of the ‘other’ to form and secure its identity. Only by knowing what is not right and proper can one know what is in fact proper. The first of Goring’s examples, John Henley (1692-1756) was a preacher who made a living from preaching outside the establishment. Though his vehement and theatrical style was easily parodied, he nevertheless attracted a paying audience and, as Goring puts it, “fired a strong interest in public delivery as a serious public issue worthy of earnest consideration and debate” (p. 62).

Like Henley, the Methodist preachers sported a preaching style very different from that of the Anglican Church. However, whereas Henley was a specific London attraction, the Methodist preachers won their followers mainly in rural and industrial areas. Their preaching was marked by ‘enthusiasm’, and though condemned “as a source of madness and social depravity” (p. 71), many were extremely popular, attracting huge groups of listeners. Even the critics could not deny that the Methodist enthusiasm was effective. Here too the body is of the greatest importance as to the effect of the speech because it must display the passions – but the question is to what degree.

To some critics, the Methodist preaching style was offensive to “somatic propriety” (p. 77); others, as for example Oliver Goldsmith, applied the style to polite literature. In his essays which were published in 1759 and in 1760, Goldsmith redefines the word enthusiasm, freeing it from its degrading connotations: “When I think of the Methodist preachers among us, how seldom they are endued with common sense, and yet how often and how justly they affect their hearers, I cannot avoid saying within myself, had these been bred gentlemen, and been endued with even the meanest share of understanding, what might they not effect!” (quoted in Goring, p. 79). The poor, Goldsmith contends, should not be addressed by dry *logos*, but by “the honest spontaneous dictates of the heart” (quoted in Goring, p. 81).

At first it might seem odd in a book about corporeal cultural history to dedicate a whole chapter to the most devoted propagator of proper pronunciation and hence of *spoken* English: “Thomas Sheridan: forging the British body”, chapter 3 (pp. 91-113). But, as Goring rightly assures us, “almost all [Sheridan’s] works are in some way concerned with the language of the body” (p. 94). The Irish born actor Thomas Sheridan was a central and highly influential figure of the British elocutionary movement. According to Goring, in his works and lectures, Sheridan “aimed to transform British eloquence by exploiting the opportunities presented by the widespread interest in attending the theatre and fashionable lectures” (p. 97). Moreover, “Sheridan importantly advanced the sentimentalisation of the body [... and] proposed that the polite body should find its expression through natural feeling” (p. 96). His Irish accent did not pass unnoticed by Dr. Johnson, of course; and David Hume, among others, found Sheridan’s enthusiastic belief that oratory is a universal remedy to be exaggerated.

To Sheridan, so Goring argues, the spoken word was the site of the passions: communicated through the right tones, gestures, and looks they were universal. Sheridan found his ideal of spoken English in the conversations at court during the reign of Queen Anne. To become a gentleman, then, required a certain language enunciated by an equally eloquent body: “Sheridan’s promotion of a language of the body contributed significantly to the construction of an eloquent body that was polite through the exhibition of distinctly sentimental virtues” (p. 108). Compared to the vehement examples listed in chapter 2, Sheridan’s gentleman is certainly more restrained, although, once again, a manly tear is acceptable and even recommended as a means of persuasion.

The star of chapter 4 (“The art of acting: mid-century stagecraft and the broadcast of feeling”, pp. 114-141), is David Garrick (1717-1794). Garrick’s novel acting style combined forces with the elocutionary movement to highlight a new civic ideal, both on stage and offstage. During

the eighteenth century, the actor's profession gradually became more socially respectable and, in turn, theatres more suitable for a polite audience. As the orator could both impassion and instruct his audience through his *actio*, so could the actor influence his viewers.

Goring traces the changes in eighteenth-century acting style and its due reception through different kinds of treatises on the art of acting. His main sources are *The Life of Mr. Thomas Betterton* by Charles Gildon (1710), Aaron Hill's *The Prompter* (1735), David Garrick's *An Essay on Acting* (1744), the anonymous *Letter to David Garrick* (1769), and Richard Cumberland's memoirs (1806). A certain development is noticeable within these texts. Gildon, echoing Le Faucheur, recommended that a "language of gesture [be] modeled according to the demands of classical decorum". The left arm, for instance, should not be the main arm in performing gestures (p. 124). Hill, on the other hand, saw the body as ruled by the physiology of the nerves, especially in the context of passions. Though the old, classical way of tragedy acting ceded to the recommended new sensibility, one still had to pay heed to the principle of *decorum*: "if a body was to be recognised as both eloquent and polite, its performance had to be conducted within a framework of refined somatic aesthetics", so Goring explains Gildon's rules (p. 136). The same attitude towards acting is found in Garrick's own essay, about which Goring states: "The emotional input was anchored to thorough technical preparation involving incredibly detailed textual analysis and a knowledgeable application of very particular techniques of stagecraft. [...] The essay contains punctilious descriptions of how the body should appear at crucial moments selected from both tragedy and comedy" (p. 134).

Essays on acting proliferated throughout the eighteenth century, and many of them promoted a new sentimental ideal embodied by actors in front of a responsive public. Though Goring is careful not to identify acting theory with its practice, these essays, beside their cultural influence as popular reading material, do tell us something about the bodily performance, on stage and off. As Goring writes: "But the popular status of acting theory is none the less of interest, for it does suggest that readerly satisfactions of some kind were being discovered through the literary consumption of fictional bodies" (p. 141).

Chapter 5 ("Polite reading: sentimental fiction and the performance of response", pp. 142-181), investigates the way in which bodies were to act in the popular sentimental fiction of the period and how the reader was expected to respond: "Sentimental fiction provided the eighteenth century's growing number of readers not only with entertainment but also with opportunities to perform polite literary responses (and/or to report and advertise such responses), thereby asserting polite identities" (pp. 142-143). The example with which Goring introduced the theme of his book, namely Richardson's reading of and reaction to Hill's essay on acting, can be seen as a counterpart to Hill's reading, in 1740, of Richardson's *Pamela*. In a letter to Richardson, Hill stated that he had read the novel to a gathering of family and friends in his home and that a little boy's tearful reaction to the reading had captured the sentiment of all present. On this tender scene Goring comments: "There are three aspects [...] which are of particular significance here: firstly, reading is presented as a socially engaged activity; secondly, proper responses are marked upon the body and are acknowledged by being seen; and thirdly, reading is presented as a process through which one can be transformed and improved" (p. 172).

In novels such as *Pamela* and *Clarissa* readers met with bodies reacting in the characteristic way of sensibility (with tears, sighs, and blushing), and thereby learned how to use their own bodies to show their response. In social gatherings such as the one described by Hill, reading meant listening to someone reading aloud, and the right reactions must, so Goring maintains, have been part of civil society's shaping of identity. Literary technique displayed the eloquent body, allowing the reader to observe it through the eyes of the fictional characters. This is what Goring calls the "theatrical virtue in Richardsonian fiction" (p. 148).

Goring points to the fact that prefaces to novels explicitly appraised sentimental literature: “If such writing produces no tears, [...] the fault lies not in the novel but in the hardened heart of the reader; if a reader cannot respond with visible sympathy, that reader has no claim upon modern, polite virtue” (p. 177). But such a mode of reading was fragile and could not endure, Goring adds, citing Louisa Stuart who reminisces about her own reaction to a sentimental novel, insufficient as it was in comparison to the tears shed by her mother and sisters (p. 142). However, as Goring rightly underlines, Stuart wrote in 1826 when such a reaction to the tender literature of times past would have elicited only laughter (p. 180).

Richardsonian fiction had been ridiculed before, as Goring demonstrates in his “Epilogue” (pp. 182-201), which deals with Laurence Sterne’s reactions to Richardson’s *A Sentimental Journey* and with *Tristram Shandy*. From *Tristram Shandy* Goring cites a wonderful passage in which “Sterne offers a massively exaggerated, parodic version of the type of analysis that contemporary elocutionists were applying to somatic expression” (p. 191). Thus, Sterne recommended that the speaker assume the bodily attitude that forms precisely “an angle of 85 degrees and a half upon the plain of the horizon” (p. 190).

In chapter 5 and the Epilogue, Goring makes two important observations regarding sentimental literature and parody thereof. First, he argues that a novel such as Richardson’s *Pamela* can easily be read in an alternative way – as Fielding’s *Shamela* shows – namely “as a tale of rampant female desire and financial plotting”, and that this “demonstrates that such fiction could carry the same type of inflammatory dangers as were seen in the amatory fiction it supposedly transformed” (p. 170). The alternative reading clearly compromised the didactic intentions of Richardson’s work. Second, Goring argues that Sterne, despite his gift for parody, nonetheless followed the eighteenth-century elocutionary discourse. From his experience as a clergyman, Sterne learned to handle “a subtle tension between the polite, sentimental eloquence of the body and the knowing, ironic play of the mind. And in significant ways such tensions came to shape the representation of bodies in Sterne’s fiction” (p. 186). Sterne learned to curb his rather Rabelaisian tendencies through the apt use of *aposiopesis*, thus at certain points leaving it to the reader to supply the missing words. As Goring writes: “By incorporating concessions to politeness – albeit that they are mostly ironic – *Tristram Shandy* acquires a shade of the polite discourse which it ironises” (p. 190).

In a sense, elocutionary discourse is itself *aposiopetic* – or so Goring claims as he concludes his book – insofar as its followers would never even consider presenting every part of the natural body to the reader. However, the polite omissions were ‘remedied’ by Sterne who – by way of *aposiopesis* – made sure he left all parts of the unruly body to the reader’s imagination.

In this interesting book, Paul Goring covers many texts, both original elocutionary treatises and recent scholarly literature from different academic fields. Since the author uses the allotted space in a wise manner, the bulk of literature referred to and the great number of examples used never result in a merely cursory presentation. The main quality of the study lies in Goring’s way of combining known and lesser-known texts and thus offering new and interesting insights. His main point – that the elocutionary discourse was of civic importance – is well argued. As a student of elocutionary rhetoric, I find his reading of ‘fictional bodies’ particularly rewarding, not least since this issue is not always given the attention it deserves.

The importance of the faculty of vision to the elocutionists cannot be overestimated, and illustrations would therefore have been highly welcome. As mentioned above, Goring avoids dealing with *actio* in the literal sense of the word, although some of the texts to which he refers do in fact focus on this subject. Because the main interest of the elocutionists was actual performance, I believe that Goring deals too cautiously with this topic. Some elocutionary texts

have illustrations that demonstrate what to do and how to do it, whereas others depict what was being done. Paintings and engravings supply us with additional supportive material of the *how*.

With regard to theatrical practice, two additional aspects support Goring's suggestion that the elocutionary movement was important to eighteenth-century British society. First, theatres offered the non-reading public a chance to receive some kind of social education. Although literacy increased immensely in the eighteenth century, many were still illiterate. Second, the new sentimental repertory demanded and nurtured a new acting style that made the classical deportment and declamation inadequate. Nevertheless, Goring mentions that *Pamela* was actually dramatized only in passing (p. 174, n. 50) and does not deal at all with the issue of the new sentimental drama.

Non-readers gained knowledge of correct body language by hearing texts read aloud. In fact, several papers at the recent conference of the International Society for the History of Rhetoric, which took place in Los Angeles in July 2005, dealt with this kind of *actio*. Some papers even suggested that reading aloud to others helped women gain access to the public platform.

As is evident from the citations above, Goring struggles admirably with determining the differences between sentimental *actio* and the classically founded *actio*. Thus, the reader learns from Goring that natural gifts are mentioned in all the treatises that deal with *actio*, and so is the importance of *decorum*. Classical and eighteenth-century treatises alike recommended offering the manly tear. Moreover, what we know from theatre productions and pertaining illustrations suggest that the new eighteenth-century *actio* was performed with a less erect body. In the extreme, the classically trained actor would strut about on the stage, his body almost leaning backwards. The new acting style would have the actor leaning forward and moving much more freely on stage (please confer the precise angle and degrees recommended by Sterne in the above citation!).

Paul Goring's book is a welcome addition to the increasing scholarship on elocutionary rhetoric.

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