

James Mulvihill:

Upstart Talents: Rhetoric and the Career of Reason in English Romantic Discourse, 1790-1820

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James Mulvihill's monograph *Upstart Talents: Rhetoric and the Career of Reason in English Romantic Discourse, 1790-1820* is a contribution to the study of the public sphere in English Romanticism. There is a lacuna on this point in Jürgen Habermas's classical account of the public sphere, as Mulvihill observes in his Preface. Attempting to remedy Habermas's omission of English Romanticism, scholars like Jon P. Klancher have posited not one public sphere but many (cf. Preface, p. 17).¹ Mulvihill, in contrast, aims at cutting across traditional boundaries between 'radical' and 'reactionary', 'left' and 'right', by examining rhetorical assumptions and practices shared among different political constituencies. His book focuses on "the rhetorical conditioning of rational argument in the public life of Romantic England" (p. 20).

In chapter 1, "Designing Eloquence: The Rhetorical Context" (pp. 21-63), Mulvihill discusses eighteenth-century rhetorical theories – the Elocutionary Movement, the New Rhetoric – in relation to the empirical philosophy of the time. Chapter 2, "Whiggish Energies: The Ethos of Technical Mastery" (pp. 64-117), deals with parliamentary rhetoric in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, while chapter 3, "Critical Stratagems: Anti-Jacobin Imposture and Periodical Reviewing" (pp. 118-160), is devoted to the periodical press. Chapter 4, "Systematic Opposition: The Case of William Cobbett" (pp. 161-206), is (as the title indicates) a case study of the publicist William Cobbett. Finally, chapter 5, "Reason in Extremis: Narratives of Regressive Rationality" (pp. 207-257), scrutinises a number of texts by Romantic authors such as William Wordsworth, William Godwin (Mary Shelley's father), Mary Shelley, Thomas Love Peacock, and William Blake.

Mulvihill takes into account sources of different kinds, for example works about rhetoric and eloquence, anthologies of speeches, political pamphlets, and articles in the periodical press. Everywhere he traces the same pattern. Reason is superseded by suggestion, imposture, and techniques of deception. Debaters appropriate and subvert their opponents' arguments. In the 1790s, anti-Jacobin writers portray "conservative reaction as a program of enlightenment" (p. 136). In the "Caroline Affair" in 1820-1821, when George IV pressured the administration to bring a parliamentary act against his wife, Queen Caroline, opposition radicals appropriated royalist rhetoric in order to combat the ministry. William Cobbett, who moved from anti-Radicalism to Radicalism, adapted "methods of rhetorical imposture learned and employed while writing for the ministerial press to the purposes of Reform" (p. 169).

In political practices, then, Mulvihill everywhere observes a regression of reason. He links this phenomenon to the influence of eighteenth-century empiricism and sensationalist philosophy, which reduced truth to the mere impression of truth. 'Sensationalist epistemology',

¹ Jon P. Klancher, "Romanticism and its Publics", *Studies in Romanticism* (Boston: Winter, 1994), pp. 527-588: 33.

he argues (pp. 20 and 32-46), pervaded the theoretical works on rhetoric of the Elocutionary Movement and the New Rhetoric in eighteenth-century Britain. In Mulvihill's account, Enlightenment, empiricism, and sensationalism become villains.

Mulvihill's study gives valuable accounts of individual, often forgotten works like *Parliamentary Logic* (1808) by the eccentric M.P. William Gerald Hamilton, as well as perceptive analyses of the frantic political debates of the 1790s and the early nineteenth century. Mulvihill's overall account of the history of rhetoric, however, is questionable. It is problematic that he does not define his central concepts – 'Romantic', 'Romanticism', 'rhetoric', 'reason', 'progressive' versus 'regressive'. Readers who are not familiar with the scholarly tradition to which the author belongs, that is, studies in English Romanticism, are therefore left to reconstruct the meaning of his key terms. By 'Romanticism', Mulvihill at times seems to refer to the literary and philosophical movement ("Romanticism is generally regarded as anti-rhetorical, even unrhetorical", p. 20), yet his choice of both nonliterary and literary sources suggests that 'Romanticism' is also used in a chronological sense, covering the period 1790-1820. As regards the term 'rhetoric', Mulvihill claims that "the traditional end of rhetoric" is "communicating truth"; likewise, *inventio* is presented as "the discovery of truth" (p. 32). By 'reason', as I understand him, Mulvihill implies the use of rational argument by the speaker/writer in order to communicate 'truth'. By the same token, in Mulvihill's text, the adjective 'progressive' denotes methods that aim at promoting appeals to the audience's reason, whereas 'regressive' refers to mere techniques of deception.

Mulvihill's description of the traditional aim of rhetoric as "communicating truth" is clearly open to question. Ever since antiquity the relation between rhetoric and truth has been a source of debate (for a survey of this, see, for example, Brian Vickers' *In Defence of Rhetoric*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988). Mulvihill quotes disapprovingly the Elocutionist Thomas Sheridan's definition of the aim of rhetoric, "to persuade others to the belief of any point" (p. 33), yet Sheridan echoes Aristotle's well-known definition: "Let rhetoric be [defined as] an ability, in each [particular] case, to see the available means of persuasion".² Mulvihill's indictment of eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century rhetoric actually parallels Socrates' attacks against rhetoric in Plato's dialogue *Gorgias*: "[In rhetoric], there is no need to know the truth of the actual matters, but one merely needs to have discovered some device of persuasion that will make one appear to those who do not know to know better than those who know".³ The Elocutionists and the New Rhetoricians often re-expressed traditional rhetorical notions within a new theoretical framework. Thus, when Joseph Priestley discusses "vividness" (p. 41) in his *Course of Lectures on Oratory and Criticism* (1777), he combines, I would argue, the old concept of *enargeia* or *evidentia*, as in Quintilian, with the new sensationalist psychology.⁴

Nor does the causal link which James Mulvihill suggests between eighteenth-century empiricism and amoral rhetorical practices in the period 1790-1820 sound convincing to me. Where political power struggles are concerned, rhetoricians of all times, from ancient Greece to our days, tend to grab whatever method or argument is at hand, regardless (alas) of reason and morals.

² Aristotle, *On Rhetoric: A Theory of Civic Discourse*, transl. George A. Kennedy (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 36 (I.2.1).

³ *Gorgias*, in *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, vol. 3, transl. W. R. M. Lamb (London: William Heinemann & Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press) (Loeb Classical Library), 1967, pp. 300-301 (459 c).

⁴ Cf. Quintilian, *The Orator's Education*, Books 6-8, ed. and transl. Donald A. Russell (Cambridge, Mass. & London: Harvard University Press) (Loeb Classical Library), 2001, pp. 60-65 (6.2.32-36).

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