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Andrew W. Robertson:

*The Language of Democracy: Political Rhetoric in the United States and Britain, 1790-1900*

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First published in 1995 by Cornell University Press and later updated in 2005, Andrew W. Robertson's *The Language of Democracy: Political Rhetoric in the United States and Britain, 1790-1900* offers a thorough comparative history of electioneering rhetoric in the United States and Britain in the nineteenth century. With alternating chapters devoted to each country, the book juxtaposes developments in the press and political language on both sides of the Atlantic; Robertson details the evolution of "government by gentlemen at the end of the eighteenth century to government for, if not by, the people at the end of the nineteenth century" (p. 1). In tracing this evolution, he examines how political rhetoric – working with old themes and new technologies and responding to a dramatic change in audience – was transformed over the course of a century. He includes images and text from letters, speeches, newspapers, and cartoons in order to document these transformations.

In his preface (pp. vii-xiv), Robertson offers a survey of new texts that treat the history of political language and delineate the relationship between language and technology. Subsequently, he charts some changes in the media, briefly describing transformations in the relationship between government and the press and drawing some comparisons between the late eighteenth century and present times. He concludes by speculating about the effects of blogs, chat groups, and emails on the transmission of truth.

In the introduction "Causes, Conjunctures, Occasions, and Relations" (pp. 1-19), Robertson contends that, beginning in the 1790s, the United States and Britain were faced with a rapidly growing electorate and thus required new methods to communicate with these masses, whose role as audience had altered. As a result, political language evolved dramatically in terms of style and substance, themes and values. Robertson explains that he chose to compare American and British history during this time period because he wanted to expand historical understanding of the relationship between language and politics, and because he believed this understanding would be limited if confined within one national context. The two nations were selected, he explains, because their political cultures shared many of the same features. To review the history of their electioneering rhetoric, Robertson posits, is "to recognize I. A. Richards definition of rhetoric as 'the study of misunderstanding and its remedies'" (p. 7). The remainder of the introduction is devoted to surveying the chapters to follow.

Chapter One, "Demi-Aristocratical Democracy: The Persistence of Anglo-American Culture, 1780-1799" (pp. 20-35), looks at both American and British political rhetoric in the last years of the eighteenth century, noting that although initially classical forms of rhetoric dominated and although those who governed did so with the belief that men of good character were the best suited to make decisions for the masses, the violent passions aroused by the French Revolution resulted in a transformation in political language. Robertson reproduces two solicitations to newspapers from the period to demonstrate how orators initially stressed character, *decorum*,

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and formality. These emphases gradually shifted as hortatory rhetoric appeared on both sides of the Atlantic, and Robertson notes that figures such as antithesis, anaphora, and *ad personam* were increasingly employed as political language became more intense. The expiration of the Sedition Act in 1801, Robertson explains, opened the doors for a new rhetoric, one that incorporated hortatory rhetoric and used devices employed by advertising. From an historical perspective, this chapter is comprehensive and densely detailed. However, from a rhetorical point of view, it seems strange that Robertson fails to discuss the classical concept of *ethos*, given that he devotes pages 22-26 to discussing the importance of an orator's good sense, good intentions, and knowledge.

With Chapter Two, "Oral Speech on the Printed Page: Electioneering Rhetoric in the United States, 1800-1824" (pp. 36-53), Robertson offers a survey of some of the major shifts in electioneering rhetoric in the early nineteenth century. During this period, there was a dramatic expansion in electoral participation, a significant increase in the space devoted to advertising, and a clear development of close associations between the parties and certain policies. As a result of these changes, political rhetoric became increasingly composed of slogans, symbols, and party nicknames, and speeches on the printed page employed emphatic typography and were arranged to emphasize antithetical arguments. Replete with examples of the new forms of rhetoric, and historically detailed, this chapter offers a comprehensive look at the political rhetoric of these early decades. There is, however, as in earlier chapters, little space devoted to fairly significant and relevant rhetorical concepts such as *pathos* and enthymemes.

Chapter Three, "Reform Agitation Under Repressive Constraints: British Rhetoric, 1800-1832" (pp. 54-67), begins by contrasting the British press with the American press, highlighting the fact that during this period the former remained under strict control through the enforcement of the Sedition Act, the application of the stamp tax, and advertising duties. As a result of these constraints, Robertson points out, the stamped press employed laudatory rhetoric, as it lacked any opposition or competition and thus had no need for another type of language. At the same time, the unstamped press, he explains, with William Cobbett as the most well-known editor, preserved the hortatory style in British journalism. The bulk of this chapter, then, is devoted to exploring the tensions between the British Conservatives and the British Radicals, tensions created by debates over the Irish question, Catholic emancipation, and Parliamentary reform. Despite these tensions, Robertson argues, electioneering rhetoric continued to focus on the character and conduct of candidates for Parliament. Robertson makes this point in a chapter stocked with historical details and numerous quotations, and it is particularly evident here that the book requires from the reader thorough knowledge of history more than an acquaintanceship with rhetorical history or theory.

In Chapter Four, "Creating a National Audience: Jacksonian America, 1828-1860" (pp. 68-95), Robertson describes the emergence of the mass-circulation press and its effect on political language and compares 'Jacksonian' rhetoric with the 'Jeffersonian' rhetoric that preceded it. Although, as Robertson points out, this was the golden age of stylized American oratory, with Daniel Webster and Henry Clay figuring as some of the most prominent speakers, the changes in media, especially the introduction of the telegraph in 1844, transformed most political language into something more simple, crude, and bombastic. Perhaps even more significantly, as this chapter makes clear, orators such as Lincoln began to address secondary audiences, delivering written addresses created primarily as documents to be published by the press, yet delivered, as Robertson describes it, with the dramatic presence of spoken oration. Robertson competently and thoroughly summarizes various figures of speech employed during this time and includes numerous footnotes to Kenneth Burke's *Rhetoric of Motives*.

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With Chapter Five, "Parliamentary Reform and the Repeal of Constraints on Expression, 1832-1855" (pp. 96-115), Robertson provides a well-researched account of how the British press, due to the First Reform Act in 1832 and the reduction of the 'taxes on knowledge' in the 1830s, increasingly facilitated changes in political discourse, with editors focusing on specific communities and newspapers establishing greater independence from political parties. This chapter also details the debates between the Tories and the Whigs and describes the transformation of voting from an act that was a spiritual and patriotic obligation to an act resulting from self-interested behavior. With the end of stamp duties in 1860 and thus the end of limited freedom for the press, Robertson explains, British orators began to do as their American counterparts were doing and directing their speeches to newspaper readers, in order to "reinvigorate their language to reach a larger audience" (p. 115).

Robertson begins Chapter Six, "The Rhetorical Civil War in the Northern Press: New York, 1860-1868" (pp. 116-128), by summarizing the many significant changes in political language in connection with the Civil War. Familiarity, he explains, gave way to formality, and instruction replaced exhortation, as editors responding to the wartime need for uniformity curtailed rhetorical excesses. With new methods of lithography available and the birth of war correspondents reporting from the battle lines, editors were able to offer audiences maps, vivid illustrations, and first-hand accounts of battles. During this time, Robertson contends, metaphors of war were more prevalent, as were battlefield allusions. According to Robertson, the "language of combat" (p. 124) reached its apogee in the 1868 election. He concludes that, after the war, political rhetoric was more subdued, though speakers would refer to Civil War generals and battles in their speeches for some time to come.

Exhaustively researched and extensively footnoted, Chapter Seven, "The Personality Contest Between Gladstone and Disraeli, 1855-1880" (pp. 129-145), reviews the debates and conflicts between the two leading politicians and their parties, exploring the many ways in which gladiatorial images and metaphors were used to describe the two as, increasingly, personalities became synonymous with parties and policies. Robertson draws connections between Gladstone and Lincoln, detailing Gladstone's legendary Midlothian campaign of 1879 to emphasize that Gladstone's victory, just as Lincoln's, was assured because he "knew how to campaign *through* the press rather than *with* it" (p. 143). Audiences had grown during this period, and the electorate had nearly doubled due to the lifting of constraints on the British press, which also developed dramatically.

In Chapter Eight, "The Loss of Public Principles and Public Interest: Gilded Age Rhetoric, 1872-1896" (pp. 146-163), Robertson examines how this period of immigration, urbanization, individualism, and excessive wealth celebrated the soldier and the entrepreneur, and rallied the masses with calls for group efforts. Robertson contends that philosophers and polemicists, believing the Gilded Age lacked a "common will", responded by appealing "to altruism, aggression, competition, and allegiance", all of which "offered possibilities for a collaborative imperative" (p. 153). These appeals often depended upon the use of military analogies and war allusions. Additionally, he explains how audiences were progressively more concerned with the private conduct of public candidates, and specifies how themes such as morality and corruption were increasingly employed. In examining the hortatory speeches of William Jennings Bryan, and the deliberative rhetoric of the *New York Times*, Robertson concludes that, by the end of the nineteenth century, American political rhetorical was still negotiating an effective means of communicating with its ever-growing audience. In sum, he finds that hortatory rhetoric inspired but polarized, whereas admonitory rhetoric instructed but did not inspire, and pure deliberative rhetoric educated but alienated. Although his summation seems accurate, this entire chapter would have benefited from more explicit references to classical rhetorical theory. Robertson

seems unaware of Cicero's account of the three offices or duties of orators, and he makes no mention of the three artistic proofs (*logos, ethos, pathos*). Such references would have provided more explicit means of discussing his major points.

With Chapter Nine, "Fire and Strength, Sword and Fire: British Rhetorical Battles, 1880-1900" (pp. 164-180), Robertson focuses on the challenges the Liberals and Conservatives faced in terms of reaching the masses. The former had to deal with an increasingly hostile press, while the latter enjoyed press support but lacked a leader with Gladstone's persuasive abilities. The chapter outlines the issues dividing the two parties and explores how political language employed the figurative language of battles and sometimes evoked connections to the American Civil War, as when the Liberals adopted the name 'Unionists'. Building on points made in the previous chapter, Robertson discusses the failures of pure deliberative rhetoric and hortatory rhetoric to reach and move the masses, and notes that, in response, by 1900, newspapers became both more independent and more focused on conveying commercial information rather than political news or opinion.

Robertson devotes Chapter Ten, "The Appeal to the Eye: Visual Communication in the United States and Britain, 1880-1990" (pp. 181-210), to exploring the proliferation of cartoons, caricatures, and other graphic illustrations in the press and in political language. Offering 12 illustrations, he traces the influence of French caricature on American and British visual political satire and describes how illustrations, engravings, cartoons, and maps allowed newspapers to entertain and provide moral focus and direction to mass audiences. Robertson's examples illustrate how the use of allegories, personification, antithesis, and analogies in these visuals worked as forms of social commentary that were didactic in nature. He concludes by reiterating one of the primary arguments of this work: "it is easier to find a new means of saying something than to find something new to say" (p. 210).

In his Conclusion, "Misunderstanding and Its Remedies" (pp. 211-219), which borrows its title from the aforementioned I. A. Richards quotation, Robertson sums up the major themes of his book, tracing the evolution of political language from the late eighteenth century to the end of the nineteenth century with the intent of demonstrating that the press played a primary role in creating identification between politicians and audiences, and with the purpose of illustrating the transformation of Americans into consumers. He suggests that the difficulties in electioneering rhetoric faced in both nations were caused by the efforts of politicians to create a discourse that was, at one and the same time, deliberative, popular, compelling, and comprehensible to the rapidly growing electorates. These efforts, he believes, still have not been successful even at our present time. He ends with a quotation from Walt Whitman emphasizing the importance of fitting language to its audience and its interests.

Certainly, as Robertson himself notes in his opening pages, there have been many works written about the relationship between medium and message, technology, and political language. Similarly, nineteenth-century American and British history has been treated exhaustively, as evidenced, most obviously, by the sheer number of footnotes Robertson includes, which refer to some of these works. However, Robertson is unique in terms of scope and concentration, thoroughly mining historical documents in both nations during these years in order to produce a comprehensively researched work dedicated to detail. In historic scope and detail, this book excels; however, in drawing explicit connections between classical rhetorical history and theory and the documents he analyzes, Robertson sometimes falters.

*The Language of Democracy: Political Rhetoric in the United States and Britain, 1790-1900* seems largely intended for an audience well versed in nineteenth-century American and British history, as, many times, politicians, events, campaigns, acts, and speeches are presented with little introduction or context. Those without such an education, while likely to be impressed by

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Robertson's academic rigor, may find themselves occasionally lost. Additionally, although one can appreciate the great amount of work devoted to locating and incorporating examples from historical documents, at times the sheer number of quotations results in the reader feeling a bit like the forest has been lost for the trees, challenging the book's readability.

It is not clear whether Robertson regards students of rhetoric as potential readers of his book. Certainly, as the subtitle implies, rhetoric is an essential concern of Robertson's, and he does an impressive job of detailing the use of many schemes and tropes in various historical documents; however, he fails to include references to many rhetorical concepts that would seem to be inherently related to many of the important points he makes, concepts such as *kairos*, Bitzer's 'rhetorical situation', and the Aristotelian artistic proofs. Finally, one of Robertson's main points is the importance of creating a bond of identification with an audience, yet he barely mentions Kenneth Burke's seminal work on the concept of identification,<sup>1</sup> despite the fact that he is obviously familiar with Burke's *Rhetoric of Motives*.

The above noted reservations aside, students of both history and rhetoric are sure to find this work clear, compelling, credible, and enlightening.

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<sup>1</sup> Robertson does note, however, that "for the persuasive process to succeed, as rhetorical theorists from Aristotle to Kenneth Burke have pointed out, the audience must see the world as the speaker sees it" (p. 211).