
Matthew Bevis:

The Art of Eloquence: Byron, Dickens, Tennyson, Joyce

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A new commentary on any of the four authors indicated in the subtitle of Matthew Bevis's *The Art of Eloquence: Byron, Dickens, Tennyson, Joyce* must join an already crowded field. The works of James Joyce alone support countless academic research careers, although they are infrequently considered together with all three of the nineteenth-century figures discussed in this book, and even more rarely approached as the subject of a primarily rhetorical, rather than literary, inquiry. The quality of Bevis's earlier book on Tennyson, *Lives of Victorian Literary Figures: Tennyson* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2003), and of his articles on, for example, Tennyson and Dickens (some of which are incorporated here, in revised form), suggests that the volume under review would offer exactly what one hopes to find in a study located at the intersection of literary and rhetorical criticism. Anyone holding such an expectation will find it largely fulfilled: this monograph presents an insightful, meticulous, and coherent reading of the rhetorical intentions, techniques, and, sometimes, efficacy of key texts by four major literary figures.

Bevis takes as his starting point a comment on the English public offered in *The Times* on October 23, 1873: "In the course of these fifty years we have become a nation of public speakers [...]. We are now more than ever a debating, that is, a Parliamentary people" (p. 2). Although the ensuing discussions of the political context of a variety of poems, stories, and novels do not often raise historical or literary points unfamiliar to scholars of the authors under consideration, the connections Bevis draws between those texts and their contexts are established with a care that exceeds the norm, and from a perspective that is new. When Bevis departs from the base of those connections, the result is often a stimulating and innovative reading of a well-known literary work. In this regard, he succeeds in offering something new to the field of literary criticism. His contribution to the history of rhetoric is perhaps more substantial, in that scholars of nineteenth- and twentieth-century political debate, particularly Parliamentary oratory, will find that Bevis investigates an area of public engagement with formal political oratory that has hitherto been largely unexplored. The primary value of Bevis's book, then, is that it helps to establish the degree to which a disposition of rhetorical disinterestedness infused the British public sphere in the nineteenth century, informing many literary works just as thoroughly as it did the best Parliamentary orations.

In the Introduction, "Literary Persuasions" (pp. 1-28), Bevis demonstrates that oratorical exercise was a common element of the plot of Victorian novels and narrative poems, and asserts that eloquence not only provided substance for plots but also offered itself as a model for literary persuasion. That the rhetorical intent of a literary text is both to win readers to a "position" and to impart to them a particular "disposition" is the book's primary claim (p. 3). Bevis characterizes this disposition as one of "disinterestedness", a term the use of which he explores in a wide-ranging consideration of eighteenth-, nineteenth-, and twentieth-century sources, such as Kant's *Critique of Judgement*, Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy*, Burke's *Thoughts on French Affairs*,

Mill's *On Liberty*, and works by Empson, Hazlitt, Eagleton, and Adorno. Distinguishing "disinterested independence" from "irresponsible indifference" (p. 5), Bevis declares his intent to defend the former, which he sees as a valuable "internal struggle" allowing thinkers to entertain, capably and simultaneously, both sides of a question before settling upon a decision (p. 9). Such disinterestedness, for Bevis, as for his sources, is a powerful means of avoiding rash commitments and irrational attachments; Bevis's entire study is thus a celebration of the divided but engaged thinker. In the remainder of the Introduction, Bevis traces several indications that such an attitude was important to the period's public thought. The primary examples provided are the development of debating societies (with reference to Thomas Carlyle) and the transformation of formal political debate from a largely inaccessible process to a popular entertainment (following especially upon the Hansard family's publications of Parliamentary proceedings).

The book's first chapter, "Byron's Hearing" (pp. 29-85), focuses on the claim that "Byron's work is the most sustained poetic engagement with oratorical culture in the period" (p. 32). Bevis supports this claim with a consideration of Byron's indebtedness – particularly in his maiden speech to the House of Lords – to the arguments of Burke and Sheridan regarding the French Revolution. Byron's view of poetry as oratorical exercise is defended throughout the chapter, with reference to *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, *The Corsair* (in discussion of which Bevis particularly emphasizes the canon of delivery), and, most extensively, *Don Juan* (which Bevis reads in the context of Warren Hasting's impeachment and accusations about Queen Caroline's adultery). Bevis reliably shuttles smoothly between considerations of external form, figuration, and other largely stylistic and formal concerns, and the political matter of the poems. The great virtue of the chapter, as of the others, is that Bevis succeeds in reading the materials' political rhetoric without losing sight of the fact that poems must also be read as poetry. Ultimately, the readings of the poems in this chapter are submitted as evidence that Byron was searching for a way to maintain a disinterested support for Whig politics without committing himself to the party.

In the second chapter, "An Audience with Dickens" (pp. 86-144), Bevis presents Dickens as keenly sensitive to sound, but also as especially concerned with a balance between the temporalities of epideictic and deliberative rhetoric, "of present needs with the need for more than the present" (p. 92). Bevis discusses the early "A Parliamentary Sketch" and selections from *The Pickwick Papers* with an eye both to Dickens's engagement with contemporary political debate and to his sense of the novel as a form of oratorical exercise that surpasses the immediate rhetorical moment to address the debates of posterity. Later sections of the chapter consider selections from *Oliver Twist*, *Barnaby Rudge*, *Bleak House*, *Hard Times*, *Our Mutual Friend*, and *Little Dorritt* in some detail, with reference to a number of other works. As with his discussion of Byron's poetry, Bevis's readings of Dickens are sensitive to the relations between the form and the content of the novels, offering attentive analysis of the relation between diction, structure, and political critique. Particularly convincing are the readings that illustrate the manner in which Dickens's works defend a Bahktinian polyvocality that at once promotes and resists circuitousness (and here Bevis appropriately refers to *circumlocutio*).

The third chapter, "Tennyson and Sound Judgement" (pp. 145-203), emphasizes the importance of Tennyson's fine poetic ear and establishes the grounds on which Bevis may consider Tennyson's role in the development of that especially oral and aural poetic genre, the dramatic monologue, and also the tensions that inform the composition of *In Memoriam*. As elegies are double-voiced (admiration, lament), so much of Tennyson's poetry, according to Bevis, consistently has a doubled stance, with one foot firmly grounded in conservatism, the other in faith in progress. Bevis' discussions of the dramatic monologues "St. Simeon Stylites" and "Ulysses" in relation to contemporary political debate, including questions about the British colonial effort, are followed by his more detailed reading of *Maud* as an engagement with the political speeches

of Gladstone, particularly those concerned with the Crimean conflict. For Bevis, Tennyson is, with *Maud*, primarily seeking not to persuade readers of a position, but to explore the “ways in which assent is created and maintained” (p. 184). Such resistance to hasty political commitment and perpetuation of reasoned debate is, for Bevis, exactly the virtue of Tennyson’s work. Furthermore, the noncommittal political speech employed in *Maud* is, Bevis argues, the grounds for the ambiguities of the *Idylls of the King*, as well as for Tennyson’s more general resistance, even as the public man of the laureateship, to walking a party line.

In Chapter Four, “Joyce’s Breathing Space” (pp. 204-262), Bevis discusses Joyce’s biographical connections to, and explicit concerns regarding, oratorical display. As might be expected, the question of Irish independence frames Bevis’s reading of many of Joyce’s works, but Bevis recognizes that this concern is more broadly that of a “search for an eloquence that could unite without producing a [...] pernicious homogeneity [...] that could [...] explore difference without being merely divisive” (p. 207). Joyce’s sense of oratorical prowess was, Bevis reasonably asserts, most indebted to Charles Stewart Parnell, whose style Bevis reads as a model of Joyce’s own. Several stories from *Dubliners*, including, predictably, “Ivy Day in the Committee Room”, are given close attention, but it is with regard to *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* that Bevis offers what are perhaps the most impressive observations. He convincingly outlines a reading of the novel’s first two pages as an enactment of Aphthonius’s *progymnasmata*. One example provides a taste of this outstanding passage: the “first exercise is ‘Fable’, and – according to Aphthonius – often ‘Aesopic’ in nature, it links animal and human life; *A Portrait* begins with ‘Once upon a time [...] there was a moocow’ who ‘met a nicens little boy named baby tuckoo’” (p. 229). In addition, Bevis connects elements of Joyce’s *Bildungsroman* with other rhetorical principles. For instance, he asserts that the novel’s five parts are aligned to the five canons. This section of the chapter is followed by a detailed reading of selections from *Ulysses*, and, while much of that material – such as the defense of Bloom as a realization of the classical *vir bonus* – is engaging, it is with his discussion of *A Portrait* that Bevis excels.

The concluding coda, “An Eyed Ear” (pp. 263-269), returns to polyvocalism but remains with Joyce, whose *Finnegans Wake* serves for Bevis as a final example of the ways in and degrees to which poets and novelists are attentive to the sound of their works, to a sense of a *listening* audience. According to Bevis, no text relies on sound more for its sense and the interplay of its conflicting voices than does the *Wake*. To Bevis, its openness to audience interaction and its obvious obscurity enact the ‘engaged disinterestedness’ he has promoted as a defining mark of literary eloquence throughout this book. As such, Joyce’s final text serves as suitable material for a concluding discussion to Bevis’s argument.

There are a few faults with Bevis’s text in terms of its contribution to rhetorical criticism. A slighting of the classical context for the Victorian sense of literary and oratorical eloquence at the start provides one of its greatest disappointments. Two brief paragraphs mention Aristotle, Cicero, Plato, Empedocles, and Gorgias early in the Introduction (p. 10), and Bevis offers some grounding for the nineteenth-century conception of disinterestedness in Aristotle (pp. 27-28), but this arrangement of the discussion of classical materials calls for a more substantial engagement with them. It must be added that Bevis later treats some of these classical sources, and others, with much greater care, but a more thorough consideration at the start would do much to contextualize his overall argument within the history of rhetoric. A second, surprising, exclusion in the Introduction has to do with what is perhaps the nineteenth-century’s most well-known assertion regarding the virtue of holding multiple understandings in mind at the same time – Keats’s Negative Capability. While Keats’s sense of this capability is not entirely aligned with the disinterestedness Bevis discusses, in that Keats deliberately excludes the desire to reach

for a resolution to opposing understandings of a question or situation, his formulation of a mental faculty that has undeniable connections to disinterestedness would seem to demand, if only by virtue of its fame, some consideration here. Another complaint this reader has is the rather cursory treatment *Finnegans Wake* receives. Such a complex text demands an extended reading, and Bevis's many insights regarding Joyce suggest he would have been up to the task. Finally, Bevis occasionally falls prey to excesses in stylistic flourish, as when he writes, for example, "orators on both sides of the House were dressing up the issue [...]. As [...] *Don Juan* is [...] dressing down some of the players" (p. 70). Still, the employment of such figures succeeds more often than not.

Despite some points with which this reader quibbles, however, Bevis offers a satisfying, and sometimes remarkable, study that bridges the too-frequently separated fields of literary criticism and rhetorical history. *The Art of Eloquence: Byron, Dickens, Tennyson, Joyce* obviously targets readers from both camps, and will likely satisfy them all. With his description of a particular public attitude that promoted debate and deliberation and reached an apogee in the late nineteenth century, Bevis establishes a substantial connection between oratorical and literary traditions, and clarifies the degree to which rhetorical exercise had become a defining trait of the Victorian public. This reader, at least, found much in Bevis's book engaging and insightful, and anticipates many others will as well.

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