

Jennifer Richards:

Rhetoric

(The New Critical Idiom)

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Jennifer Richards, Professor of Early Modern Literature and Culture serving as Head of the School of English Literature, Language, and Linguistics at Newcastle University (UK), is well qualified to contribute the volume on *Rhetoric* to The New Critical Idiom series. Her *Rhetoric and Courtliness in Early Modern Culture* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), among other publications, establishes her expertise on the rhetorical tradition. The *Rhetoric* of her predecessor Peter Dixon in the original Critical Idiom series (London: Methuen, 1971), which she acknowledges as “comprehensive” for its time (p. 120), has been an invaluable historical survey of the art of rhetoric from the ancients through I. A. Richards and of its applications to English literature. However, rhetoric itself has been challenged in the past four decades by critical movements such as structuralism, post-structuralism, Marxism, and gender theory that cynically dismiss the possibility of achieving rhetorical ideals such as authorial control, disinterested debate, beneficent persuasion, and even one of the goals of this new series, clear communication. According to the series editor, John Drakakis, its purpose is “to address the radical changes which have taken place in the study of literature during the last decades of the twentieth century” in introductory volumes on literary terms that “combine clarity of exposition with an adventurousness of perspective and a breadth of application” (p. viii). This new volume of the series is likely to appeal more to post-secondary teachers and students of English literature than to historians of rhetoric. Jennifer Richards’ sometimes narrow selection of aspects of the earlier rhetorical tradition that have attracted the interest or reaction of recent critical theorists may disappoint more traditional scholars, but her focus on connections between past and present can help them to understand recent theories of language. Moreover, her study leads to a clear and thoughtful conclusion: that as witnesses to the death of traditional rhetoric and the despair of the hermeneutic circle, we can find our best guide to a socially conscious use of language in Kenneth Burke’s mid-twentieth-century *Grammar of Motives* and especially *Rhetoric of Motives*.

Richards’ survey contains an Introduction; three chapters; a Conclusion; a Glossary of rhetorical terms; a Bibliography; and a (general) Index. I would advise university students to read her “Introduction: what is rhetoric” (pp. 1-18) *after* Chapters 1 to 3, when it will make better sense. At first the book seems to be a commentary on contemporary politics. It opens with a long epigraph from a journalist’s July 2006 interview with Ségolène Royal, then the Socialist candidate in the French presidential election. The point of the epigraph turns out, toward the bottom of page 2, to be the journalist’s pejorative use of the word ‘rhetoric’. Richards herself seems to share the modern distaste for the term, and after addressing the question “what is rhetoric?” in this “Introduction”, a desultory hopscotch across some twenty-five centuries of rhetorical tradition, she admits at last that it “has proven a little harder to answer than expected” (p. 18).

Although Chapter 1 (“The classical art”, pp. 19-63) and Chapter 2 (“Rhetoric renewed”, pp. 64-113) attempt to survey in ninety-five pages the history of rhetoric from the fifth century BCE through the nineteenth century CE, a careful selection of sources has been made to prove a central point: the decline and ultimate death of ‘formal rhetoric’. Gorgias’ *Encomium of Helen*, Plato’s *Gorgias* and *Phaedrus*, Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*, the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, Cicero’s *De oratore* and his prosecution of Verres, Quintilian’s *Institutio oratoria*, and Tacitus’ *Dialogus* represent the classical tradition. Of patristic and medieval rhetoric, only the *ars dictaminis* is briefly cited as the art of letter writing, for Richards claims that rhetoric was simply “eclipsed by logic and grammar” (p. 66). Although Richards acknowledges the Italian rediscovery of a complete manuscript of Quintilian’s *Institutio oratoria* (1416) and of Cicero’s *De oratore* and *Brutus* (1421), she essentially makes five sixteenth-century English works represent the entire Renaissance: Thomas Wilson’s *Arte of Rhetorique*, John Rainolds’ *Oratio in laudem artis poeticae*, Henry Peacham’s *The Garden of Eloquence*, George Puttenham’s *Arte of English Poesie*, and John Hoskins’ *Directions for Speech and Style*. She also cites Juan Luis Vives and William Gouge as recommending silence in women. Thus Richards mentions the thousand years of the Middle Ages only four times, barely touches on the Continental Renaissance, and says nothing at all about the Reformation and Counter-Reformation. With the exception of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, British writers (Thomas Sprat, Thomas Hobbes, Alexander Pope, David Hume, Adam Smith, William Wordsworth) dominate the discussion of the period from the Restoration to the Romantic Period and the principal focus is on reactions against rhetoric from science, philosophy, and poetry.

Richards also analyzes passages from literature as applications of rhetoric, but the analyses are sometimes placed well ahead of the quotations being analyzed, so that the reader is forced to wait for or even to search for the promised illustrations, as in the following paragraph:

An example of a grammatical figure is parenthesis or *interpositio*, when we insert a remark in the middle of a sentence, modifying the original assertion or complicating it ([Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria*], 9.3.23). In the example that follows, taken from *The Defence of Poetry* (c. 1579), Philip Sidney is advising the poet to follow the example of the ‘courtier’ who uses linguistic devices ‘naturally’ because he is copying their ‘practice’, but perhaps also, since this term serves both as a noun and a verb, just to practise them. This is not a difficult argument to grasp when stated like this, but Sidney’s formulation makes us pause to really think about the paradox it implies, that one can do something artfully, without knowing what one is doing: ‘the courtier, following that which by practice he findeth fittest to nature, therein (though he know it not) doth according to art, though not by art’ (Sidney 1989: 247). The parenthesis draws attention to this curious possibility because it complicates the original assertion; this is reinforced by two rhetorical figures of speech which are used in the same sentence: *epistrophe*, the reiteration of a word at the end of a clause or sentence (‘art’), and *antithesis*, the opposition of contrary words or sentences (‘according to art, though not by art’). (pp. 48-49)

Why not cite the illustration of *interpositio* before analyzing it, or at least indent the quotation from Sidney to make it visible? And what is the antecedent of “this” in Richards’ discussion of grammatical figures above: “this is reinforced by two rhetorical figures of speech”? Vague reference is a pervasive problem throughout the book; if reprinting is planned, some judicious editing could greatly improve the prose.

Richards does hit a number of highlights in the rise and fall of the rhetorical tradition before the twentieth century. Her account might be summarized as follows: Antiquity debated whether rhetoric is a means to knowledge or merely skill in persuasion indifferent to truth. Aristotle defends rhetoric as a pragmatic tool for deciding issues that cannot be resolved with certainty, while Cicero, at least in *De oratore*, adopts the skeptical model of rhetoric as debate on both

sides of a question. Quintilian shifts the emphasis on rhetoric as an art from Aristotle's *logos* to his *ethos* and *pathos*, that is, from logical to emotive appeal. Tacitus observes the decline of rhetoric into a merely technical art in imperial Rome. The decline continued in the Middle Ages. Republican rhetoric enjoyed a brief revival in city-states of Renaissance Italy, especially Florence, but the sixteenth-century English handbooks of rhetoric are principally style manuals, and even those not limited to describing schemes and tropes associate rhetoric with social and political control. In the seventeenth century, the demand of science for a plain, transparent style began giving the word 'rhetoric' the negative connotation customary in post-Renaissance discourse. Enlightenment theorists such as Smith and Rousseau nevertheless seek a new rhetoric of civility. The Romantics attack rhetoric as rule-bound artifice and contrast it with poetry, which, in Wordsworth's theory, is the language of ordinary men expressing "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" (p. 104). A renewed interest in the seemingly inexpressible sublime also characterizes the modern revolt against rhetoric.

Richards makes one or two concessions to the rhetorical tradition in what is otherwise her description of a rule-bound art (or artificial language). Cicero's *De oratore* may be confusing and even inconsistent but at least in its skepticism it encourages argument on both sides of a debatable question. The tradition of debate produces not only parodies of rule-bound rhetoric but "some astonishing writing that constantly broke free of apparent constraints" (p. 87), such as William Shakespeare's plays and John Milton's *Paradise Lost*. The latter in turn influences the more recent genre of the novel, represented here by Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. On the other hand, in his attack in *A Defence of Poesy* on "a faddish 'Ciceronianism', the attempt to reproduce exactly the style of Cicero" (p. 109), Sidney only appears to reject rhetorical art in favor of natural expression. As in Cicero's *De oratore*, Sidney's "natural expression turns out to be artful and practised" (p. 112), that is art hiding art.

Richards then turns in Chapter 3 (pp. 114-175) to a description of the post-Enlightenment decline of "formal rhetoric", which "failed as a theory of language" (p. 115), and of the paradoxical revival and extension of rhetoric in the twentieth century. Her brief survey of the art of persuasion through the nineteenth century, which must seem incomplete and often reductive to a historian of rhetoric, prepares for her presentation of more recent reactions to that tradition in this chapter, entitled "From rhetoric to rhetoricality". She begins with the modern recognition that language is pervasively figurative. For I. A. Richards, thought is inherently metaphorical (pp. 116-121). Ferdinand de Saussure, the founder of structural linguistics, describes meaning as produced by similarities and differences within a self-contained system rather than by reference to the real world (pp. 123-124). Roman Jakobson describes two kinds of *aphasia*, namely "similarity disorder" and "contiguity disorder", as metaphoric and metonymic (p. 123). Structuralism produces its own histories of rhetoric. Gérard Genette traces the reduction of rhetoric through time, culminating in the absorption of metonymy by metaphor in the theory of the Belgian Liège group. Roland Barthes "intends to reduce rhetoric to 'a merely historicized object'" (p. 126) – which originated when "we began to reflect upon language in order to defend our own" (p. 127) – and claims that rhetoric 'colonized' the other arts to become by the Renaissance a tool of oppressive power (pp. 127 and 128).

As structuralism gives way to post-structuralism in the 1970s in the work of Paul de Man and Barthes himself, among others, the interest shifts from efforts to describe language more scientifically to a recognition of its inherent instability, its "rhetoricality" (p. 131). Friedrich Nietzsche, teaching rhetoric at the University of Basel in 1872-73, anticipated post-structuralism by formulating the principle that we cannot step outside linguistic uncertainty. Because language is inherently figurative and deceitful, no pure philosophical language is possible (pp. 132-134). Jacques Derrida, examining Socrates' attack against writing as harming memory and

wisdom in Plato's *Phaedrus*, deconstructs the opposition between the sophists and Socrates to show Plato wrestling with linguistic ambiguity (pp. 135-140).

That Jennifer Richards is not herself an uncritical champion of post-structuralism becomes clear, however, when she examines the theories of Paul de Man through the lenses of his critics (pp. 140-156). Answering Brian Vickers' "combative" *In Defense of Rhetoric* (p. 145), Richards defends de Man's analyses in "Semiotics and Rhetoric" of what de Man calls "rhetorical questions" and concludes that de Man's "focus on the tension between literal and figural reading" (p. 151), between grammar and rhetoric, appropriately undermines naive belief in clear communication and in rhetoric as the art of persuasion. Yet not only Vickers but also other less traditional critics, such as Terry Eagleton, have criticized de Man's "evasion of extralinguistic meaning", of "circumstances outside the text", as "a failure to take responsibility for language", especially "the relationship between language and power in social and political contexts" (p. 154).

Richards warns against Hannah Arendt's nostalgia for the Greek separation of the political sphere, a realm of individuality characterized by agonistic debate among equals, from the social sphere, dedicated to life's necessities. The Greek *polis*, Richards reminds us, excluded women, foreigners, and slaves (pp. 157-158). However, she finds in Kenneth Burke a conception of rhetoric as speech action that can be extended to traditionally excluded groups (pp. 161-175). Burke argues that our efforts to persuade others by identifying with them hides divisions in human relationships, but that rhetoric can include semi-conscious acts of self-persuasion that manage antagonisms and affirm a more positive social order. Burke's skeptical rhetoric, Richards concludes, has the flexibility to be "both critical and constructive" (p. 174), if we use it with constant vigilance in the service of social justice. That concluding thesis is indeed, in keeping with The New Critical Idiom series, an adventurous perspective that invites broad application.

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