Moral Rhetoric and Formal Rhetoric

Reading Response Week 7 (8 October 2007)

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This week's readings from nineteenth-century rhetoric, it seems to me, fall rather neatly into two camps. One, which includes the feminist and abolitionist rhetors,[1] might be called the "moral rhetoric" group. For this group, rhetoric is inspired by and deeply connected to a perceived moral mission. On the other side is what might be called the "formal rhetoric" group, including Whately and Spencer. This group treats rhetoric as a neutral-valued skill (or set of skills) that can be applied to a variety of communicative situations, without any necessary moral connection. Of course, we've seen this division in one form or another in earlier periods; in the ancients, it was the division between Socrates and Plato[2] for the moralists, and the Sophists and Aristotle (each in their own way) for the formalists. Even in the Medieval period we might contrast Augustine, say, with the letter-writers. But this abiding question—does rhetoric have moral content?—seems to have arisen again more forcefully in this period, perhaps because of social pressures caused by the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution. On the one hand, the scientism of the Enlightenment encourages a formalist, technical, pragmatic view of rhetoric as a tool for the dissemination of scientific information (and probably more importantly, though often glossed over by period writers, for winning epistemological contests by forcefully presenting a new theory); given its purpose, it's not surprising that this is also a compositionist movement. On the other hand, the Industrial Revolution and the spread of general technology (such as the steam engine, which enabled new types of industrial production) produced various kinds of social upheaval: changes in the job market, especially for the laboring class; threats to slavery as an economic model;[3] increasing social mobility, which bolstered the middle class; and so on. And that upheaval, in turn, created both new opportunities for moral rhetoricians and new audiences for them. Some other differences: because moral rhetoric

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[1] And, as Malea illustrates so thoroughly in the essay we read a few weeks ago, the native-rights rhetors— who are mysteriously missing from this section of Bizzell & Herzberg. I understand space is limited and they can't include selections from every important rhetor of the period, but I'm sad that a headnote written no later than 1999 (given the dates of the references in the bibliography at the end) would omit any mention of native rhetors, other than a brief bit about Apess, when there were at least three scholars (Malea, Scott Lyons, and Resa Crane Bizzaro) actively presenting and publishing on the subject, at least two of whom are prominent and highly visible outside their fields. Oh well.

[2] And in a different, weaker form, Isocrates, who did not believe that it was possible to teach morality, but did associate "good character" with proper rhetorical performance.

[3] This is Eric Williams' thesis in *Slavery and Capitalism*: that slavery ended because it was no longer economically viable. C L R James later claimed that the idea was his, and he gave it to Williams when they were students together in England. Later, as Prime Minister of Trinidad, Williams had James imprisoned, which shows that academic rivalries can turn pretty bitter indeed, I guess. James, of course, also wrote *The Black Jacobins*, about Tousaint L'Overture, who was mentioned in this section's headnote, so this is relevant.

in this period was a populist rhetoric, the moral rhetors are primarily orators, unlike the formalists; and the moralists are attuned to ethos, while the formalists seem to disregard it.

Nietzsche is (as usual) an interesting figure in this regard, because while he disdains conventional social missions of the sort that animated the moral rhetors, he does believe that rhetoric is inevitably socially and politically engaged. In this sense he stands between the two groups, and it's easy to see how this position contributed to both post-structuralism (with its view of language as deeply connected to social formations) and social-constructivist rhetorical and compositionist theory (which tries to correct for the overly-mechanical views of the formalists).

But if, for the sake of argument, I ignore Nietzsche and the twentieth-century theorists and accept the moralist/formalist dichotomy for the moment, where do I stand? I have a deep-seated affection for mechanical analysis and formalisms, thanks to my engineering background.[4] But as a scholar of language I recognize that mechanical explanations disregard the larger part of the functioning of language, and while I'm skeptical of metaphysical, obscure, or intuitive interpretations of language's cultural functions, I do believe that the ethical and political dimensions of language use must always be kept in mind. Neither of these traditions (moral and formal) is dispensable. Fortunately, social constructivism does some of the work of synthesizing them.

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It's interesting to see how the formalist writers—particularly Spencer, but also to some extent Bain and Hill—seem to be anticipating information and communications theories. Of course, the mathematical models that are crucial in particular for information theory weren't developed until the early twentieth century, so these early steps are still rather imprecise. But the physiological effort that Spencer is concerned with is somewhat analogous to the actual thermodynamics of information: information does have energy content, and processing it does have a cost (though, curiously, the cost actually comes when you *discard* changes—a result that no doubt would surprise Spencer considerably). Hill's "correction" to Spencer's theory ("a reader's mental power is not a constant quantity", 1150) is another interesting step in this direction, suggesting a very nineteenth-century view of thermodynamics—that there's more energy available, if you figure out how to extract it (as the steam engine does from wood or coal). There's an interesting intellectual thread that appears here, as the formalists' interest in psychology and the phenomenology of the mind (they're always trying to inspect their own thinking) is yoked to an undertheorized but intriguing idea of biological thermodynamics; Freud later picked that up in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, when he theorized that all organisms have a drive to seek a state of minimal excitation.

Spencer's phrase "economizing the reader's or hearer's attention" (1155) also made me think of Richard Lanham's *The Economics of Attention*. (Hill actually uses the term "economy of attention" when he discusses Spencer, but I'm not sure that exact phrase appeared in our selection from Spencer's essay.) I got this book last year (a Christmas present—how geeky!) but have only read the introduction so far. It does seem, though, that Lanham is working on a sort of updated version of Spencer's project, though working

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[4]This often seems to be even more true for software developers than for "proper" engineers. The latter have well-established professional institutions that regulate practices and usually provide reliable, reproducible results, but computer programming is still an immature profession struggling to bring some order to its practice. It'd be interesting to write a bit on the rhetoric of computer-programming standardization, such as the gradual development of explicitly-standardized terminology in the Internet Engineering Task Force's "Request For Comments" (RFC) documents, where words such as MAY, MUST, and SHOULD have become terms of art with definitions specified in an IETF standard.

through an economic framework rather than a physiological or psychological one. Lanham's not concerned so much with the effort expended by the audience as the competition for attention; so where Spencer's foe is weariness, Lanham's is distraction.