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## RHETORIC

The academic discipline of stylistics is a twentieth-century invention. It will be the purpose of this book to describe the aims and methods of stylistics, and we will begin by considering its relationship with its most notable predecessor—rhetoric.

The term is derived from the Greek *technē rhetorikē*, the art of speech, an art concerned with the use of public speaking as a means of persuasion. The inhabitants of Homer's epics exploit and, more significantly, acknowledge the capacity of language to affect and determine non-linguistic events, but it was not until the fifth century BC that the Greek settlers of Sicily began to study, document and teach rhetoric as a practical discipline. The best-known names are Corax and Tisias who found that, in an island beset with political and judicial disagreements over land and civil rights, the art of persuasion was a useful and profitable profession. Gorgias, one of their pupils, visited Athens as ambassador and he is generally regarded as the person responsible for piloting rhetoric beyond its judicial function into the spheres of philosophy and literary studies. Isocrates was the first to extend and promote the moral and ethical benefits of the art of speech, and one of Plato's earliest Socratic dialogues bears the name *Gorgias*. It is with Plato that we encounter the most significant moment in the early history of rhetoric. In the *Phaedrus* Plato/Socrates states that unless a man pays due attention to philosophy 'he will never

be able to speak properly about anything' (261 A). 'A real art of speaking...which does not seize hold of truth, does not exist and never will' (260E). What concerned Plato was the fact that rhetoric was a device without moral or ethical subject matter. In the *Gorgias* he records an exchange between Socrates and Gorgias in which the former claims that persuasion is comparable with flattery, cooking and medicine: it meets bodily needs and satisfies physical and emotional desires. Rhetoric, he argues, is not an 'art' but a 'routine', and such a routine, if allowed to take hold of our primary communicative medium, will promote division, ambition and self-aggrandizement at the expense of collective truth and wisdom, the principal subjects of philosophy. Plato himself, particularly in the *Phaedrus*, does not go so far as to suggest the banning of rhetoric; rather he argues that it must be codified as subservient to the philosopher's search for truth.

Aristotle in his *Rhetoric* (c. 330 BC) produced the first counter-blast to Plato's anti-rhetoric thesis. Rhetoric, argues Aristotle, is an art, a necessary condition of philosophical debate. To perceive the same fact or argument dressed in different linguistic forms is not immoral or dangerous. Such a recognition—that words can qualify or unsettle a single pre-linguistic truth—is part of our intellectual training, vital to any purposive reconciliation of appearance and reality. Aristotle meets the claim that rhetoric is socially and politically dangerous with the counterclaim that the persuasive power of speech is capable of pre-empting and superseding the violent physical manifestations of subjection and defence.

The Plato-Aristotle exchange is not so much about rhetoric as an illustration of the divisive nature of rhetoric. It is replayed, with largely Aristotelian preferences, in the work of the two most prominent Roman rhetoricians, Cicero and Quintilian; it emerges in the writings of St Augustine and in Peter Ramus's *Dialectique* (1555), one of the founding moments in the revival of classical rhetoric during the European Renaissance. Most significantly, it operates as

the theoretical spine which links rhetoric with modern stylistics, and stylistics in turn with those other constituents of the contemporary discipline of humanities: linguistics, structuralism and poststructuralism.

Plato and Aristotle did not disagree on what rhetoric is; their conflicts originated in the problematical relationship between language and truth. Rhetoric, particularly in Rome and in post-Renaissance education, had been taught as a form of super-grammar. It provides us with names and practical explanations of the devices by which language enables us to perform the various tasks of persuading, convincing and arguing. In an ideal world (Aristotle's thesis) these tasks will be conducive to the personal and the collective good. The rhetorician will know the truth, and his linguistic strategies will be employed as a means of disclosing the truth. In the real world (Plato's thesis) rhetoric is a weapon used to bring the listener into line with the argument which happens to satisfy the interests or personal affiliations of the speaker, neither of which will necessarily correspond with the truth. These two models of rhetorical usage are equally valid and finally irreconcilable. Lies, fabrications, exaggerations are facts of language, but they can only be cited when the fissure between language and truth is provable.

For example, if I were to tell you that I am a personal friend of Aristotle, known facts will be sufficient to convince you (unless you are a spiritualist) that I am not telling the truth. However, a statement such as, 'Aristotle speaks to me of the general usefulness of rhetoric' is acceptable because it involves the use of a familiar rhetorical device (generally termed *catachresis*, the misuse or mis-application of a term): Aristotle does not literally speak to me, but my use of the term to imply that his written words involve the sincerity or the immediate relevance of speech is sanctioned by rhetorical-stylistic convention. What I have done is to use a linguistic device to distort pre-linguistic truth and to achieve an emotive effect at the same time. My reason for doing so would be to give a

supplementary persuasive edge to the specifics of my argument about the validity of Aristotle's thesis. Such devices are part of the fabric of everyday linguistic exchange and, assuming that the hearer is as conversant as the speaker with the conventions of this rhetorical game, they are not, in Plato's terms, immoral or dishonest. But for Plato such innocuous examples were merely a symptom of the much more serious consequences of rhetorical infection. The fact that Aristotle lived more than two millennia before me cannot be disputed, but the fabric of intellectual activity and its linguistic manifestation is only partly comprised of concrete facts.

Morality, the existence of God, the nature of justice: all of these correspond with the verifiable specifics of human existence, but our opinions about them cannot be verified in direct relation to these specifics. The common medium shared by the abstract and the concrete dimensions of human experience is language and, as a consequence, language functions as the battleground for the tendentious activity of making the known correspond with the unknown, that speculative element of human existence that underpins all of our beliefs about the nature of truth, justice, politics and behaviour. Plato and Aristotle named the conditions of this conflict as *dianoia* and *pragmata* (thought and facts, otherwise known as *res* or content) and *lexis* and *taxis* (word choice and arrangement, otherwise known as *verba* or form), and the distinction raises two major problems that will occupy much of our attention throughout this book.

First of all it can be argued that to make a distinction between language—in this instance the rhetorical organization of language—and the pre-linguistic continuum of thought, objects and events involves a fundamental error. Without language our experience of anything is almost exclusively internalized and private: we can, of course, make physical gestures, non-linguistic sounds or draw pictures, but these do not come close to the vast and complex network of signs and meanings shared by language users. The most important consequence of this condition of language

dependency is that we can never be certain whether the private world, the set of private experiences or beliefs, that language enables us to mediate is, as Plato and Aristotle argue, entirely independent of its medium. The governing precondition for any exchange of views about the nature of existence and truth—a process perfectly illustrated by Plato's Socratic dialogues—is that language allows us to disclose the true nature of pre-linguistic fact. However, for such an exchange to take place at all each participant must submit to an impersonal system of rules and conventions. Before any disagreement regarding a fact or a principle can occur the combatants must first have agreed upon the relation between the fact/principle and its linguistic enactment. An atheist and a Christian will have totally divergent perceptions of the nature of human existence, but both will know what the word 'God' means.

The twentieth-century alternative to Aristotle's and Plato's distinction between *dianoia/pragmata* and *lexis/taxis* has been provided by Ferdinand de Saussure, a turn-of-the-century linguist whose influence upon modern ideas about language and reality has become immeasurable. Saussure's most quoted and influential propositions concern his distinction between the signified and the signifier and his pronouncement that 'in language there are only differences without positive terms'. The signifier is the concrete linguistic sign, spoken or written, and the signified is the concept represented by the sign. A third element is the referent, the pre-linguistic object or condition that stands beyond the signifiersignified relationship. This tripartate function is, to say the least, unsteady. The atheist and the Christian will share a largely identical conception of the relation between 'God' (signifier) and 'God' (signified) but the atheist will regard this as a purely linguistic state, a fiction sustained by language, but without a referent. For such an individual the signifier God relates not to a specific signified and referent, but to other signifiers and signifieds—concepts of good and bad, eternity, omniscience, omnipotence, the whole network of signs which enables

Christian belief to intersect with other elements of the human condition. In Saussure's terms, the signified 'God' is sustained by the differential relationship between itself and other words and concepts, and this will override its correspondence with a 'positive term' (the referent). Plato and Aristotle shared the premise that it is dangerous and immoral to talk about something that does not exist, and that it is the duty of the philosopher to disclose such improper fissures between language and its referent. Saussure's model of language poses a threat to this ideal by raising the possibility that facts and thoughts might, to an extent, be constructs of the system of language.

The relation between classical philosophy/rhetoric and Saussurean linguistics is far more complicated than my brief comparison might suggest, but it is certain that Saussure makes explicit elements of the divisive issue of whether rhetoric is a potentially dangerous practice. And this leads us to a second problem: the relationship between language and literature. Plato in *The Republic* has much to say about literature—which at the time consisted of poetry in its dramatic or narrative forms. In Book 10 an exchange takes place regarding the nature of imitation and representation: the subject is ostensibly art, but the originary motive is as usual the determining of the nature of truth. By the end of the dialogue Socrates has established a parallel hierarchy of media and physical activities. The carpenter makes the actual bed, but the idea or concept behind this act of creation is God's. The painter is placed at the next stage down in this creative hierarchy: he can observe the carpenter making the bed and dutifully record this process. The poet, it seems, exists in a somewhat ambiguous relation to this column of originators, makers and imitators.

Perhaps they [poets] may have come across imitators and been deceived by them; they may not have remembered when they saw their works that these were but imitations thrice removed from the truth, and could easily be made without any knowledge of the

truth, because they are appearances only and not realities.

(1888:312)

In short, the poet is capable of unsettling the hierarchy which sustains the clear relation between appearance and reality. Poets, as Aristotle and Plato recognized, are pure rhetoricians: they work within a kind of metalanguage which draws continuously upon the devices of rhetoric but which is not primarily involved in the practical activities of argument and persuasion. As the above quote suggests, they move disconcertingly through the various levels of creation, imitation and deception, and as Plato made clear, such fickle mediators were not the most welcome inhabitants in a Republic founded upon a clear and unitary correspondence between appearance and reality.

Plato's designation of literature as a form which feeds upon the devices of more practical and purposive linguistic discourses, but whose function beyond a form of whimsical diversion is uncertain, has for two millenia been widely debated but has remained the dominant thesis. During the English Renaissance there was an outpouring of largely practical books on the proper use of rhetoric and rhetorical devices: for example R.Sherry's *A Treatise of Schemes and Tropes* (1550), T.Wilson's *The Arte of Rhetorique* (1553), R.Rainolde's *A Book Called the Foundation of Rhetorike* (1563), H.Peacham's *The Garden of Eloquence* (1577) and G.Puttenham's *The Arte of English Poesie* (1589). These were aimed at users of literary and non-literary language, but a distinction was frequently made between the literary and the non-literary *function* of rhetoric. In George Puttenham's *The Arte of English Poesie* we find that there are specific regulations regarding the correspondence between literary style and subject (derived chiefly from Cicero's distinction between the grand style, the middle style and the low, plain or simple style). The crossing of recommended style-subject borders was regarded as bad writing, but a far more serious offence would be committed

if the most extravagant rhetorical, and by implication literary, devices were transplanted into the serious realms of non-literary exchange. Metaphors or 'figures' are, according to Puttenham, particularly dangerous. 'For what else is your *Metaphor* but an inversion of sense by transport; your *allegorie* by a duplicite of meaning or dissimulation under covert and darke intendments' (1589:158). Judges, for example, forbid such extravagances because they distort the truth:

This no doubt is true and was by then gravely considered; but in this case, because our maker or Poet is appointed not for a judge, but rather for a pleader, and that of pleasant and lovely causes and nothing perillous, such as be for the triall of life, limme, or livelihood...they [extravagant metaphors] are not in truth to be accompted vices but for vertues in the poetical science very commendable.

(ibid.: 161)

Poetry does of course involve 'perillous' matters, but what Puttenham means is that the poetic function is not instrumental in activities concerned with actual 'life, limme, or livelihood'. As a spokesman for the Renaissance consensus Puttenham shows that the Plato/Aristotle debate regarding the dangers of rhetoric, especially in its literary manifestation, has been shelved rather than resolved: in short, Puttenham argues that in literature it is permissible to distort reality because literature is safely detached from the type of discourse that might have some purposive effect upon the real conditions of its participants. What Puttenham said in 1589 remains true today: literary and non-literary texts might share a number of stylistic features but literary texts do not belong in the same category of functional, purposive language as the judicial ruling or the theological tract. This begs a question which modern stylistics, far more than rhetoric, has sought to address. How do we judge the difference between literary and non-literary discourses? We



have not finished with rhetoric, but in order to properly consider the two issues raised by it—the relation between language and non-linguistic reality and the difference between literary and non-literary texts—we should now begin to examine its far more slippery and eclectic modern counterpart.