



Sizing Up Rhetoric, David Zarefsky and Elizabeth Benacka, eds.

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David Gold's book makes an important contribution to the field of rhetoric and composition studies because it exposes and examines rhetorical education in understudied college settings and highlights the work of scholar-teachers committed to providing their charges with essential language skills. *Rhetoric at the Margins* leads us to consider more carefully the historical significance of instruction in diverse institutions among a wide range of learners and reminds us that conservative methods and radical aims frequently coexist.

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David Zarefsky and Elizabeth Benacka, eds. *Sizing Up Rhetoric*. Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 2008. iii–vi + 442 pages. \$37.95 paperback.

Sizing Up Rhetoric is a collection of thirty papers from the 2006 biennial conference of the Rhetoric Society of America, held in Memphis that May. As such, it presents a challenge for the book reviewer. It lacks the singular voice and sustained argument of most academic monographs, but it also lacks the thematic or topical coherence of most edited collections. In addition, although several of the pieces have been expanded, most still betray their origins as twenty-minute conference papers and are thus more prospective than conclusive, suggestive than definitive. In short, this is a loose collection of relatively brief papers on a wide range of topics, organized into a handful of somewhat arbitrary categories and tied together mainly by the fact that all were presented, in earlier form, at the 2006 meeting of the RSA.

Of what value is such a volume? Well, for one thing, it provides a snapshot of North American rhetorical studies in the early twenty-first century. It offers heartening evidence, for example, that the supposed tension between the two main camps of the field, what Robert Connors used to call “speech-rhetoric” and “composition-rhetoric,” has either finally dissipated or was exaggerated in the first place. The papers are evenly distributed across “comm” and “comp”—with fifteen authors (including the editors) associated with the former discipline, seventeen with the latter, and three with neither (all, incidentally, from institutions outside the United States). But more interesting than the equal disciplinary breakdown of these pieces, which could have been designed by the editors, was the fact that, for me at least, it was almost impossible to tell, when reading one or

another of these pieces, what the disciplinary location of its author was, something that I do not believe would have been true even ten years ago. That doesn't mean that there aren't still significant differences between the two camps (especially in teaching) but in actual *scholarly* performance, they seem now almost indistinguishable from each other.

There's also little overt anxiety about rhetoric itself in these pages. Questions about the field's status, location, and "size," which led to so much handwringing in the 1980s and 90s, are almost entirely absent here. This suggests to me that over the last generation or so, and partly through the efforts of RSA itself, we have built together a genuine "interdiscipline," focused on rhetorical study and characterized by neither undue self-importance nor excessive modesty. And it suggests to me as well that younger scholars in the field, well represented in this volume, have left off the navel-gazing of so many rhetoricians at the end of the twentieth century, including this reviewer, in favor of simply getting down to work.

And what kind of work is that? If *Sizing Up Rhetoric* is indicative, our work is primarily interpretive. Most of the papers collected here are case studies of particular texts, analyses of specific speeches, debates, books, pamphlets, advertisements, essays, and other cultural artifacts. Sometimes, as in David Bailey's analysis of David Walker's nineteenth-century *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World* or Lisa Storm Villadsen's study of Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen's 2005 official apology for the Danish government's treatment of Jewish refugees during World War II, the focus is a single text. Other times, as in Leslie Hahner's analysis of late nineteenth-century antivice literature or J. Blake Scott's study of the contemporary HIV prevention policy debate, it's a number of related texts. But regardless of how many texts are analyzed, these are almost all critical studies, hermeneutic in orientation and particular in focus. To be sure, there are a couple of pedagogical pieces here, two "lit reviews" (one on visual rhetoric, another on legal rhetoric), and a few essays of other types. But the vast majority of the papers in this volume, nearly three-quarters by my count, are rhetorical readings of texts.

What kinds of texts? In addition to those just mentioned, there are studies of the speeches delivered at the funeral of Ronald Reagan, the language surrounding the 1990s citizens' militia movement, the evacuation speeches that preceded Hurricane Katrina, the documents involved in the 2005 TOPOFF 3 bioterror-preparedness drill, medical journals from the Progressive Era, an eighteenth-century German religious text by Jewish philosopher Moses Mendelssohn, debates and TV advertisements from the 2004 US presidential campaign, the second-century Latin *Apologia* of Apuleius, the medieval *Dialogue* of Catherine of Siena, and post-1989 symbolic representations of national identity in Poland.

Most of these artifacts are clearly *public* in nature: officially sanctioned, widely circulated, of general import. When rhetoricians read, in other words, it's the language of power that we train our sights on: the discourses of politicians, priests, doctors, bureaucrats, reformers, philosophers, and teachers. Still, I was somewhat surprised at the lack of counterpublic voices and vernacular texts. The attitude of the analyst is often critical here, even subversive, but the focus of criticism is almost always the texts of elite speakers and writers.

Finally, the texts analyzed here are read primarily through the lens of classical rhetoric. The authors use a critical language sharpened, that is, by such tools as the elements of the speech situation (speaker, audience, and subject matter), the topics of argument, the figures of style, the appeals of persuasion (*ethos/pathos/logos*), and the genres of public discourse. Concerning the last, a particularly striking feature of these papers is the prominence of the epideictic, of public speaking and writing that is not explicitly argumentative, that assumes and affirms values and positions rather than overtly deliberating, debating, or arguing them. One epideictic genre that gets surprising play here, for example, is the eulogy: The volume opens with speeches from Ronald Reagan's 2004 funeral and closes with a memorial address for Wayne Booth. In between, there are several discussions of eulogistic and related discourses, including an essay by Beth Hewett on the eulogy as a genre. Other texts studied here also feature death, or the threat of death, as a topos: for example, hurricane evacuation addresses ("If you're going to stay, then go get a toe-tag so afterwards we can identify your body" [202]) and bioterror-drill documents. It's as if the art of rhetoric has become, in our time, the way we deal with death in political contexts.

In short, my reading of this collection suggests to me that the interdiscipline of rhetorical studies in the early twenty-first century is, for the most part, oriented to the analysis (rather than production) of spoken and written texts; it is, for the most part, focused on *public* discourse (that is, the language of political and cultural elites); and it is, for the most part, driven by the terminology and ideology of "classical" rhetorical theory.

If all that sounds rather conservative, it is. The field of study presented in these pages, I would argue, is deeply indebted to tradition. At worst, that tradition leads us down well-traveled paths into overly familiar and sometimes simply uninteresting territory. After all, how many more appreciations of Kenneth Burke do we really need? And what do we learn of importance by analyzing the early agricultural addresses of President Eisenhower? The tradition can also, apparently, keep us from fully engaging the "here and now" of contemporary human communication. I was surprised, for example, by the lack of interest exhibited here in digital rhetorics and the paucity of work on intercultural and international communication.

At its best, though, the tradition is deployed here in ways that powerfully illuminate our rhetorical past, present, and future. Take, for example, Kirt Wilson's fascinating look at the role of sentimentality in commemorations of the US civil rights movement. He examines, among other events and artifacts, a 1996 episode of the *Oprah Winfrey Show* in which surviving members of the 1957 Little Rock Nine are brought together with some of their former tormentors. But rather than use the occasion as an opportunity for blacks to "speak truth to power," or for Americans of all races to confront one another through critical deliberative rhetoric, Oprah stages therapeutic moments in which individual whites are given the chance to apologize to individual blacks. In this way, through sentimentality and emotion rather than open discussion and debate, we embrace the civil rights movement while avoiding its toughest questions. Winfrey helps create here, in other words, "an ideal black audience that always offers whites forgiveness for the wrongs of the past in return for an affective state that diminishes but does not fully remove the pain, anger, hate, and despair so frequently produced by racism." And she thus helps encourage in our relations with one another a "decorum" that excludes disruptive acts, enabling "an increasingly anemic public discourse that celebrates the movement but only with language and styles that reinforce its death" (23).

Similarly, Stephen A. Klien, in the paper here that comes closest to social science, bemoans the way the 2004 US presidential campaign failed to provide American voters "with a clear, direct debate on the issues that they could use to deliberate, judge, and act on in a prudent, informed way" (194). In a study of television advertising by the two major candidates that year, Klien shows how the discourses surrounding the election, especially those concerning the war in Iraq, were dominated by emotional rather than logical appeals and favored simplification over complexity, all of which, he argues, gave the conservative candidate, George W. Bush, an edge.

Likewise, Lisa Keränen's detailed study of the language surrounding the TOPOFF 3 bioterror-preparedness drill in 2005 shows how the government uses vivid appeals to an apocalyptic future involving biological and chemical weapon attacks to incite fear and anxiety in the public, even though the Department of Defense has concluded that conventional terrorism is far more likely, and deadly, than chemical or biological terrorism and even though fifty years of research on disasters has called into question the "trope of the panicked public" in times of crisis (239).

In each case, these authors suggest, we are victimized by a public discourse that serves us poorly. We are enchanted by sympathy, seduced by simplification, incited by fear—even though in every case we would do better to turn from such irrational appeals and deliberate, honestly and openly, about the issues that most

concern us. In fact, if there's a common topic that weaves in and out of this volume, it's the failure of our political leaders and institutions to, in Klien's words, "encourage critical public discourse on policy issues . . . to provide the 'respectful discourse'—a discourse tolerant of ambiguity and complexity—that a 'mature democracy' requires" (197).

If eloquence is "wisdom speaking," in other words, why is such eloquence so often unpersuasive? Why do our political judgments, made amidst historically unprecedented amounts of information and open political debate, seem so often unwise? And why is the opposite of "wisdom speaking"—demagoguery, sentimentality, irrationality—still so appealing to us? To paraphrase the title of a book much-discussed among liberals since 2004 and cited in at least one of the papers collected here, *What's the Matter with the United States?*

The working out of this and related questions may well be the central rhetorical task of our time, when the triumph of modernity is tempered by a surge in medievalism, when increasing integration is met with increasing fragmentation, when the rise of secular culture happens alongside growth in religious fundamentalism, when the spread of peace and prosperity co-occurs with the persistence of violence and terror.

Still, if some of the authors here seem depressed by the failure of eloquence in our time, others are more open to a kind of rhetorical realism, an acceptance (even celebration) of the way rhetoric has always been about the mind *in* the body, the body *in* the mind; about the character of logic and the logic of character; about the self in society and society in the self. So rather than construct a binary in which good rhetoric is opposed to bad, reason to emotion, complexity to simplification, critique to sentimentality, deliberative to epideictic discourse, they ask us to imagine rhetorical arts that fuse or at least toggle back and forth between these poles.

In a piece that could almost be seen as the obverse of Klien's essay, Marc Santos also analyzes the "failure" of rhetoric in the 2004 US presidential election, though he arrives at a very different conclusion. Like Klien, he admits that on almost every score John Kerry out-argued George Bush and that the Democrat's speeches and debate performances were "textbook examples of classical oratorical deliberative performance" (173). But rather than give in to the "elitism of the condescending, cosmopolitan liberal," Santos asks us to try to understand why, again and again, we rhetoricians underestimate the power of "ethical rhetoric" and the "epideictic encounters" in which speaker and audience come together to craft "an affective temporal coexistence, a dynamic, mutually constituting exchange" that precedes truth and logic, and on which they depend (177).

Similarly, Patricia Bizzell, in a study of Moses Mendelssohn's *Jerusalem*, shows the extent to which religious belief and political justification are not opposites but

twins, both subject to probabilistic reason and emotion-laden interpersonal warrants. Likewise, D. J. Mulloy, in a penetrating look at the discourses surrounding the American militia movement of the 1980s and 90s, asks us to see violence not as the antithesis of US civic republicanism, with its “covenanted patriotism” based on the promises of the Declaration of Independence (“that all men are created equal,” and so forth), but as, in fact, “its primitive and bloody side” (210).

So, we are back with Aristotle and his claim that rhetorical art is irreducible and multiform, that it involves, at once, appeals to *logos*, *pathos*, and *ethos*, that it shows up in deliberative, forensic, and epideictic genres, that these things mix and mingle in complex ways, and that we humans are neither beasts nor angels but something in between. And we are back as well with Cicero, who shows up in Craig Smith’s study of Apuleius’ *Apologia*, for which he serves as a model of the nearly inexpressible synthesis of *logos* and *ethos*, argument and character, thought and style, plan and occasion, seriousness and humor in eloquence.

Oddly enough, Cicero shows up at the end of this volume, too, in a paper by Antonio Raul de Velasco, in which the orator is paired with bell hooks, the two articulating together an eloquence made up of equal parts decorum and transgression, with rhetoric not simply a way of knowing language but “a way of being and acting in the world,” in which “normativities are circulated and enforced” even as they are contravened (396). Through such a practice, de Velasco writes, the self is fashioned, and community edified.

Cicero and bell hooks? Only a rhetorician would dream that one up.

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David P. Domke and Kevin Coe. *The God Strategy: How Religion Became a Political Weapon in America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008. 3 + 220 pages. \$30.00 hardcover.

The God Strategy emphasizes the prominent role that God and faith have had in US political discourse from the founding of the nation until the present. To document the growth and intensity of religious references in political discourse, the authors analyze campaign speeches, presidential addresses, party platforms, and presidential proclamations. Domke and Coe’s study builds upon existing