

BUCKNELL REVIEW

Rhetoric, Literature,  
and Interpretation

Edited by  
HARRY R. GARVIN

BUCKNELL REVIEW

# **Rhetoric, Literature, and Interpretation**

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BUCKNELL REVIEW is a scholarly interdisciplinary journal. Each issue is devoted to a major theme or movement in the humanities or sciences, or to two or three closely related topics. The editors invite heterodox, orthodox, and speculative ideas and welcome manuscripts from any enterprising scholar in the humanities and sciences.

BUCKNELL REVIEW

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HARRY R. GARVIN

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# Introduction

Since antiquity, critics of literature have been searching to understand what they do when they practice their craft, art, or game. They find criticism torn in inescapable dichotomies: theory and practice, understanding and evaluation, description and analysis, instruction and entertainment, rhetoric and interpretation. Dichotomies like these suggest roles and functions for the critic, but they leave the nature of the critic in doubt. In what way can critics exist in their own right when challenged by all the ancillary functions that enter into criticism: those of the teacher, mystic, philologist, historian, philosopher, moralist, not to mention the most powerful challengers, the rhetorician and the literary artist? The critic's role must often be defined in relation to one or more of such roles as these, in opposition or cooperation or in some more complex relationship. This issue of *Bucknell Review* singles out one pair of oppositions that define the role of the critic, interpretation and rhetoric, and presents three groups of essays to illustrate the problems critics face when they adopt one side of this dichotomy as a starting premise, the ingenious strategies they may employ to exploit and justify that initial premise, and the consequences of attempting a resolution of the dichotomy. Each set of essays contains contributions that explore a particular critical theory or practice or both; all seek to illustrate particular approaches and to delineate their limiting features.

The first set of essays investigates criticisms that start out as interpretations of literature, attempts to derive or create hitherto unrealized meanings in literary works. In his essay on Milton, Mary Shelley, and patriarchy, Burton Hatlen attempts to recover a revolutionary content in both *Paradise Lost* and *Frankenstein* by reading the works in conjunction. Traditionalist critics, he argues, have seen in the works traces of the mythos of a dominating patriarch creator. Hatlen, however, maintains that the signs in *Frankenstein* point in a different direction, to-

ward a mythos of creativity with a nonmale creator. Such a mythic content, he adds, better fits the revolutionary context of Milton and Mary Shelley and illuminates her creative process and critical reading of Milton.

In an essay that deals with literary and critical theory rather than practice, Algis Mickunas discusses recent developments in hermeneutics. After tracing briefly the history of that term's use before Hans-Georg Gadamer, he assesses Gadamer's achievement. First, Mickunas distinguishes Gadamer's "hermeneutics" from the "apophantics" of Martin Heidegger. Heidegger attempts to attain understanding by extracting an expression from the context within which it functions; hermeneutics, for Gadamer, attempts to understand the context. Such an understanding of context depends upon linguistic understanding—thereby gaining insight into the presuppositions imbedded in language—and upon understanding the historical tradition that has produced that language. "Human understanding is immersed in a historically effective consciousness."

The problem of the nature of the knowledge that gives such an understanding exercises the successors of Gadamer, who denied the validity or effectiveness of science without linguistic understanding; for he and his successors asserted that science cannot attain knowledge about itself. Erich Heintel explores more closely the dominating role that the technological model of the explanatory sciences adopts and argues for a more humanistic hermeneutic that, unlike the scientific, allows hermeneutics to understand itself. Karl-Otto Apel searches for a model of a domain of mediation between the scientific and humanistic approaches and suggests the encounter of Western technology and pretechnical societies where differing hermeneutical traditions come into conflict. Otto Poeggeler goes a step further by integrating a technological hermeneutical model within the humanistic through the use of his "mantic phenomenology." Finally, however, Poeggeler is still left with the need for a mediator and reverts to the image of Hermes, the founding conception and eponym of hermeneutics, the god that translates divine edicts into human language.

Marylin Arthur sets out to explore one kind of psychoanalytic interpretation of literature, the application of the Narcissus motif, the self-reflexive project of male identity to recover itself as presence. Allied with the doubled presence of Narcissus lies

thoughts "on man, the heart of man, and human life" into an aesthetic form, "a history / Homely and rude . . . / For the delight of a few natural hearts" (ll. 33, 35–36) and also as an inspiration for young poets who will inherit his role as local bard. But his accounts do not balance. He shows us a man who has led an exemplary life crushed by unmotivated and unmerited catastrophe; if we are left to conclude that it teaches the ennobling of man by nature and his corruption in the city, then the poem is crudely sentimental, extracting a surplus of feeling from a minimal significance, a trite contrast. There is a distance between the narrator and his subject, Michael, that is more than temporal. It is the aesthetic distance between the poet and his poem, which projects a cold calculation of response rather than the expression of fellow-feeling that one would expect of a local poet; he separates himself from the shepherds, "men / Whom I already loved;—not verily / For their own sakes, but for the fields and hills / Where was their occupation and abode" (ll. 23–26), and slants his narration "for the sake / Of youthful Poets, who among these hills / Will be my second self when I am gone" (ll. 37–39).

Whatever Wordsworth's original intention may have been, the pragmatic form of "Michael," as a sentimental tale of rural misfortune, elicited the immediate response the narrator expected of his listener, a response Wordsworth himself noted with pride: "This poem has, I know, drawn tears from the eyes of more than one, persons well acquainted with the manners of the 'Statesmen,' as they are called, of this country; and, moreover, persons who never wept, in reading verse, before." His conclusion is revealing: "This is a favourable augury for me."<sup>25</sup> Perhaps it was, but not for the poem, doomed to a reading as a sentimental document of romantic feeling.

The modern reader, however, senses a strength in the poem that lifts it out of its institutionalized interpretation and undermines the dominance of its pragmatic form. The three forms of rhetorical discourse, the pragmatic, the syntactic, and the semantic, solicit different modes of assent from the reader.<sup>26</sup> The only assent required for a pragmatic structure is one of attention or recognition: "That's what X says to Y," for example. No judgments are required because the statements are speech-acts in specific contexts. Syntactic statements appear in the context of a closed system of signs, a semiotic, in which all signs are interpreted through other signs. Here the response of assent is

Daniel Stempel's essay examines one kind of underpinning of the New Formalism, the critical approach rooted in the use of structural linguistics or its analogues, which adopts paradigms from the physical, biological, and human sciences. Structuralists can assume the linking of the languages of literature and economics. Two contemporary critics, Marc Shell and Kurt Heintzelman, have argued that the discourse of literature and economics intersects in common elementary constituents: metaphorical exchanges. This assumption permits them a formal procedure for criticizing a wide range of texts. Stempel, too, argues for an "economic" reading of texts, but his method transcends a simplistic, ahistorical formalism by positing the need to search for imaginative constitutive paradigms. These paradigms fulfill rhetoric's need for some kind of formalism. Stempel attempts to focus on these paradigms in isolation from the other feature of rhetoric, concern with language that calls attention to itself, by devoting the second part of his essay to an examination of Wordsworth's "Michael: A Pastoral Poem," a work written in ordinary language stripped of metaphor. Stempel's concluding section shows the limitations of applying Shell and Heintzelman's economic readings to Marxist and other contemporary texts for which the method might seem well suited. The rhetorical formalism to which they aspire cannot deal with the immediacies of the language and paradigms of such texts.

Robert Wess considers a somewhat similar kind of question, as he discusses Louis Althusser's revisions in the understanding of Marx's thought. He focuses on the concept of totality which Althusser opposes to that of economism, "a misreading of Marx inspired by Hegelian dialectic." The simplistic formalism of base and superstructure that economism postulates leads to a reductionistic method of textual analysis through the ideologies that are assumed to derive mechanistically from the economic base. Wess focuses on the term *ideology* as the bridge in this argument. He traces the development of the term in the thought of Althusser, his sources, and his commentators, especially Antonio Gramsci and Fredric Jameson. Wess sees the core of the problem of ideology as its nature: is it a kind of physical entity, as traditional Marxism postulates, and thus the subject of science, or something else, a proper subject for humanistic study? Althusser finds both extreme positions untenable and hence seeks to locate ideology in the problematic of

signification. Here, ideology becomes a “symbolic action with persuasive power in concrete social and economic situations.” Ideology, in other words, is a form of rhetoric and needs to be treated accordingly.

The theory—and practice—of interpretation can be derived from disciplines ancillary or alien to literary criticism; interpretations may be sweeping and general or individual and tailored to the demands of a particular work. An interpretation balanced between the sweeping and the particular, the literary and the nonliterary, is hard to attain. The interpreter is concerned always with the range, power, and applicability of interpretation. On the other hand, the rhetorical critic tends to be limited by the power of structures and rules of language and warned away from sweeping, open-ended readings of literary texts. It is not surprising, therefore, that, to attain depth and sensitiveness, critics resort to a combination of often contradictory methods of reading. The two final essays in this issue illustrate how rhetorical and interpretative approaches may interact, in harmony or conflict.

Daniel O'Hara is concerned with the tendency of deconstructionist critics to identify “onto-theological traditions” at work in the texts they study and to master the discourse of these texts by this identification. Any idea of a self—author or reader—becomes a fiction in such readings; the critic's reading is needed to make a text clear and whole. But, as Paul de Man argued, the critic's reading, too, becomes a text to deconstruct in its own right. To avoid infinite regression, deconstructionists resort to “irony”: “preliminary sketches for a parodic interpretation of the critic” that privilege the critic's position.

To get around this regression, O'Hara uses *Women in Love* to demonstrate a position that combines interpretative and rhetorical elements. He shows how Lawrence in that work anticipates the position Michel Foucault developed in his analysis of sexuality as a complex round of pleasure-knowledge-power. Lawrence invents the discourse of human sexuality and also seeks to evade that discourse by making sex sacred and unnameable. Exploring the consequences for criticism of this irony in Lawrence's text, O'Hara argues that it is not an exclusively linguistic phenomenon. Lawrence, he argues, leaves himself a true “nothing,” a randomness that possesses the same kind of power as death.

The final paper takes up a topic that appears to belong to the

area of rhetoric, but it develops an interpretative approach by elucidating for a reader the effect of a text. Michael Hancher analyzes the madness in *Through the Looking-Glass* by examining the pragmatics of the conversations in that work, starting from the approaches of J. L. Austin and John Searle but presenting also the approaches of other scholars who have applied pragmatics and speech-act theory to literary texts. Hancher is able to show how Carroll's characters manipulate Alice and how Alice learns to ignore or circumvent the unfamiliar devices of the characters she encounters. Hancher's discussion is essentially rhetorical, in its insistence on study of the linguistic text through formal structures. But this study helps to convey to the reader a sense of the real-life situations imbedded in the text and hence a sense of the author's motives and strategies. Ultimately, Hancher argues, this insight begins to make clear the meaning of that elusive literary term *tone*.

The editors hope that the essays of this issue of *Bucknell Review* contribute some light to the ongoing struggles of critics to elucidate literature and to analyze their elucidations.

James M. Heath  
Associate Editor

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