

‘Rhet’ric languish’d on the ground’:

New Rhetoric and Rhetors’ Self-Criticism in the Early Eighteenth Century*

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Writers of the first half of the long eighteenth century are absent from the history of the decline of rhetoric. Some critics, including Walter Ong, suggest the decline began during this period, but they do not paint a clear picture of this decline.¹ Other scholars of rhetoric interpret this period as the age of elocutionary movement, whose definition varies according to the theorist. Wilbur Samuel Howell, on the one hand, claims proponents of the movement regarded rhetoric as the art of public speaking,² while on the other, Paul Bator and Jacqueline George believe they viewed rhetoric as the art of reading.³ While they agree that this movement transformed the technique of traditional rhetoric, the focus of their interpretations differs. However critics define rhetoric, the writers they often cite in support of their arguments are those of the second half of the century such as Adam Smith and Richard Sheridan. These rhetoricians were constant in their critical attitude toward the classics — to cease believing in ancient rhetors and refine their literary legacy. At the same time, it cannot be denied that their advanced intention ignored the premise that rhetoric had survived because of their predecessors’ inheritance of the classics. After all, the qualitative change

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¹ Walter Ong hints that rhetoric as the symbol of oral culture gradually declined by the age of romanticism. See Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London; New York, NY: Methuen, 1982), p. 26, 116.

² Wilbur Samuel Howell, *Eighteenth-Century British Logic and Rhetoric* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1971). Although Howell in fact sees the publication of anonymous *Action Proper for the Pulpit* in 1753 as the beginning of the elocutionary movement, he also introduces some rhetoricians before this. His detailed discussion on them, however, does not seem to cover the general nature of this movement.

³ Paul G. Bator, ‘Rhetoric and the Novel in the Eighteenth-Century British University Curriculum’, *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 30 (1996/1997), 173-95. Bator does not use the term ‘elocutionary movement’ in this essay, but insists that the appearance of novels in university education turned rhetoric into fiction-reading skills, mainly referring to Hugh Blair and Adam Smith. See also Jacqueline George, ‘Public Reading and Lyric Pleasure: Eighteenth-Century Elocutionary Debates and Poetic Practice’, *Journal of English Literary History*, 76. 2 (2009), 371-97.

which undermined rhetorical tradition was certainly occurring in rhetoric at that time, but rhetoricians of the first half of the century did not occupy any specific place in this process. As it is unreasonable to assume that the decay of rhetoric suddenly began in the latter half of the eighteenth century, this paper aims to reveal the common interests of rhetoricians of the early eighteenth century.

Rhetoricians in early eighteenth century Europe faced an adversity which shook their literary foundation. Those who were sensitive to their own language must have felt certain anxiety that it would undergo a drastic change. They keenly perceived that the change in language would endanger their literacy based on rhetoric. It was not easy to guess their perplexity at this situation, as few had raised any serious doubts about eloquence. Giambattista Vico, an Italian professor of rhetoric, shared his anxiety about language. In his keynote address to first-year students of the University of Naples Federico II, he speaks with dissatisfaction of the crisis of rhetoric:

In our days, instead, philosophical criticism alone is honoured. The art of ‘topics,’ far from being given first place in the curriculum, is utterly disregarded. Again I say, this is harmful, since the invention of arguments is by nature prior to the judgement of their validity, so that, in teaching, that invention should be given priority over philosophical criticism. ... Nature and life are full of incertitude; the foremost, indeed, the only aim of our ‘arts’ is to assure us that we have acted rightly. Criticism is the art of true speech: ‘*ars topica*,’ of eloquence.⁴

In speaking of ‘philosophical criticism,’ he is alluding to René Descartes, whose methodological scepticism he describes as harmful to common sense and art. Cartesians warn that rhetorical language is a mere ornament that obscures truth, treating elocution lightly and regarding it at best as a talent of one’s own.⁵ For Vico, however, Cartesians seem to place so much emphasis on the scientific pursuit of truth that they underestimate the ‘*ars topica*’ or the verbal art of inventing any discourse, which is also vital for science. He is sure that elocution has priority over philosophy because the abilities fostered by the former, such as imagination and memory, are crucial for the latter. His audience, then, would understand that he was

⁴ Giambattista Vico, *On the Study Methods of Our Time*, trans. and introd. by Elio Gianturco (Ithaca, NY; London: Cornell University Press, 1990), pp. 14-15. In the preface by Donald Phillip Verene, he shows Vico, in his autobiography, expressing strong opposition to *méthode*, which Descartes provides in his *Discours de la Méthode*.

⁵ René Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, trans by Elizabeth S. Haldane and G. R. T. Ross, in *Discourse on Method and Meditations* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2003), pp. 3-52 (p. 7).

earnestly arguing against attacks upon rhetoric, and possibly that Descartes was typical of these imaginary enemies who aroused the anxiety of rhetoricians. His acute sense of crisis in this speech demonstrates the difficulties of his contemporaries.

In the case of England, the anti-rhetoricians appeared in the context of language reformations of that period. Just as Cartesians thought that the truth was veiled with flowery language, the English language reformers were more specific and regarded heavy accents, foreign words, inkhorn words, as well as puzzling tropes to be problematic barriers to communication. They ascribed the corruption of language to these verbal barriers and struggled to remove them so that English might become current throughout England. In fact, this idea of corrupt English acted as an intermediary between Samuel Johnson and the Fourth Earl of Chesterfield, although their relationship unfortunately broke down owing to Johnson's *Dictionary*, which was first conceived as a means to reform the language.⁶ As suggested in *The Plan of a Dictionary of the English Language*, what prompted Johnson to compile the dictionary were inconveniences in word construction, phraseology, and word definition, as well as those in orthography and pronunciation.⁷ The English of his time seemed so corrupt to him that he described the language situation of England as 'almost madness to invade.'⁸ Sharing Johnson's view of contemporary language corruption, Lord Chesterfield belatedly wrote a letter offering his patronage soon after the publication of the dictionary. Thus, Johnson and Lord Chesterfield apparently shared in the interests of intellectuals in eighteenth century England. Communication failure in English, they believed, would mean their country divided into certain regions, communities, and social classes due to troubles with the native tongue. This was sufficient motive for those who had experienced the social disorder triggered by the two revolutions of the previous century to set in motion a language reformation. To unify the disjointed country or rather to make English generally accepted

⁶ As Jack Lynch suggests in the introduction to Johnson's *Dictionary*, Johnson did not intend to be an authoritarian in terms of his achievement as a lexicographer. He certainly hoped to reform pronunciation of English and to correct grammar when he proposed the plan for the dictionary in 1747; but he wanted rather to record words as they were used than to adjust the language at the publication in 1754.

⁷ Samuel Johnson, *The Plan of a Dictionary of the English Language*, in *Samuel Johnson's Dictionary: Selections from the 1755 Work that Defined the English Language*, ed. by Jack Lynch (New York: Leveger Press, 2002), pp. 565-580.

⁸ Johnson, p. 579.

among the people, they had to devote themselves to removing the verbal barriers that hindered communication in English.⁹

To avoid jargon, and not to demand excessive precision — these were the contributions to the currency of English provided by The Royal Society of London for Improving Natural Knowledge, which was founded at the dawn of the long eighteenth century. Their attention to the style of discourse was closely linked to their mission to develop natural science. The main services provided by the early Society had been the collection of rarities from England and abroad, achievements that were realised not only by society members but also by external citizens. Whatever enterprises the Society engaged in, they, in effect, required the participation and assistance of amateurs. This is clear from a glance at the national project to survey longitude, which was supported by the Society and implemented using prize money, so that it succeeded in appealing to aspiring venturers and projectors for their ideas for the survey.¹⁰ The cooperation with ordinary citizens facilitated their duties, and simultaneously opened up scientific knowledge to the general public. It was also a matter of course that media to propagate science were simplified to expand the circles of lay scientists. The open door to science turned scholastic arguments used for ages in this field into experiment-based simple arguments that were effective in offering knowledge clearly to everybody.¹¹ In this transition of scientific discourse, persuasion based on sight questioned and replaced such verbal intricacy like jargon which often appeared as obstacles to amateur access to science. The requirement for the democratisation of science was the visual and simple presentation of its utility, not the insignificant wrangling about Aristotelian interpretations of an experiment.

⁹ Peter Burke argues that language reformers in eighteenth century England aimed to give spatial uniformity and temporal constancy to English. See Peter Burke, *Language and Communities in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004)

¹⁰ Larry Stewart handles the details of the longitude survey project in chapter 6 of *The Rise of Public Science*. See Larry Stewart, *The Rise of Public Science: Rhetoric, Technology, and Natural Philosophy in Newtonian Britain, 1660-1750* (Cambridge; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 183-211.

¹¹ According to Peter Dear, natural philosophers before the seventeenth century had basically depended on Aristotle to explain how the world behaved. Their task had been to construct an Aristotelian argument by ingeniously distorting a phenomenon to make it consistent with the Grecian authority. Scientists after the scientific revolution, however, criticised their predecessors for their blind belief in Aristotle, and instead proposed that they should work out a plain discourse upon an experiment. See the following article: Peter Dear, 'Totius in verba: Rhetoric and Authority in the Early Royal Society', *Isis*, 76 (1985), 144-61.

The distrust of words and stress upon visual clearness that underlay this new style of science are well epitomised in the Society's slogan, '*nullius in verba*.'

¹²

Another benefactor to people's better understanding of English was the Church of England, which contrived a simple style for its sermons. This adjustment in sermons was similar to that of scientific discourse mentioned above in that both of them aimed to clearly communicate the truth to people, but the former took on a deeper colour of anti-rhetoric than the latter. This was the case with John Tillotson, the Archbishop of Canterbury and fellow of the Royal Society. In his influential treatises upon preaching, he reiterated the simplicity and perspicuity of sermonic texts. So much divine power to awaken people to devotion lies, he insisted, in the lines of the Bible that clerics should preach the doctrine 'with so much simplicity and plainness,'¹³ and this religious view formed the theoretical basis for the so-called plain style. As O. C. Edwards, Jr. explains with a quotation from James Downey, Tillotson's sermons are logically composed without garnish and have few agitative elements such as perorations.¹⁴ This plain style laid down the formula for sermons preached by Anglican clerics in the first half of the eighteenth century. When one observes how Parson Yorick in *Tristram Shandy*, for instance, attacks embroidered orations and hopes to make his as simple as possible,¹⁵ one may discover that sermon writing in Tillotson's manner was handed down to posterity. This style is incompatible with flowery expressions, and it can be said that the inclination to stylistic plainness gradually marred *elocutio*.¹⁶ The fact that Anglican preachers came to view rhetoric as something to be trimmed would be welcomed in light of the improvement of English, but was, in contrast, simply a nightmare for rhetoricians. Although those who strived to reform the English language, whether secular or religious,

¹² Stewart, pp. 19-21.

¹³ John Tillotson, 'The Evidences of the Truth of the Christian Religion', in *The Works of the Most Reverend Dr. John Tillotson, Late Lord Archbishop of Canterbury in Ten Volumes*, 10 vols (Edinburgh; Glasgow, 1768), X, pp. 1-80 (p. 67).

¹⁴ O. C. Edwards, Jr., 'Varieties of Sermon: A Survey of Preaching in the Long Eighteenth Century', in *Preaching, Sermon and Cultural Change in the Long Eighteenth Century*, ed. by Joris Van Eijnatten (Leiden; Boston, MA: Brill, 2009), pp. 3-53 (p. 12).

¹⁵ Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, ed. by Ian Campbell Ross (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 254.

¹⁶ Rhetoric is the art of persuasion, which is composed of five steps: *inventio*, *dispositio*, *elocutio*, *actio* and *memoria*. Of these, *elocutio* contains various expressions of a text, such as tropes or figures, *inventio* is a technique for finding topics, *dispositio* for constructing a logical composition, *actio* for appropriate behaviour for oration, and *memoria* for arranging oration for recollection. Hereafter in this essay, 'rhetoric' refers to *elocutio* without a special reason.

were firmly persuaded that their project aimed to ensure communication in their native tongue, they appeared unconscious of the sacrifice of rhetorical conventions.

A brief examination of rhetorical treatises printed before the eighteenth century shows that their authors were bent on importing and preserving the ancient tradition of rhetoric on which these language reformers adopted a critical position. The main interest of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century rhetoricians was not to criticise figures and tropes, let alone to limit their use. Thomas Wilson's *The Arte of Rhetorique* published in 1553 will elucidate this trend. It covers the five branches of rhetoric exhaustively and assigns fewer pages to *elocutio* than to *inventio* and *dispositio*. Such a structure quite likely reflects Wilson's intention that *elocutio* is simply one of the ways to serve the original function of persuasion that is emphasised in the preface. Wilson continues to insist that discourse should be embellished in order to 'boldelye commende and beautifie oure talke wyth diuers goodly colours, and delitefull translations.'¹⁷ He does not focus upon the mental effects that exornation can produce, or rather his frequent references to Cicero demonstrate his devotion to Ciceronian rhetoric. He, confining his treatise within Ciceronian rhetoric, seeks to offer tropes and illustrations of them, by grafting the Ciceronian tradition onto the English language. Thus, Wilson would have no excuse for criticising or disregarding the authority of the Roman, which he thinks should be accepted without reserve. Such a 'positive' or uncritical attitude toward the classics of rhetoric was transmitted to Thomas Blount, a lexicographer of the seventeenth century. Unlike Wilson, who surveyed all fields of oratory, he seems to have composed *The Academie of Eloquence* as a series of instructions on tropes and figures. He provides explanations of them with ample examples, blindly believing in and borrowing the whole legacy of exornation. His concentration on rhetorical expressions never means expressly examining them in detail; but all that the contents of his treatise exhibit are his designs in composing a list of figures by relying on Demosthenes and Cicero.¹⁸ Blount is no exception to the rhetoricians who had appeared for approximately two centuries since the first

¹⁷ Thomas Wilson, *The Arte of Rhetorique*, introd. by Robert Hood Bowers (Gainesville, FL: Scholars' Facsimiles & Reprints, 1962), p. 191. Thomas Wilson (ca. 1523-81) is a humanist and politician. *The Arte of Rhetorique*, a counterpart of his *The Rvle of Reason*, depends on Ciceronian rhetoric and was published in 1553.

¹⁸ Thomas Blount was wholly devoted to these two rhetoricians to such a degree that he inserted their portraits in the frontispiece of *The Academie of Eloquence*. See Thomas Blount, *The Academie of Eloquence* (London, 1654), p. ii.

treatise upon English rhetoric was published,¹⁹ for their duty could be to make rhetoric accessible and available to English-speaking peoples. To fulfil this objective, it was of the utmost importance for rhetoricians to thoroughly immerse themselves in the rhetorical tradition, and such a critical approach to rhetoric as that adopted by eighteenth century rhetoricians would ruin their plan.

Yielding to the pressure of perspicuous style, or as though sympathising more or less with the language reformation movements of the eighteenth century, contemporary rhetoricians dealt with tropes and figures with a great deal of prudence and hesitation. They not only offered the rhetorical apparatus but drew readers' attention to its drastic effect upon the mind.²⁰ It is certain that rhetoric has been designed in order for an orator to evoke responses from his/her audience, yet no thorough inquiries had yet been made into the functions of the figurative language itself. Hence, what chiefly occupied them was the relationship between tropes and the person rather than that between a rhetor and the audience. The mental impact of tropes is evidence that both vindicates and censures embellishment. In his *Lectures Concerning Oratory*, John Lawson observed that figurative expressions are crucial to overcoming the prejudice inherent in people and to gaining their favour.²¹ His positive attitude toward such expressions can also be found when he mentions the auditory pleasure that the musicality of words provides to hearers.²² However, rhetoricians do not always refer to the mental effects of rhetoric to highlight its advantages; they place heavier emphasis on its risk. They are aware that orators must employ passionate language to affect the audience, and precisely for this reason they fear cases wherein strong emotions overcome language. If

¹⁹ George A. Kennedy refers to Leonard Cox's *The Arte of Crafte of Rhetoryke* published in approximately 1530 as the first study on English rhetoric. See George A. Kennedy, 'The Contributions of Rhetoric to Literary Criticism', in *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, ed. by H. B. Nisbet and Claude Rawson, 9 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), IV, pp. 349-64.

²⁰ It was quite common for writers in the eighteenth century to deepen their interest in the connection between figures of speech and mind, as observed in Edmund Burke's reading of Milton in his *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. Adam Potkay argues that they attempted to ascertain the origin of tropes in the mental process inherent in human beings.

²¹ John Lawson, *Lectures Concerning Oratory* (Dublin, 1758), p. 215. John Lawson (1708/09-59) was a rhetorician born in Northern Ireland and his *Lectures* were based on his lectures at Trinity College, Dublin.

²² Lawson, p. 222. Embellishment can be applied not only to sentences but also words, and Lawson here mentions the latter. It includes prosthesis, aphaeresis, epenthesis, syncope, proparalepsis, and apocope, all of which change the form of words to create a musical effect.

passion precedes words in the orators themselves, it prevents them from rationally expressing their thoughts. Lawson confirms the intensity of affection, taking an actor as an example:

An Actor, who would excel, should appear to be possessed with the strong Passion his Part expresseth, and seem the Man he represents; but he should not feel that Passion, should not be that Man. Why? Because the Strength of the Passion would disable him from expressing it: Violent Rage, Grief, or Despair, would choak up his Words; Nature would swallow up Art, and Imitation be lost in Reality.²³

What is important here is the inevitable imbalance between figurative language and passion. It is, at worst, a precarious situation in which powerful emotion referred to as ‘Nature’ triumphs over oratorical words such as ‘Art.’ Orators standing under this tension should be careful not to become obsessed with violent emotions, since they cannot create words utterly void of any sentiments. Therefore, ideal orators must divide their outer selves from their inner, and are required at least to separate their words from their feelings.²⁴ This difficulty of manipulating rhetoric that is inseparable from affection makes it difficult for rhetoricians to show their full approval of figuration. Now that rhetoric turns out to be a double-edged sword, they must be cautious of using tropes and figures that could evoke emotional violence.

The negative nuance of figurations also reveals itself in rhetorical treatises in a different way. These were not simply encyclopaedias of expressions, but became types of instruction manuals that taught both their usage and abuse. This change in the nature of the treatises can be proved by rhetoricians’ value judgments as to whether each trope was suitable for use or not. In Lawson’s book, for example, he judges the efficacy of figurative expressions on the basis of the impression or affect they engender. While he recommends apostrophe, hyperbole, and prosopopeia for practical use, all of which enable orators to properly express their passion, he nevertheless rejects several figures because their artificiality is likely to disappoint the audience:

One Sort consisteth in Words, as *Repetitions*, *Likeness of Sounds*, and *Cadence*, and *Oppositions*; to which we may add, as being useful in embellishing Stile, certain Kinds of *Metaphors*, *Transpositions*, *Reduplications*. Now these being

²³ Lawson, p. 255.

²⁴ Lawson surely idealises orators’ division of their words and feeling, but he faces the dilemma regarding rhetorical language. According to him, orators must feel the emotion that their words will draw from an audience, and at the same time pretend to be calm in order not to be overwhelmed by it. Roughly speaking, they need to have a feeling that they are expected not to have. See Lawson, pp. 251-52.

calculated to please the Ear of Imagination, being conducive to Prettiness and Elegance only, are Enemies to the Pathetick; are too insignificant and idle for Occasions of such Importance, and from all such ought to be excluded.²⁵

It is characteristic of Lawson to analyse rhetoric in view of its mental effects, but one can discover rhetoricians' intention to classify and assess it from a certain viewpoint even in a rhetorical primer. *The Art of Rhetorick, as to Elocution* written by Charles Bland, which outlines tropes and figures in question-and-answer form, also indicates the improper figuration as follows:

Q. *How many reputed Tropes are there, that are improperly so call'd?*

A. Eight, *Antonomasia, Onomatopœia, Antiphrasis, Charientismus, Astismus, Sarcasmus, Parœmia, and Ænigma.*²⁶

Although in illustrating each of these tropes he does not explain why some figurative expressions are usable and others are not, he definitely categorises figurative language into proper and improper types. It is not necessary to discuss the disagreement between Lawson and Bland over their classification. To develop the most fruitful argument about the rhetoric of those days, more attention must be paid to the obvious fact that they not only introduce but also criticise figures, or more precisely, to their attempts to specify unacceptable expressions. The above two specimens reveal the existence of rhetoricians who critically re-examine rhetorical traditions and reject a part of them.

Rhetoricians' descriptions of improper figures involve advice not to employ them. This may be reasonable if they are expected simply to teach the discipline, but their restructuring of rhetorical figures to improve the rhetorical artifice in truth imposes certain restrictions upon their own rhetorical techniques. Most significantly, it was in the age of plain style that their critical stance on inappropriate rhetoric became discernible. It will therefore be difficult to clearly assert a scenario in which new rhetoric undermines rhetorical conventions,²⁷

²⁵ Lawson, p. 253.

²⁶ Charles Bland, *The Art of Rhetorick, as to Elocution; Explained: and Familiarly Adapted to the Capacities of School-Boys, by Way of Question and Answer; in English* (London, 1706), pp. 12-13.

²⁷ New rhetoric is, Howell explains, unrhetorical and plain style established as the general standard of discourse in seventeenth and eighteenth century Britain. He sums up the relationship between new and old rhetoric as follows: '... the grand style with its emphasis upon the tropes and figures always tended to make the middle and the plain style seem unrhetorical, and the result was that oratory became associated in

because the decline of oratory was not caused by the language and style reformations alone but also by the rhetoricians' self-censorship. A better comprehension of that decline requires the correct recognition that their attitude was one of the triggers for it. When new rhetoric redefined 'rhetorical' style as 'unrhetorical and perspicuous,' and when they set out to restrict and slim down traditional rhetoric, old rhetoric began to decline. 'Rhet'ric languish'd on the ground,'²⁸ as Alexander Pope depicted in *The Dunciad*, was a product of both internal and external causes — rhetoricians' voluntary restraints on figures and the anti-rhetorical movement.

The history of the decline and refinement of rhetoric is one and indivisible. The rise of new rhetoric threatened rhetorical conventions, and rhetoricians in the early eighteenth century, concerned about this crisis, cultivated a critical attitude toward ancient authorities on oratory. After their predecessors' energetic transplantation of classical rhetoric, some rhetoricians became sufficiently flexible to examine this rhetoric objectively. The process of compiling rhetorical treatises provided them with the opportunity to discover the (a)symmetry between figures and passion. Their concern for affection, or their apprehension concerning unexpected situations in which intense emotion suppresses verbal expression, became the standard for the selection of appropriate figures. They aimed to refine the rhetoric scheme enterprisingly by trimming down inappropriate figures. These analytical efforts would strike classicists such as Pope as an unfavourable orientation to the canons of oratory, since their rejection of 'inappropriate' conventions originated from nothing but self-censorship of Grecian and Roman rhetoric. It is possible, however, that rhetoricians themselves were forced to reconsider the value of their erudition in a severe environment in which anti-rhetorical pressure was increasing. If their aforesaid refinement was rooted in this reevaluation, and even if their attempts were an active response to the crisis of rhetoric or the instability of humanistic grounds, their strategy brought about the ironic result that new rhetoric eventually replaced rhetorical conventions as a model of prose style.

the public mind of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries with stylistic intricacy, floweriness, and conscious ornament.' See Howell, p. 446.

²⁸ Alexander Pope, *The Dunciad*, IV. 24. in *The Poems of Alexander Pope*, ed. by James Sutherland (London: Methuen, MA: New Haven, CT; Yale University Press, 1953).

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