LINCOLN AT COOPER UNION: A RATIONALE FOR NEO-CLASSICAL CRITICISM

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The last issue of this journal included our critique of Lincoln’s Cooper Union Address, and we assume that the neo-classical origins of the analysis were apparent, even though methodological concerns were slighted. A more elaborate statement on methodology appeared in an earlier version, but the editors cautioned that the single article did not offer sufficient scope for both an explication of the rationale and its application. Accepting their advice, we deleted most of the theoretical material, but having offered the critique, we want to explore further its theoretical bases.

Our approach is neo-classical. That is, it is rooted in the rhetorical theory of antiquity. This is the same source that produced neo-Aristotelianism, “the dominant mode of rhetorical criticism of the present century in the United States.”1 Our critique shares most of the presuppositions that inform this traditional mode, but there is one essential difference. Treating “rhetorical discourses as discrete communications in specific contexts,”2 neo-Aristotelianism is preoccupied with the particular. This orientation implies a rejection of formal criteria and almost forces the critic to rely on the criterion of empirical effect. On the other hand, we treat Lincoln’s speech within the framework of the classical conception of oratorical genres. As opposed to the nominalism implicit in neo-Aristotelianism, genre theory permits an abstract conception of audience and of rhetorical situations. It, therefore, enables the critic to seek formal ends for critical judgment.

Our purpose, here, is to explore the potential of genre theory as a corrective to some defects in the neo-Aristotelian mode. We shall begin with reference to the development of neo-Aristotelianism, comment on its rejection of generic distinctions and note the limitations that this rejection imposes. We shall then suggest that the conception of genre can help invigorate critical inquiry based on classical models. We would emphasize, however, the provisional nature of our formulation; we do not consider it to be definitive, and we recognize that our version of neo-classicism has its own limitations.

NEO-ARISTOTELIAN CRITICISM

Although the neo-Aristotelian position is most fully delineated when one moves from “The Literary Criticism of Oratory”3 to A History and Criticism of American Public Address4 to Speech

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2 Black, p. 35.

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3 Herbert A. Wichelns, “The Literary Criticism of Oratory,” in Methods of Rhetorical Criticism, Robert L. Scott and Bernard L. Brock (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), pp. 27-60. Further references to the essay will be to this source.
Criticism,5 Wichelns remains the commanding presence. His essay "set the pattern and determined the direction"6 of this approach, and the direction in which he moved took "certain Aristotelian conceptions as safe points of departure."7 The most crucial of these was the centrality of audience. Of course, Aristotle and other classical theorists do not spell out a critical system, but "they do imply one. If a literary work may be said to have three references—to the universe, to the writer, and to the audience—Greek rhetorical theory, like the Renaissance criticism which descends from it, thinks the audience-reference by far the most important."8 Seeking to revive the dormant rhetorical perspective, Wichelns makes this same reference the basis for the rhetorical analysis of oratory. The importance of this principle can scarcely be exaggerated; without it, modern speech criticism would not have been possible. Nevertheless, Wichelns' determination to separate rhetoric from literature leads to a restricted conception of audience.

As the very title of his essay suggests, he thinks it important to distinguish between literary and rhetorical activity. The literary artist, he asserts, "is free to fulfill" (p. 56) his own law because literature is concerned "with permanent values" (p. 57). The rhetor, however, is "perpetually in bondage to the occasion and the audience" (p. 56). Consequently, criticism of oratory must regard "a speech as a communication to a specific audience" and must be "concerned with effect" (p. 54). Permanence and universal- ity are reserved for the literary critic, because "the result can only be confusion" when a speaker is "made to address a universal audience" (p. 57). Rhetorical criticism, then, finds its raison d'être in the specifics of the particular situation, and it is in these terms that the critic must interpret the function of "personality," "proof," "arrangement," "delivery," or any other of Wichelns' topics (pp. 56-57), all of which originate in classical theory.

If Wichelns succeeds in establishing rhetorical criticism as an independent activity, his program also obscures formalistic aspects of the classical inheritance. Despite his many borrowings from Aristotle, Wichelns says nothing about oratorical genres. This is hardly accidental, for genre theory is notoriously abstract; it rejects time and place as bases for classification and groups historical situations into general categories. As a result, it raises questions about "the relation of the class and the individuals composing it, the one and the many, the nature of universals."9 Such questions cannot be a part of Wichelns' program because they smack of literary judgment. It is only in literature that one hears "the voice of the human spirit addressing itself to men of all ages and times" (p. 57), a voice transcending particular situations.

Neo-Aristotelians attempt to modify and escape this particularism. For example, one reads that the consummate critic "appraises the entire event by assigning it comparative rank in the total enterprise of speaking"10 and that a speech may be criticized "as a finished product having certain rhetorical features which conform agreeably to fixed principles or rules."11 One reads also of

7 Thonssen and Baird, p. 15.
10 Thonssen and Baird, p. 18.
11 Thonssen and Baird, p. 457.
touchstones. But to assign comparative rank or to note agreeable conformity to fixed principles demands some notion of permanence, and such standards simply are not available in a system oriented completely to the specific situation. Here, the appropriate standard is that of immediate effect, and this single criterion makes it difficult, if not impossible, to develop intrinsic artistic standards. The system supplies no logical mechanism for connecting apparently disparate events.

Since Aristotle speaks of oratorical genres, this would seem a likely source for neo-Aristotelian formalism, but neo-Aristotelians, caught up in Wichelns’ severe nominalism, cannot exploit this possibility. They may refer to genres, but the distinctions do not become instrumental; limiting or dividing analyses, they do not control them.12 Ironically, neo-Aristotelians slight the genres even as they embrace the taxonomic categories to which the genres gave purpose, with the result that critics tend to classify “certain grosser properties cast under the heads of the traditional modes and canons,” to produce “a mechanical accounting or summing up of how well the speech fits an a priori mold.”13 Any critical system will exhibit certain a priori features, but it appears that the mold of traditional criticism has become mechanically taxonomic. Stripped of generic distinctions, the neo-classical taxonomy does not encourage interaction between the critical apparatus and the broader purposes of rhetorical discourse, and the critic glances off the relationship that has been accepted as the very excuse for his being—the relationship between speaker and audience. Seeking refuge, critics turn to biography or history, but neither is an adequate resolution. That the adducing of historical details offers no escape is reinforced if we turn to an essay representing “the neo-Aristotelian tradition at its best,”14 Marie Hochmuth Nichols’ “Lincoln’s First Inaugural.”15

The most noteworthy feature of this essay is its accumulation of historical detail. Avoiding generalization, Nichols invites the reader to participate in the ambiance of the situation by recounting the particulars that surround it. Disregard the reprinted text of the address, and two-thirds of the article is devoted to a “scrupulous documentation”16 of the events immediately preceding and following the speech. Such documentation can be an important ancilla, but the final test is whether the critic uses the accumulated detail in ways that add to an understanding and appreciation of the rhetorical transaction. Nichols faces this responsibility in the final third of her essay, but she is unable to overcome the inherent limitations of Wichelns’ program.

Adhering to his tenets, she evaluates the speech “as a speech, a medium distinct from other media, and with methods peculiarly its own” (p. 88). The special topics appropriate to this task are “Lincoln’s selection of materials, his arrangement, his style, and his manner” (p. 90). What is to unify these lines of inquiry? It is the speaker’s purpose. But Nichols warns against the casual assumption that “Lincoln’s purpose is easily discernable in the occasion itself” (p. 89), and she implicitly rejects generic considerations when she turns away from the fact that “this was an inaugural ceremony, with a ritual fairly well established” (p. 89). Genre is beside the

12 Even a casual reading in A History and Criticism of American Public Address reveals that genres are not examined systematically.
13 Douglas Ehninger, “Rhetoric and the Critic,” Western Speech, 29 (Fall 1965), 230.
14 Scott and Brock, p. 21.
15 Marie Hochmuth Nichols, “Lincoln’s First Inaugural,” in Scott and Brock, pp. 60-100. Further references to this essay will be to this source.
16 Black, p. 41.
point because Lincoln’s purposes arise from the experiences “of the nation between his election as President and the day of his inauguration” (p. 89). These experiences focus on party, nation, and man, and they lead to this conclusion: “Clearly, he intended to take the occasion of the inauguration to declare the position of the Republican party in regard to the South, to announce his considered judgment in regard to the practical questions raised by the movement of secession, and, in all, to give what assurance he could of his personal integrity” (p. 90).

Compared to the specificity of the earlier historical documentation, the analysis following this statement of purpose is vague. For the most part, the critique is a summary. Including numerous quotations from the text and comparisons with earlier drafts, it certainly reproduces the flow of Lincoln’s argument. Yet, it leaves the reader to his own devices in attempting to fathom the forms and topics of argument, the nature of evidence, the interaction among parts of the discourse, and the character of appeals to the audience. Summary simply does not explain how Lincoln became the affectionate father, the benevolent and hopeful counselor” (p. 95). Moreover, the analysis of style does not probe deeply into the text itself; commentary becomes rigorous and specific only in terms of an external reference—in relation to the wording of earlier drafts. It is interesting to view the style through a consideration of the language Lincoln did not use, but a closer examination of that which he did use is needed to support the claim that his style produced “an image of great-heartedness, great humility and great faith” (p. 99).

To avoid misunderstanding, we want to underline that our purpose here is not to belittle this important essay. We merely want to emphasize that the critique exhibits a complete commitment to the unique context of the discourse. This commitment, in turn, produces an analysis that concentrates on external circumstances rather than on the internal development of the speech. The resulting limitations become strikingly apparent when Nichols attempts a general evaluation of the discourse.

Her position is unmistakably clear; the Inaugural Address is a rhetorical masterpiece. But what is the basis for this judgment? It cannot be found in either literary value or cultural force; these criteria are explicitly reserved for literary critics and historians (p. 88). Thus, everything comes down to effect, to the question of whether the discourse did what it was supposed to do. And this particular speech was supposed to enunciate party policy, allay the fears of the secessionists, and establish the orator’s personal integrity. The reaction of the South, therefore, becomes the salient index. Yet, by this standard, the speech was the most abject of failures. It did not mollify the secessionists. In fact, Nichols argues convincingly that, after examining the Inaugural, “the South saw little hope from Lincoln” (p. 85). But she flees the inexorable conclusion. Ignoring immediate effect, she contends that “any fair-minded critic removed from the passions of the times, must find himself much more in agreement with those observers of the day who believed the Inaugural met the ‘requirements of good rhetoric’” (p. 95). This will not do. It is patently inconsistent to focus exclusively on the unique and specific situation and then to ask that final evaluation be “removed from the passions of the times.”

The problem we have just outlined seems insoluble within the terms of the neo-Aristotelian tradition. Certainly there is but cold comfort in Parrish’s ob-
rors that "not failure, but low aim, is crime" in speechmaking (p. 100). That only papers over the gap that necessarily yawns between a philosophical dedication to the particular and a desire for a more permanent frame of reference. Parrish correctly recognizes a need for abstract standards, but he does not offer an ultimate grounding for the formalism he proposes. That grounding, we believe, exists in the theory of genres. To explain our position, we must return to the ancients.

**Genre Theory**

As opposed to Wichelns, the dominant position in ancient rhetoric is not that situations are unique and particular, but that they fall into general categories, into "types" or "kinds." The influence of Aristotle is decisive. He describes the three familiar genres of deliberative, forensic and epideictic, maintaining that "rhetoric falls into three divisions (genê), determined by the three classes of listeners to speeches." Since it is the listener who "determines the speech's end and object," the audience is the central element in the system. Consequently, Aristotle paves the way for general acceptance of the proposition that "the important aspect of the speech situation is the speaker-audience relationship." At the same time, however, Aristotle marks and emphasizes the similarities among certain kinds of audiences and certain speaking situations; his entire theory ultimately responds to an abstract classification of oratorical requirements.

Later classical rhetoricians thoroughly endorse this theory of genre, and we find Cicero, Quintilian, and other writers consistently treating intentional theory in terms of the three types of speaking. More importantly, the genres give meaning to the whole of the complex taxonomy in classical rhetoric. The five officia and their elaborate sub-structures are significant only insofar as they assist the speaker in achieving his goal. That goal, of course, is conditioned by the nature of the audience; the speaker, however, locates his audience with reference to the genre in which he must function. Without the genres, classical rhetorical theory loses contact with the audience, and the elaborate taxonomy becomes meaningless, a system bereft of any rhetorical purpose. For this reason, we believe that any critical program based on classical models must give serious consideration to genre theory.

The immediate advantage of generic criticism is that it permits the creation of intrinsic standards for rhetorical discourse without losing sight of the audience. Predicated upon the "expectations of the audience and the demands of the situation," the concept of genre assumes that certain types of situations provoke similar needs and expectations among audiences. Identifying and categorizing these situations are basic to inquiry, and the critic must uncover patterns of need and expectation that bind audiences together, even though they may be far removed in time and place. An adequate description of a genre, then, produces a general index of audience demands; it, therefore, locates the abstract rhetorical problems confronting the speaker and points to intrinsic standards for judging a particular kind of discourse.

To illustrate, we can expand upon the

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20 Thomsen and Baird, p. 15.

generic underpinning of our approach to the Cooper Union Address. This is a campaign speech, an oratorical form well-known to American audiences and easily distinguished from other types of public address. Nevertheless, this type does not fall within the tripartite Aristotelian division. The anomaly becomes evident when we consider the campaign speech in relation to audience and purpose, the basic components of the Aristotelian distinction. One who listens to a campaign speech is a judge of a future event, and he is urged to do something (i.e. to vote for a particular candidate). This corresponds to the function of the audience in deliberative oratory. The object of judgment, however, is not a policy, as it is in deliberative speaking, but a person, as it is in epidectic. Ends also are blurred; the deliberative orator examines the “expediency or the harmfulness of a proposed course of action”; and the epideictic orator must “praise or attack a man” in order to prove “him worthy of honour or the reverse.”\(^2\) Now, the end of campaign oratory is to make the candidate appear worthy and honorable. Nevertheless it makes no sense to argue that the campaign oration is a form of epideictic, since the speaker’s goal is to effect a decision, and listeners are asked to judge, not merely to sit as spectators. Evidently, no one of the traditional genres is entirely satisfactory, and it follows that intelligent application of the neo-classical approach entails the description of a separate genre for campaign oratory.

In this instance, the problem in the traditional system appears to be an omission rather than an inherent defect, and we found it relatively easy to define the genre and remain consistent with Aristotelian principles. Finding Rosenthal’s analysis of ethos suggestive, we approached the campaign oration as an instance of “personal persuasion,” as discourse in which the central concern is the audience’s attitude toward the candidate.\(^2\) Given this condition, the campaign orator’s first responsibility is, by definition, to promote himself as an individual. Both policies and character are in question, but policy is subsidiary to the purpose of creating an identification of thought and feeling between speaker and audience—a demand inherent in the situation. The ultimate objective is ingratiation. Translating all this into neo-classical terminology, we could describe the genre of campaign oratory as speaking in which listeners act as judges of a future event, an election: the end is to effect a judgment of the candidate, a judgment based on character and upon the treatment of issues.

This consideration of generic requirements helped to focus our analysis of the Cooper Union Address. In this case our description of the genre followed Aristotle rather closely. Other situations may demand more radical adjustments of the traditional system. Surely it is unreasonable to expect the tripartite division of antiquity to encompass all subsequent forms of public address. Genres are like institutions.\(^2\) They exhibit a degree of stability over time, but they also grow, change, and decay in response to the conditions of society. Hence they “should not be viewed as static forms but as evolving phenomena.”\(^2\) The critic must retain the flexibility needed to adjust to changing circumstances. He must remember that generic distinctions should not force every item into a pre-

conceived category; instead, their proper function is to uncover genuine points of similarity and difference among forms of discourse.

The discovery of these similarities and differences results in the establishment of generic constraints, and the use of these constraints appears to solve the most troublesome problem in neo-Aristotelian criticism—the antithetical tension between the commitment to a particular situation and the need for formal standards of evaluation. Theoretically, the dissipating of this tension can make neo-classicism again available to the rhetorical critic. We intended that our critique of the Cooper Union Address specify some of the potential. The critique itself must stand as the sole witness to our success or failure, but the genesis deserves comment because it helps explain the rationale and points up both strengths and limitations.

**The Uses of Neo-Classicism**

The position we have taken in this essay and elsewhere clearly is at one with Black’s call for “an alternative to neo-Aristotelianism,” and the literature indicates that the search has been profitable. Nevertheless, it seemed that the common acceptance had become “any alternative to neo-Aristotelianism,” and if neo-classicism had become mechanical, arbitrary rejection seemed a short-sighted reaction. To forsake traditional theory completely appeared a dubious course, and an examination of the original sources convinced us that a return to generic distinctions was the key to another useful alternative. And to a large extent genre theory anticipates the contention that the neo-classical taxonomy commits the critic to a static set of categories and deflects the true purpose of criticism. It specifically anchors a discourse in the context of other discourses and the demands of the audience, and it blunts the charge that the neo-classical orientation forces the critic to overlook “the effects of audience, situation and other contemporary discourses on the speaker’s behavior.”

The system retains schematic features, but that seems an advantage rather than a disadvantage. If criticism is not totally whimsical and subjective, some schema must control the analysis. The critic may concentrate on archetypal metaphors, dramatistic elements, analogues from anthropology and mythology, but there must be standards for sifting and sorting the materials. In this light, the neo-classical taxonomy is but one of many schemata available, and it has the particularly appealing feature of attempting to deal with the entire rhetorical transaction on its own terms. Recently, the most important and instructive analyses have had a non-traditional bias, but many tend to isolate and emphasize a single element or concept. A complete neo-classical approach, however, centers directly on the rhetorical process and divides it into a simple but comprehensive set of constituents. Out of context, the categories can be domineering, but any other schema can become equally oppressive, and genre theory helps prevent a neo-classical tyranny. Keeping the taxonomy within proper bounds, it centers attention where it ought to be, on the speaker-audience relationship, and the system produced seems an excellent filter for the analysis for a particular speech. Examining the Cooper Union Address, for example, we did not feel prisoner to a crammed and stultifying orthodoxy, nor find ourselves trapped in tangential concerns. We found, in-

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28 Black, p. 132.
stead, that the system forced us to come to grips with the speech as a speech, and we found that it forced us to make choices. Whether we made the proper ones is not as important as the fact that we were not enclosed within arbitrary and debilitating confines.

The system, of course, does have confines. Genre theory presumes types, and a critic ordinarily will use the type to explore the single example. Comparisons are possible, or criticism might center on a series from one genre, but the character of neo-classicism is most appropriate to the analysis of a single speech. If the system cannot address "picketing, sloganeering, chanting, singing, marching, gesturing," and similar communicative phenomena, this limitation does no more than describe the scope of neo-classicism. A more serious problem attends the charge that the neo-classic critic suffers from a rationalistic bias.

From the generic perspective, this bias is an institutional one. Rhetorical genres are grounded in established practices, and genre theory must assume the existence of stable conventions that govern public communication. Capitalizing upon this area of public agreement, genre theory can present a coherent and therefore "rational" account of rhetorical argument. This is advantageous under normal circumstances, but it is quite another matter when circumstances are not normal, in times of rapid change. Here is the most significant limitation to the critical program we are advocating.

This program necessarily works best in situations where the range of disagreement is limited, where there is a broad consensus about what can be argued and how it should be argued. Thus, even an observer as sympathetic as Booth must acknowledge that "the Aristotelian tradition is suited best to analyzing the cogency of . . . rhetoric, from the point of view of someone who is at least in some sense on the inside." Our proposal, then, deals with an insider's rhetoric. Yet, everyone is aware of the outsiders', "the rhetoric of 'conversion,' of transformation—the rhetoric with the effect whether designed or not, of overturning personal ties and changing total allegiances." This radical rhetoric may explicitly attack the stable conventions and institutions of a society; furthermore, it is likely to appear in a form that challenges the established norms of discourse, for attempts to subvert the establishment almost always involve an attempt to subvert its language.

In such situations, genre theory falters. Based on the presumption of stability, the system has no mechanism for explaining idiosyncratic and dramatic changes in ideology or style. The critic may adjust over time, but long-term flexibility is beside the point when one seeks to explain radical rhetoric in situ.

28 In our critique, we deliberately suppressed details of the analysis. For example, we slighted intricacies in the argument of the first section because the reporting would have been tedious for the reader and would have made the speech appear more formalistic than it really is. We slighted other matters as well. Except by implication, we did not explore Lincoln's use of the rhetorical question or the "our fathers" refrain. We could have extended the latter into each segment of the putative debate with the South, and we might have considered its echoic religious values for an audience all too familiar with the Lord's Prayer. We do not mean to imply that these facets of the speech would not be available to a critic of a different persuasion. We do insist, however, that genre and taxonomy brought them to our attention. That we did not report them indicates choices we made rather than any shortcoming in the approach.


32 Booth, p. 102.
Worse yet, adherence to a conventional typology can make the critic a captive of the institutional system that nascent rhetorical forms seek to destroy. The resultant analysis will condemn advocates of change because their rhetoric does not conform to conventional expectations, and the nature of that rhetoric may well go misunderstood. Nevertheless, even this limitation may prove to be of some value, if properly appreciated.

A time of rapid and drastic change is one, above all others, that may require stable points of reference. Surely it is hazardous always to evaluate new kinds of discourse in terms of the old, but there is no reason why old genres cannot be touchstones for understanding new developments. In other words, rhetorical criticism might "act on the premise that the study of historical change could greatly profit from a clearer view than we now have of what is changing." 33 We have yet to devise a critical rationale adequate to account for sudden shifts of ideology.

CONCLUSION

In concluding, we can do little more than repeat what we already have said. We simply propose the addition of genre theory as a means of introducing formalism into neo-classical criticism. Squarely within the tradition, this theory does not ask that critics abandon the centrality of the audience. In fact, genre theory acts as a corrective precisely because it allows for a broader conception of audience than is permitted in neo-Aristotelian criticism. If critics can identify situations that create generally similar audience demands, then they can abstract principles that will apply to a wide variety of discourses. Although these principles rest on audience analysis, the audience is conceived in generic terms, and the generalizations produced may offer formal grounds for evaluating speeches of a particular kind. These standards lack the more purely formal characteristics of certain literary genres, but they provide a point of entry into a discourse and focus the critical reaction.

Much remains to be done, of course. Our analysis of the campaign genre remains limited and tentative. To focus the neo-classical taxonomy, we established an a priori definition of the end for campaign oratory, and we were then able to construct very broad standards for rhetorical evaluation in a particular instance. Additional instances have to be accumulated before the genre can be described properly and more specific generic constraints developed. More generally, we have not examined genre theory in detail, nor have we attempted a systematic classification of modern rhetorical genres.

Fortunately, the evidence indicates a probing in those directions. 34 Much of the effort has been piecemeal, but this, after all, may prove the most satisfactory route. Modern rhetorical critics usually start with a settled theoretical position and then make an application, but in writing the two essays, we found ourselves attacking the problem from the opposite perspective. The experience was instructive, and perhaps it can be generalized. The progress of rhetorical criticism may depend more on the ability of critics to induce principles from actual critiques than on a concern with abstract issues.

34 See Black, pp. 132-177; Forbes I. Hill, "Conventional Wisdom—Traditional Form: The President's Message of November 3, 1969," QJS, 58 (Dec 1972), 373-386; B. L. Ware and Wil A. Linkugel, "They Spoke in Defense of Themselves: On the Generic Criticism of Apologia," QJS, 59 (Oct. 1973), 273-283; and Jamieson. The last two articles include references to a number of related discussions.