

RANI RAY  
Delhi

## RHETORIC, TEXTUALITY AND MEANING

Critical paradigms governing literary studies today rely heavily on meaning<sup>1</sup> as "essentially a play of difference within linguistically constituted codes", or/and as a product of intertextual strategies lacking in any extra-linguistic commitment, still less an obligation to value. The way in which a literary work means is related to the notion of language as a system rather than a mode of apprehending experience. On the one hand the claim that "there were nothing but texts" has put paid to the distinction heretofore made between literature and other non-aesthetic domains, on the other, a conception of meaning as embedded in the "instantiation of language" in speech or text has encouraged the uncovering of an undifferentiated discursive reasoning by means of semio-linguistic analysis. But if the relocation of the literary text within an interrelated cultural and scientific field has made up for the impoverishment resulting from an exclusionary aesthetics, then the argument that "everything is already within language" without reference to its foundation in experience has certainly compounded the problem of literary meaning. For we then regard literature as a "dehumanised meaning system" rather than what it ought to be: a body of knowledge of incommensurable temporalities that characterize human experience<sup>2</sup>.

---

<sup>1</sup> This essay does not concern itself with the "theory" of meaning, as such, but with the term's restricted use to refer to the way in which literary works mean, on the assumption that one can talk about meaning only in relation to the subject matter. There are numerous instances of attempts to relate meaning to literature "as category by itself", but these have been confined to defining the objectives and the limits of literary interpretation and have not been addressed to the nature of literary activity.

<sup>2</sup> Structuralism, Deconstruction and indeed all kinds of post-structuralist theories of literary meaning vehemently deny any extra-linguistic/extra textual significance to

Not surprising therefore is the shift of interest from questions of value to non-teleological explanations, and the substitution of literary understanding by "Theory". For there is no question that the emergence of Theory as a substantial field of study has been synchronous with the idea of the "referent" as linguistically determined and meaning as a general category absorbing and redistributing a number of unrelated topics. And resulting out of this "valorization" of meaning (as a detachable field of inquiry) is the new interest in epistemology to which we may refer all speculations about self-referentiality, and in ideology to which the question of indeterminacy is partly addressed<sup>3</sup>. But if Theory, an independent apparatus, applied, tested and contested - in skirmishes over meaning - is the new object of study, can we assume that it can do justice to literature as an expression of the qualitatively distinct feelings and thought that make up its realm? No over-arching universal law, Theory's new incarnation, can provide us with the wherewithal by which

---

the literary work. Further post-Saussurean language theory has enforced a homology of disciplines as diverse and as far flung as linguistics, anthropology and psychoanalysis, reducing diversity of content to unity of form as linguistic structures. Each of these disciplinary activities are now described within the totality of the relationship within which they are placed, resulting in proliferation of a synthetic interpretative vocabulary, reinforcing a unified meaning, which is internal, and related to the procedural axis. In this configuration, literary interpretation has acquired the logical status of a scientific method with its commitment to description and analysis. Moreover the strict separation between subject and object, inherent to scientific epistemology, is inimical to the consanguinity between subject and experience, which I argue, is the premise of the evaluatory dimension of literary activity. The aim of this essay is to partially restore the idea (ancient enough) that literary meaning is cognitive in ways different from understanding objects/essences and to stress the fact literary evaluation must always be morally and not ontologically oriented. Among pioneering work in this area may be mentioned Wesley Trimpi, *Muses of One Mind: The Literary Analysis of Experience and its Continuity* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1983). Richard Rorty points to the philosophical unsoundness of the objectivist/scientist method of current critical thinking. See especially *The Consequences of Pragmatism* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1982).

<sup>3</sup> The new epistemology interpellated by textuality is self-referential since it assumes both the constructedness of the literary object and its construction as an object through interpretation. Ideological distortions taken as given (in most post-structuralist analyses) make the literary work inaccessible whence determination of meaning is achieved by uncovering the ideological posturing rather than by any direct reference to the content of the work. Catherine Belsey, *Critical Practice* (London: Methuen, 1980); Terry Eagleton, *The Significance of Theory* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990); Frederick Jameson, *The Ideology of Theory: Essays 1971-1986*, Vol. 1 (London: Routledge, 1988) and others.



we comprehend and negotiate the experientially rendered presuppositions that underlie the trajectory of literary discourse; more drastically it can render mute the cognitive and judicative dimensions of the literary act. In the conscious evasion of questions of value there lies an implicit, though hardly intended, belittling of literature itself: the diminution of the very dispositions that yield its structure<sup>4</sup>.

The question of value may be raised all over again within a relationship that exists between literature and the concrete particularities of experience. But it has to be seen as a question of not this or that value – Truth or Beauty, epistemologically and formally rendered significance – but as different conceptions of reality, feasible precisely to the extent literature exemplifies the perceptual diversity of experience, utilising a stratum of evaluative notions of which language as an “ethically thick compound” is itself constituted. The continuing power of literature to arouse or reinforce specific moral or psychological responses in us, different from an acquiescence to an indisputable naturalistic explanation of the phenomenon, should at least lend a certain degree of feasibility to such a hypothesis. When we submit literature to questions about facts (the world out there) we not only ignore its proper status as knowledge, we make it vulnerable to general laws, to all positivist manoeuvres as well; such blurring of distinctions may not be unfamiliar to the practitioners of textuality, wary of the boundaries between the scientific and the non-scientific. Among current models of interpretation even cultural studies which expressly rejects both causal explanation and the “autonomous corrective force of brute facts” constructs meaning through unmasking “hidden categories”, in other words, by surrendering to the premises of positivist sciences in its myth of “coherence”<sup>5</sup>. At its opposite end the tropological view that privileges

<sup>4</sup> Stein Haugom Olsen argues for the logical priority of interpretative/evaluative judgements over all other judgements and descriptions of literature and demands that literature be apprehended as “literature” through “these types of judgements”. “These” identify “what literature is all about” – an experience of value. See *The End of Literary Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 143.

<sup>5</sup> I use the term “culture” to signify a method which seeks to identify a gesture or a statement in terms of larger patterns or structures. Levi-Strauss traces the underlying reality of the social phenomena in *Structural Anthropology 2* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973). Clifford Geertz claims that the aim of ethnographic analysis is to arrive at invariants beyond empirical diversity and that “the study of culture (is) a positive science like any other”. See *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), p. 302. Critical theorists have generally used culture as a conceptual scheme for the interpretation of literary representation of experience.



the literariness of the text over and above its "grammatical" dimension, as de Man put it, merely authenticates literature's irrelevance as a form of knowledge<sup>6</sup>. Is there a way out of this cul-de-sac?

Of late there has been much communication between ethics and politics and ethics and science resulting in a radical revision of political and scientific theories. And here scholarship is rich and suggestive, underscoring the viability of knowledge which is not *a priori*, requiring a simple description, but enacted within the context of living and therefore indefinitely revisable. Such knowledge presumes a relationship between language and the nature of the world which defies the logical categories of true/false. Attempts by Martha Nussbaum, Charles Altieri, Richard Eldridge and others to make literature the focus of moral philosophical inquiry<sup>7</sup> notwithstanding, literary theory has remained, by and large, impervious to the normative, evaluative dimension of literary meaning. Instead its preoccupation has been with its own constructions. Wedded to the idea of literature as a body of texts - an objectively existing product - and to what I would describe as the ethnographical method applicable to artefacts it has drawn on structural analysis and semiotic readings. It may be argued that there is justifiable skepticism about evaluation linked with any universal idea - a correlate of "unmixed" life - such as the idea of morality itself when seen as generating from the assumed identity of Value/Being or the Kantian First Principles. Yet the non-viability of conceptualizing a wide range of

---

<sup>6</sup> De Man's concept of reading as a "tropological activity" is geared to the demonstration of the autonomous potential of language, and more pointedly to freeing literature from the constraints of the objectivist epistemologies of the sciences. See especially *Allegories of Reading* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1979) and "The Resistance to Theory" in *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986). But according to Jerome McGann he is unable to free himself from the ontological reality of "language events".

<sup>7</sup> For Nussbaum literature deals with questions and choices and emotions, about our own social existence and the totality of our connections - questions that animate ethical theory. "Perceptive Equilibrium: Literary Theory and Ethical Theory" in: Ralph Cohen (ed.) *The Future of Literary Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1989). For further discussion of the problem see Olsen *The Structure of Literary Understanding* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), Richard Eldridge, *On Moral Personhood: Philosophy, Literature, Criticism and Self - Understanding* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989); Charles Altieri, *Act and Quality: A Theory of Literary Meaning and Humanistic Understanding* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1981); Richard Freadman and Seumas Miller, *Re-Thinking Theory: A Critique of Contemporary Literary Theory and an Alternative Account* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).



distinctly identifiable gestures reflecting equally the multiple and the mixed nature of experience (rather than a stable constant) in terms of a persistent systematic structure has not become that obvious. For literary meaning to be re-posed within its "contextual" field nothing less than the institution of a less programmatic explanatory mechanism commensurable with specific human needs and capacities is required.

Here it would be appropriate to invoke the classical art of rhetoric which, particularly in the *enthymeme* (the rhetorical argument), gives us a model for dealing with the diversity of human experience. Through the perception of a set of analogous situations rhetorical argument persuades by demonstrating that which is likely. The factual, which is often contradictory and lends itself to opposing perceptions, becomes intelligible in this way. Aristotle's notion of effective persuasion takes cognizance of the contingent character of experience: he said that "human character and goodness in their various forms" as well as emotions related to their particular causes have to be taken into account (*Rhetoric*, I, 1356a, 24-25). The subordination of particular cases under schematic explanation legitimized opinion for practical purpose without imparting to it the rigour of logical analysis. Aristotle's insistences on social interchangeability and dialectical understanding dismantled whatever potential reification rhetoric had as a discourse system. He defined rhetoric "as an offshoot of dialectic and also of ethical studies... not scientific study of any one separate subject: both are faculties for providing arguments" and are related to each other in this way<sup>8</sup>.

It does not bear repetition that current interest in rhetoric has been triggered by the recognition that it is bound up with human interest and is not a mere stylistic prescription. An additional impetus being rhetoric's reflexiveness, its conceptualization of its own activity of persuasion covering a wide spectrum of intentions, rendering it eminently suitable for any discourse on meta-language. The interlacing between literary and rhetorical theories has hardly ventured beyond the formal analyses of techniques: the constructedness of discourse as "forms of power and persuasion" and so has remained designedly within the textualist fold<sup>9</sup>.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Jürgen Habermas: "Where rhetoric was involved with actual matter under discussion the orator was engaged in the philosophical transaction of practical prudence within the specific sphere of Politics... For this Aristotle recommends the topical procedure as a dialectical one..." *Theory and Practice* (London: Polity, 1973), p. 79-80.

<sup>9</sup> See Terry Eagleton, *Walter Benjamin or Towards a Revolutionary Criticism* (London: Verso, 1981) chap. 2; Roland Barthes, *Semiotic Challenge* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), p. 3-93.

But for Aristotle, persuasion, unlike "a verbal thing made", is not bound up by language as ontology and limits of meaning. His overriding theme being that words and forms of reasoning have practical ends, which assumes among other things an intelligible construction of experience apprehended by the senses. As a system of signification rhetorical argument may allude to meaningful acts but not to autotelic objects. Moreover, Aristotle did not conceive rhetoric as belonging to any "special or definite class of subjects" necessitating a rational reconstruction of its intrinsic nature. On the contrary rhetoric referred to the intelligibility of a wide variety of subjects/experience.

The fact that any given case affords "available means of persuasion" indicates that it is amenable to reasonings and understanding. Therefore political oratory is distinguished from the science of politics (dealing with information about the constitution and the state) and is characterized by deliberations about what is "expedient, profitable and good" etc. It is thus that Aristotle demarcated the boundaries separating the practical art of rhetoric from the natural sciences, and warned that "the more we try to make either dialectic or rhetoric not what they really are, practical faculties, but sciences, the more we shall inadvertently be destroying their true nature; for we shall be re-fashioning them and shall be passing into the region of sciences dealing with definite subjects..." (*Rhetoric*, I, 1359b, 12-18). However, critics intent on discovering rhetoric's human-historical interest have merely directed their energies to noting the internal laws of an objectified practice, discerning in it a complicity with an already assumed ideology, whence concepts and ideas expressed are independent of and prior to enactment. Rhetoric has come to represent "an inherently coherent formal system", a set of conventions, not meant to come to terms with the world, but to falsely reflect it<sup>10</sup>.

To make Rhetoric the nodal point of my argument about literature requires first a rejection of all such meta-linguistic assumptions, and second, more vitally, a cognizance of its character as practical wisdom. As structured explanation of the exigent, rhetoric underscores meaning relative to persons tied to particular situations. Aristotle said that "individual cases are so infinitely various that no systematic knowledge of them is possible" (I, 1356b, 32-33). Indeed any explanation that presumes total rationality, or value-free neutrality is characteristically

---

<sup>10</sup> Victoria Kahn, "Habermas, Machiavelli and the Humanist Critique of Ideology", *PMLA*, 105, No. 3 (1990), p. 464-475.



indifferent to the particular circumstances. It can have no bearing on "what is appropriate to the occasion". The aim of rhetorical reasoning is "to discover the means of coming as near such success as the circumstances of each particular case allow" (I, 1355b, 11-12). Rhetorical theory is therefore my point of entry to a consideration of literature as an expression of active and speculative aspects of individual conduct and statement. It strengthens a project that aims to shift the critique from the text to the literary act, from literature's discernible formal features to its varying conceptual impulses<sup>11</sup>. But while some and not all aspects of rhetoric form a substantial part of my argument, I adopt these also as more congenial to a concept of literature based on similar ethico-political premises. I have in mind the ancient theory of mimesis which took up interpretation of reality as its canonical task even while problematising the nature of that reality and the adequacy of representation. Mimesis posited that human interest, including politics, was constitutive of "making". The reality projected was expressive of a particular understanding of experience rather than the mirror image of an already acknowledged truth. Aristotle said mimesis did not refer only to past or present, things as "they are said or thought to be" but what seems to be, or "things that ought to be" (*Poetics*, 25, 1460b, 10f), in other words what "appears probable to a man of a given type". Aristotle thus tied objectivity to human desire making the poet's presentation of events coloured by his stance. In this context meaning is not an automatically assumed correspondence between word and object ('this is that'), literature and life, but ideas about it, (*Rhetoric*, III, 1410b, 20), situated as it is within an interdependent context of thought and reality, within that dynamic field of human productivity. The underlying assumptions of both rhetoric and poetry may thus properly challenge notions of truths as semantic facts or objects; may repudiate all ideas of texts as illusions or meaning as the function of and parasitic upon abstract systems.

Based on oral practice rhetoric assumes that language acquires significance in the context of its operation: the manifold social activities

<sup>11</sup> The "text-work" distinction echoes Barthes' famous "Text-Book" in *Image, Music, Text* (London: Fontana, 1972) but my aim is to steer clear of post-structuralist notions of the literary object and thus of any engagement with the mechanics of production now infamously referred to as the "methodological field". Jerome McGann makes an incisive critique of current preoccupation with literature's own "aesthesis" rather than knowledge. *The Beauty of Inflections: Literary Investigation in Historical Method and Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985).



incorporating various human interests and attitudes. There was little dilution of this basic premise with the emergence of rhetoric as a logical system of rules in response to taxonomic impulses. Aristotle's cogitations about forms of argument referred to the original condition of meaning in the domain of action: action provided the occasion for reasoning, for determining through major and minor premises of the syllogism of the class or kind of thing that ought to be done. Cicero's all embracing notion of eloquence that saw it as "the origin and operation and developments of all things, all the virtues and duties, all the natural principles governing the morals and minds and life of mankind" likewise postulated its pragmatic dimension: its handling of matters of "customs, and laws, and rights", and the control of the government of the state (*De Oratore*, III, XX, 76-77). Rhetorical theory thus holds forth the idea that the linguistic act is at all times a cognate of historical particulars, continually posing questions of value contingent upon those and expressive of human cognition intrinsic to any act of evaluation, consequently meaning. As such all systematic treatment of the art in theory did not exclude the evaluative categories.

Aristotle's philosophical distinction between two kinds of intelligibility, pertaining to things "knowable in themselves" and those "apprehended by the senses" (*Nicomachean Ethics*, I, 3, 1095a 6-95a17) is directly relevant for the qualitative measurement of experience which is the persuasive aim of rhetoric. The criterion of knowledge about human affairs takes into its purview the variety and separateness of individual needs and capacities, as things cannot be "one and the same for everybody". Aristotle further stated that "though it is desirable to start from things known (the intelligible first principles or divinely conceived forms of being) ...it is proper to start from what is known to us because when things go beyond perception, we cannot tell whether they exist or not" (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1095a, 31ff). Aristotle was not merely contemplating the nature of ordinary human understanding but also its appropriate object. Trimpi explains, "one reason for starting primarily with principles apprehensible to us than those knowable in themselves is that conceptions of moral excellence such as justice, good, involve such difference of opinion that no certain premises can be assumed"<sup>12</sup>. In other words, human perceptions admit an infinite degree of difference according to concrete details so as to make them non-transferable. The domain of rhetoric is one of perceptual divergence, where single minded

<sup>12</sup> Trimpi, *The Muses of One Mind*, p. 122.



pursuit of truth fails and philosophy (abstract structures) finds itself at a disadvantage, where presumably the radically contingent character of experience may be accommodated. In fact Plato's strictures on rhetoric, invoking external objective standards of veracity did not rule out its practical possibilities. Political life admitted difference in respect of what is desirable "for social matters ...so far as good and bad customs or rights and wrongs or matters of religion are concerned whatever any state makes up its mind to enact as lawful for itself, really is lawful for it and in this field no individual or state is wiser than another" (*Theatetus* 172a).

Aristotle classified knowledge, identifying affective cognition in the area of human interest. He presumed an integral relation to exist between the pursuit of different objectives (knowledge objects) and the operations of distinct mental faculties: for the mind speculates something, produces something. "Practical intelligence deals with moral and political questions tied to the activity of "doing". Thus rhetorical reasoning resembles closely the ethical in that it is an expression of intention formed as a result of deliberation of action. Yet poesis or "making" is not entirely devoid of such prudential exertions of the mind. For the object produced (whether it be a speech or a poem) owes its formal character to choices made in the means adopted in its realization; put in Aristotelian terms, "in its coming into being". Aristotle conceded that although "making" and "acting" are different and art "a matter of making" it involves "a course of reasoning" which determines its success or failure (*Nicomachean Ethics* VI, 5, 1140a 20). The simultaneous involvement of "doing" and "making" in the representative arts is a feature of the ancient theory of mimesis, which regards literature as dealing with ethical issues, "matters of expediency and conduct" that rhetoric properly negotiates. Moreover in Aristotle praxis (action) differs from poesis (production) only in their specific relations to the means-end dialectic. Action (the objective of prudential activity) does not have an end in view, for there are "few situations in life that come already inscribed with the names of all the concerns which touch or impinge them"<sup>13</sup>. The explanation of human conduct in terms of desires and interests leaves therefore a certain margin of indeterminacy. Whereas in the making of an artistic object "production is its own end". Nevertheless

---

<sup>13</sup> David Wiggins, "Deliberation and Practical Reason" in Amelie Okseberg Rorty (ed.) *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), p. 233-234.

in *Poetics* (chapter 25) Aristotle suggests that production is not limited to technical performance (the making of a material object), and in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (II, ix) the example of technical deliberation is used to illuminate non-technical matters, suggesting thereby the collateral status of ethics and poetics, dissolving somewhat the difference between *poesis* and *praxis*, craft and choice, so far taken for granted. Aristotle insisted that in artistic judgement, or the question of right or wrong in poetry "one should consider not only the intrinsic quality of the word or deed, but also the person to whom he says, or does it, the time, the means and motive of the agent" (*Poetics*, 1461a, 5-9). The poet thus becomes, according to Aristotle, a maker in double senses of the term: as a technician and as a possessor of a coherent set of assumptions about the reality perceived<sup>14</sup>. Rhetorical theory highlights the orator's mediatory discriminating powers in the hypothetical construction of reality by suggesting meaning as relative to the individual practical response to questions about life. In this orientation literary texts may also be seen as interpretations involving matters of craft, of choice, of existential decision-making in the act of creation. Structured by beliefs and attitudes towards experience, literature readily yields itself to the construing of meaning at the level of urgency with "human intention" becoming the object of scrutiny.

Critical discourse based on methodological monism - such as that proposed by textuality - cannot adequately address itself to this task. It precludes the knower from knowing a whole range of things, extra-textual, pertinent to the person concerned, and excludes our entry into that space where personal attitudes and purposes are formed within their specific contexts. It is that which constitutes the subjective, interactive dimension of the literary act. Literary hermeneutics may therefore actually be of benefit by loosening the textualist hold which has only encouraged the objectivist fallacy and has promoted a critical detach-

---

<sup>14</sup> Aristotle's idea that artistic error is not merely a zoological one but is related to a faulty choice of techniques is an implicit recognition of the artist's conceptual commitments. One may note that artistic failure is never measured in terms of that which is represented (clearly a modern criterion) but in terms of the artist's inability to execute his conception (*Poetics*, 25, 1460b, 6-30). Plato groups hunting, trafficking, etc., as acquisitive or productive arts, as they involve the "coming into being of things not being" a statement that may be taken as an early description of the nature of imitative arts (*Sophist*, 165a). For the difference between the prudential and the productive see also Plato, *Protagoras* 319b-323a, where political wisdom is placed under the head of the prudential.



ment from responses to all levels of motivations and perceptions, to values in general. It is no wonder that Aristotle opined that ethical syllogism cannot be based on natural science propositions which present an invariable, universally valid position. Moreover rhetorical argument, in the form of "what ought to be most reasonably thought" in order to be pursued is an illuminating instance of the process of designating meaning in relation to "choices" made in the empirical context. The orator formulates - through individual selection from among possible explanations - a conception of facts over which he has no control. Elsewhere Aristotle had proposed that meaning cannot be taken for granted even at the basic level of semantics. For "it is useful to have examined the number of uses of a term both for clearness's sake (for a man is more likely to know what it is he asserts, if it has been made clear to him how many uses it may have), and also with a view to ensuring that our deductions shall be in accordance with the actual facts and not addressed merely to the word used" (*Topics*, I, 18, 108a, 18-22). He thereby suggested that the relationship between word and meaning is not a matter of words - which according to Searle is a mistaken account of the nature of "quotation" - but a complex equation involving human purpose, empirical fact and language"<sup>15</sup>.

Cicero discerned a similar process in the formation of ordinary human wisdom based on imperfect apprehension of experience, "...all true sensations are associated with false ones so closely resembling them that they contain no infallible mark to guide out judgement and assent ... many sensations are probable, that is, though not amounting to a full perception they are yet possessed of a certain distinctness and clearness and so can serve to direct the conduct of the wise man" (*De Natura Deorum*, I, V-VI). He made thus clear case for discriminatory perception in the conception of external objects.

Rhetorical argument, as Cicero would it, is "a course of reasoning which firmly establishes a matter about which there is some doubt" making it plain that certitude as the inherent nature of the subject is not the question. While syllogistic argument extends and incorporates "extrinsic factors", (the causal), it is limited by reference to particular persons and situations, to practical wisdom which has to do with values, human and contingent. The Ciceronian practical thesis *causae* - as different from the theoretical - is not the simple inquiry i.e. what the

---

<sup>15</sup> John R. Searle, "Reiterating the Differences: A Reply to Derrida", *Glyph* (I, 1977), p. 198-208.

thing is, for example, what is honourable what is useful or equitable etc., but involves comparisons - "what is more honourable or useful or equitable" etc., implying "a class of consideration which comprises the things that constitute the supreme value of life" (*De Partitione Oratoria*, XIX, 66). At all times *quale sit* (qualitative aspects) of the situation takes precedence over *quid sit* (definitive distinctions); judicative intention mingles with the cognitive. The Ciceronian practical thesis may be easily tied up with interest-bound discernment, the character of rhetorical reasoning.

Aristotle discussed rhetoric's exemplification of ways of identifying "reasons" enabling decision and action. The deliberative topic towards which rhetoric tended had the resounding implication of how one ought to live or morality. Knowledge is an active knowing what to do and not something that may be contained in a definition or a concept. For Aristotle "to know anything that is noble is itself noble"; but to know how to bring it about and "out of which it arises is most precious". For "we do not wish to know what bravery is but to be brave, nor what justice is but to be just" (*Eudemian Ethics*, I, 1216b, 5-25). However the difficulty of determining what to do is related to the inapplicability of any absolute uniform concept of right and wrong, mistakenly assumed in the administration of justice. He pointed to "the defects of a community's written code of law" and to a sort of justice, in other words equity, which goes beyond it. Its existence is intended when the legislators are "unable to define things exactly ...", in fact "what holds good always only holds good usually". For it is not easy to be "complete owing to endless possible cases presented" (*Rhetoric*, I, 1374a, 20-35). Deliberation thus puts the onus on reasons for action and not on its result or consequences. In the case of perjury, for example, judgement would depend on "the intention and not on the spoken word" (I, 1377b, 3-9). Aristotle is even more categorical about virtue, the avoidance of excess or defect or the selection of action which represents the "mean" or the intermediate, as not residing in the object, but as determined by the particularity of the situation and is "relative to us" (*Nicomachean Ethics*, II, 6, 1106b 7). And despite a strong theory of teleology which assumes that *eudaimonia* (happiness) is the chief good - the end of the things we do - he did not suggest any consistency between human goals and drives, teleology and choice (I, 2, 1101a 10ff). On the other hand he referred to competing views about it, to the heterogeneous needs and interests that each individual situation reflects, making it necessary for *eudaimonia* to be constructed out of the "content of desires" which any



individual can be expected to substantially have<sup>16</sup>. In an adjacent context rhetorical argument may be seen to present such a structure of discovery. Its major premise (accepted truth) is evaluated not for its unconditional acceptability but for its adequacy in the explanation of a situation/action. Therefore maxims which are often premises and conclusions of the enthymeme must always be accompanied by supplement, especially if they express disputable matters (*Rhetoric*, II, 21, 1394b, 27-28). The "middle term" or the minor premise introduces concerns incommensurable with the propositional statement. And if the contextual elements are indeterminable then explanation can only approximate a practical possibility rather than coincide with truth. Reasoning or opinion is therefore unrelated "to action or its end". Further, the understanding of meaning through language is quite different from action oriented control of the natural or social world. Practical syllogism offers at best a description of the subject's decision process. It is a reconstruction of reasons that an agent himself has for his actions as the "moving principle of action" is always brought back to the agent himself - *to the ruling part of himself* - his desires and interests, for *that* is what he chooses" (*Nicomachean Ethics*, III, 3, 1113a - 6ff italics mine). Meaning thus remains enclosed within the exigencies of a descriptive account of specific desires or interests; within the parameters of prudence.

As already indicated, moral and political good cannot ascribe to any regulatory principles. The orator can only argue about "how and by what means it will come to be", about decision making. Now true and just actions, which political science investigates, exhibit much variety and fluctuation, so that they may be thought to exist only by convention, and not by nature. And moral good also exhibits similar fluctuation; it is not some common element answering to one idea but must be attainable by man (I, 6, 1096b, 25). One who performs noble actions is a good man. Similarly practical wisdom calls for an ability to select from a number of

---

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Bernard Williams, "if ethical thought had a foundation in determinate conceptions of well-being, the consequences of that could lie only in justifying a disposition to accept certain ethical statements, rather than at showing directly the truth of those statements", *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Collins: Fontana, 1985), p. 199. Alasdair MacIntyre says that although Aristotle gives the name *eudaimonia* to a state of well-being he leaves the question of content largely open. See *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1981). However Nussbaum considers that what appears to be a correct account of the need of human beings can become a description of good for all. See "Virtue Revived" *TLS* (3 July 1992).

features of a situation those which are probable and beneficial. Aristotle says "Not all voluntary acts are deliberate but all deliberate acts are conscious" (*Rhetoric*, I, 9, 1368b, 12). Since no one is ignorant of what he deliberately intends, choice refers to "what goes on in the mind of man". He used the term *voluntas* to specify structural explanation of action as agent begetting (*Nicomachean Ethics*, III, 3, 1112a, 14ff) while reserving the term choice for agent morality (to borrow a term from Salkever)<sup>17</sup>. And he located choice as the basic pattern of motivation within a structure of preference "this rather than that", making a fine distinction between the moving principle of action and conscious decision (III, 3, 1112b, 21f). In a situation where a thing "may be produced by several means" choice refers to the adoption of that "by which it is most easily and best produced" (III, 3, 1112b, 18). In deliberative (political) oratory man makes decisions about "his own vital interest" (*Rhetoric*, I, 1354b, 31). Whence it becomes easy to adduce character disposition manifest in wide-ranging activities from the art of money-making to navigation, giving us warrant for statement of conduct "as conduct has to do with individual cases" (*Nicomachean Ethics*, II, 7, 1107b, ff).

Cicero too emphasised the orator's individual understanding while dialectically relating linguistic competence to the "beneficial arrangements involved in the establishment and preservation of a civic society". The excellence of speech, while it owes something to the orator's familiarity with "precedence, tradition, manners and disposition of his countrymen", depends also on his intuitive grasp of the "quality" or *status* of the case<sup>18</sup>. For in defining the "issue" the orator reaches beyond the provisions encoded in the statutes and the senatorial ordinances, breaking free of the recursive character of language as also "ideologies embedded in proffered discourse". For Cicero the aim of rhetorical *inventio* is to capture the "essential content" of the case. This is achieved by opening up the case to arguments and sources which run against the grain of "proofs laid away for particular type of cases". For both Aristotle and Cicero rhetorical competence is a matter of individual judgement.

<sup>17</sup> Stephen G. Salkever, *Finding the Mean: Theory and Practice in Aristotelian Political Philosophy* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1990).

<sup>18</sup> Cicero argues that every matter that is the subject of inquiry involves some issue whether abstract or legal/political. He prescribes inference, definition and deduction as the three modes by which to discover the "issue" or the essential content of the thing (*De Oratore*, III, xxix, III).



Cicero's description of commonsense wisdom particularly undergirds the constant interplay of the orator's critical perception with the specifics of his existence: The man of sight and sense cannot be "wholly ignorant of the nature of sowing and reaping, or of the lopping of trees and pruning of vines, or of the times of the year for doing these things, or of how they are done" (*De Oratore*, I, LVIII, 249). Judgement far from being intuitive – the same for all and sundry – is thus related in one way or another to the practical mastery of everyday life, and is situated in the axis of potential realization of productive activity resembling closely Aristotle's well known description of the discernible relation between thought and action. Meaning is positioned thus in *tertium quid* between perception and reality. Cicero's discussion of "commonplaces" as the source of argument is even more conclusive about the evaluatory demension of meaning. Although the authority of the commonplaces – "everyone seems to agree with them" – make them intransitive, Cicero's intervention is pregnant with implication about the reflective nature of any verbal statement. Cicero identified two uses of the commonplace viz as seats of argument and as *loci communes*, or collective sayings. The first is important as it suggests developing a line of thought on any subject; or finding something to say by "defining, or looking to causes, effects" etc. But more to our purposes is Cicero's discernment that commonplaces (which represent the orator's "linguistic universe") have to be reflectively co-opted into the argument as a combination of description and evaluation, in order to highlight the "issue of the fact"<sup>19</sup>.

Rhetoric thus may be said to conflate the apparently conflicting claims of knowledge and human interest. As Cicero put it, things are sought "for some profit and advantage in them rather than their own

---

<sup>19</sup> Vico's concept of *sensus communis* has been taken as an analogue of the "commonplace topic" of rhetoric, and his discourse on tropes is seen as continuing the argument of classical rhetoric. Vico links *sensus communis* with the mental faculty of "ingenium" which is structure of thought or the basic law of the mind itself, and in its operation of inventing similarities is responsible for technical production (*On the Ancient Wisdom of the Italians*, "On the Faculties" IV). But as basis for shared pre-logical meanings (which make it close to the rhetorical Doxa), it is unreflective and judgements involved may be akin to prejudices. As such it can have little bearing on "commonplace" of rhetoric which emphasizes the reasoning processes. Vico, however, has been made much use of by the discourse theorists in their dealings with the dialectic of language and thought. See especially John D. Schaeffer, *Sensus Communis: Vico and the Limits of Relativism* (Durham: University of North caroline Press, 1990) and Schaeffer, "The Use and Misuse of Ciambattista Vico: Rhetoric and Theories of Discourse" in Aram H. Vesser (ed.), *The New Historicism* (New York: Routledge, 1989).

merit". He conceived all human action and decision as intersecting between the twin pulls of *honestas and utilitas*, virtue and expediency<sup>20</sup>. Moreover he merged the theoretical and practical categories by insisting that "whatever is just, ... the same is also profitable; and whatever is honest, the same is also just; whence it follows, that whatever is honest, the same must be also profitable"<sup>21</sup>. The fact/value dichotomy that has riven critical discourse seems redundant to a conception which takes meaning as consonant with value. The orator's understanding, even when it embodies culturally nascent theories and doctrines (as indeed it must), incorporates his particular choices and reasonings. Cicero demanded that in considering an act like Ulysses' going over to the enemy "one must not only think what the occasion demands but also what is worthy of the person concerned, and one must consider not what is being done, but with what spirit anything is done ... from these divisions ideas should be drawn for expressing an opinion" (*De Inventione*, LVIII, 176). It alerts us to the way literature may also embody individual predilections.

However, a conception of an event or the understanding of a particular expression of experience is possible only in relation to general assumptions: by uniting the two spaces i.e. the immediate and "what people know to be, or not to be the case". The negotiability of meaning is premised upon the accessibility of different concepts of reality to the extent they appeal to "the usual, possible, that which happens for the most part" (Aristotle *Rhetoric*, I, 2, 1357a, 4-6). This does not suggest the universality of language or human nature or even the transparency of psychological processes. What it does imply, however, is that human interests and desires, no matter how specific, are communicable matters. And communication, verbal and literary, relies on inter-subjective norms and conventions and is logically dependent for its sense on social interaction. As Ong states "the sender (of the message) has to be not only in the position of the sender but also in the receiver position before he or she can send anything"<sup>22</sup> thus signalling meaning as more-than-

<sup>20</sup> Cicero accedes that truth draws us by its "intrinsic merit", attracting us by its own worth, but asserts that "it also holds out to us a prospect of some advantage to induce us to seek it more eagerly", *De Inventione* II, LI, 157-158.

<sup>21</sup> Cicero, *Offices, Essays, and Letters* (rpt. London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1937), p. 75.

<sup>22</sup> Walter J. Ong Jr. *Orality and Literacy: The Technonogizing of the Word* (London: Methuen, 1982).



-verbal situation, exceeding the strictures of discursivity. Besides, the object of deliberation in rhetoric is the contingent which presents us with alternative possibilities. The implicit recognition of some normative perspective which makes communication possible does not preclude that "things can be otherwise". For the orator deals with "things that may or may not take place" as "no one thinks that he opines when he thinks that it is impossible for it to be otherwise ... but when he thinks that it is so but that nothing prevents it from being otherwise, then he thinks he opines" (Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics*, I, 33, 89a, 5-11).

Primary rhetoric, constituting an act of enunciation on a specific occasion, already contained audience expectation in its topic of deliberation. But the art of discourse, such as rhetoric emerged, required rethinking about *techné* as knowledge rather than skill. It led to Aristotle's formulation of a theory about practice and a conception of verbal meaning. To him the notion of the universal was necessarily tied to identification of the particular, as when "one conceives the particular, perception is of the universal"; more specifically "in demolishing or establishing a thing universally we prove it in the particular" (*Topic*, II9a, 32). This stance is related no doubt to Aristotle's position that thought can become more persuasive (accessible) in reference to the sort of things "people may say or do" as "people love to hear stated in general terms what they already believe in some connexion" (*Rhetoric*, II, 1395b, 5-7). It becomes obvious that the major term in syllogism, the propositional statement, functions as the basic of general understanding and is not an ideal equivalent of the particular experience by which the one thing or one imaginable constituent of the event seized upon can be made representative. We may say the fictional example is likewise not a "concrete universal" but a member of a class and that which exemplifies the class<sup>23</sup>.

In the *Republic* Plato had asserted that human enquiry takes off from "the accustomed method of establishing some one particular form for each of the particular manys to which we give the same name" (10, 596a, 5-8). Though not observing a rigid commensurability of meaning, Aristotle conceived rhetorical syllogism or the *enthymeme* as embodying the same principle in its reflexive justification of choices made or not made. For example if "Dionysius is asking for a bodyguard" we may conclude that "he is scheming to make himself a despot" for in the past

<sup>23</sup> E. D. Hirsch Jr., "Meaning and Significance Reinterpreted" *Critical Inquiry*, II, No. 2 (Dec. 1984), 209.

Persistratus kept asking for a bodyguard in order to carry out such a scheme and did make himself a despot as soon as he got it" (*Rhetoric*, I, 2, 1357b, 30-95). It is by means of an induction of particulars in cases that are alike that we claim to induce the universal. But prudential wisdom also detects that habits resemble nature, and frequent occurrence is akin to invariability (I, 10, 1370a, 6-9). It indeed becomes possible to construe from a "good number of cases all of the same kind" the quality of the man who did them, as people will think "they must have been intended" (I, 9, 1367, 25-27).

Rhetorical argument utilizes contextual knowledge, linguistic entities in the construction of analogous, concrete instances. Such proof is too fragile to withstand the charge of deception – qualities attributed to an event or a thing hardly intrinsically belong to it – nevertheless, the sheer power of shared assumptions make for persuasion. For in the world of *doxa*, within which rhetoric operates, objective stringency matters less than that "which would be judged, or which has been judged, a good thing or a better thing than something else, by all or most people of understanding, or by majority of men..." (I, 1364b, 12-15).

Likewise Cicero pointed to the "awareness of event in relation to its broadest context of application". Argument is required to draw out the full implication of the case and express the orator's understanding of the "nature and character of the matter as a whole". At all times the structuring of speech and the application of the principle of decorum in the determination of its various features is tied to the highlighting of the general issues. There is no denying the abstraction ensuing such a procedure, nor the character of a second-order statement of speech. Generalization ensures the operational success of rhetorical art, in the performance of its latent function within its specific context. It illustrates the co-operative principle at work in "delimiting or qualifying something as yet unspecified", without eliminating a whole range of "possible views of life". The attempt is to reach out to the hypothetical truth conditions, to the area of likelihood, and intelligibility. There is no gainsaying that meaning acquires the status of cognizable construction, outstripping all positivist boundaries.

I would argue that poetic representation depends for its appeal on general approximation, which the term *verisimilitude* so succinctly expresses. Aristotle's conception of the universal in poetry militates against all notions of symbolic truth and mimetic projection formal and complete in itself. The resistance to "necessity" in the poetics is premised upon the general assumption that poetry is humanly intelligible.



It is the cognizing principle that is at stake in any ideal reference. Cicero perceived a similar danger in the use of maxims in rhetoric resorted to by the Stoics. On hindsight it appears that Plato's distinction between resemblance and identity, so cogently put forward by the Eleatic Stranger in the *Sophist*, is our best yardstick yet for distinguishing between hypothetical assumptions of rhetoric and poetry and the exact meaning of the hard sciences. The Stranger as an image maker relates the representational problem to the problem of knowing, maintaining that the realm of phenomenal change (which cannot be known directly) may be approached through "a dialectical analysis of the genuinely and specifically interrelated forms and concepts expressed in language"<sup>24</sup>.

The orator's ability to argue on both sides of the question, his taking on of opposing stances is the logical corollary to the hypothetical truth conditions that rhetoric persuades. Flexibility germane to what is humanly possible marks the cognitive status of rhetoric. Rhetorical theory admits that argument is not rendered ineffective by the fact that there may be different views about an identical situation. To Cicero it was possible to speak pro and contra on topics of "virtue, duty, good, utility and moral" etc., and that one can have "different opinions at different times on an identical issue, in which case only one of such opinions can possibly be right" (*De Oratore*, II, VII, 30). There is no question of verbal meaning working against itself or lending itself to pluralism. The tacit assumption is that "there may be difference between case and case but not between rhetoric and itself" (Quintilian *Institutio Oratoria*, II, xviii, 32)<sup>25</sup>. Unfortunately, current notions of the opaqueness of the literary text, as well as the concomitant belief that interpretation requires a structure of explanation which enables an identification of experience as the interpreter's own, favours contestation over meaning, which is presumed to be retrievable at the objective level. Though rhetoric makes use of commonly held assumptions it does not commit itself to the view that "all situations are explicable by a structured notion of common

<sup>24</sup> Trimpf, *Muses of One Mind*, p. 109.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Aristotle: "...we must be able to employ persuasion, just as strict reasoning can be employed, on opposite sides of a question, *not in order that we may in practice employ in both ways (for we must not make people believe what is wrong), but in order that we may see clearly what the facts are, and that, if another man argues unfairly, we on our part may be able to confute him...* (*Rhetoric*, I, 1355a, 29-38, italics added). Such reasoning, or an exchange of opinions as it were, may not be possible in a strictly scientist approach to either experience or the literary text.

experience" as defined by the cognitive sciences. Explanation is both reflective and individual-specific. The reflective purpose that constitutes it, i.e. "what ought to be said in each individual case", makes it resistant to any objective regularities and to theory as such. At the same time the different choices made by different human beings by way of coming to some understanding of experience does not diminish the validity of the variety of perceptions. For these are related to the "accidental property of things" and are thrown up by socio-psychological dimension of experience and yield a range of possible views of life"<sup>26</sup>.

We have seen how Aristotle's notion of human good takes its bearings from the richness and complexity of the natural world of human need and that ethical and political values are empowered by the emphasis laid on particular situations whereas these are likely to be debilitated by reference to exclusive concepts like a good man and good action. His definition of a good life relies on a distinction made between the more or less virtuous, taking into account the realities on the ground and the priorities among recognized notions of virtue. Similarly Cicero's injunction that: attention be paid to the condition and relation of anything "due to time, or the result of action or their management or to interest and desires of men" (*De Inventione*, LVIII, 176). is an overwhelming instance of an acknowledgement of the differences that constitute life, and the propriety of not regarding things in every case "in the same light as they have been regarded". Different evaluations are possible and even desirable, not only because any situation (verbal or otherwise) continually lends itself to alternative possibility, but also because probable explanation – and literature negotiates that – has as its context a space where "everything is persuasion and nothing is ultimate truth and rationality", to borrow a description from Bernard Williams<sup>27</sup>. It is a space where ready-made rational structures have to give way to inferences of the "intuitive" kind.

There is a recognizable dimension to this openness: the negotiability of moral language which forms the basis of this disclaimer of an unconditional truth, or a fixed view of things "that can be otherwise". By

---

<sup>26</sup> Cicero distinguishes between qualities of things as either belonging to "necessity" or "affection" and considers the latter in the old philosophical sense to refer to the temporary non-essential state, condition or relation of anything. See *De Inventione* II, Lii, 158.

<sup>27</sup> Bernard Williams in "Saint-Just's Illusion-Interpretation and the Powers of Philosophy" *LRB*, 13, No. 16 (August 29, 1991), 8-10.



the same token the conditionalities within which explanation becomes the "means to a desired end" falls short of absolute conditions. Rhetorical narration forming an important part of confirmation in speech was to Cicero the very model of hypothesization (imaginative, interpretative) of the conditionalities within which the rightness and wrongness of conduct/action may become apparent. Cicero's engagement with the literary text was behind this conception and qualified his notion of "probable truth" which in Aristotle had retained a quasi-logical character. Narration reveals the "status of the case", and is integral to the process of "defining a crime proving a definition or determining the issue at hand." Significantly fictional hypothesis (*narratio*) makes visible ramifications of a particular lawsuit in the backdrop of cases encoded in legal interpretation, making its meaning uniquely different from justifications available in "a posteriori significance of image patterns", law in theory<sup>28</sup>. In demonstrating the particular motivation of action, for example, "the purpose Ulysses had", Cicero resorts to a detailed account of when and how he went over to the side of the enemy. In the case of the defence of a person who had slain his countryman the circumstances are redolent with implications of a discernible motive: whether "he actually killed in obedience to a decree of the senate and for the salvation of his native land" or not. Thus both uncontrolled events as well as conflicting dispositions complicate the process of sense-making.

In fact Ciceronian rhetoric highlights making and discovering as corollary processes especially when it comes to bear upon the significance of action, a concept which may be aligned to the central question in Poetics i.e. the intelligibility of the dramatic plot: "what such or such kind of person will probably or necessarily do". Like the middle term in rhetorical argument, dramatic reconstruction of human motives deploys empirical context as implicitly inductive, and as premises for a particular action and choice. The difference Aristotle envisaged between the objective truth of philosophy or hard facts of history and poetry lay precisely in the latter's fictional conjecture of what is likely.

Reflexive response to experience was the *sine qua non* of rhetoric and only in the post-Hellenic period when verbal skills were packaged as pedagogical apparatus did the problem of "interpretative discrepancy"

<sup>28</sup> Modern hermeneutical understanding depends upon retrospection and patterned response to experience and not upon the initial condition of action/meaning. See, for example, Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. I (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1984).

make itself felt. Yet, whether in the *paraphrasis* of classical texts or in the composition of speeches in imitation, critical perception and evaluation continued to dominate over interest in techniques. For example Quintilian's discussion of ancient texts is very much a demonstration of his literary (and moral) evaluations. Aware that imitation may fall short of capturing "the original purpose" (*Institutio Oratoria*, X, II, 11-14) he advocated a method that would take into account "the appropriateness with which these orators' handle the circumstances and persons involved in the various cases in which they were engaged, and observe the judgement and powers of arrangement which they reveal, and the manner in which everything they say" (X, II, 27). In the practical task of improvising declamatory speeches his advice was to take note of the fact that rules could be altered "by the nature of the case, circumstances of time and place and by hard necessity itself" (II, XIII, 1-4). It is obvious, therefore, that although rhetoric in Quintilian's time had become an already written text, occupying, as it were, a chirographic space, its implication continued to remain the relationship that exists between the author and reality rather than that presumed between the reader and the text.

There is no denying that Quintilian's famous discussion about the interrelation between thesis and hypothesis (definite and indefinite questions) was conducted against the backdrop of the activity of text production. It records, appropriately, a rethinking about the verbal act whence the aim becomes to render free implication by interpretation. This may have some bearing on current discussions on the distinction between meaning and significance with the proviso that there can be no reference to be "literariness" of meaning<sup>29</sup>. Quintilian said that abstract issues (thesis) must inhere in circumstantial description (hypothesis) on the premise that "it is from the indefinite questions that the definite was derived" (III, V, 8). Alternatively the students were asked to see whether "there is a certain intrusion of the abstract" when depicting actual cases. For example "Milo killed Claudius, and he was justified in killing one who lay in wait for him". But does this not raise "the general question as to whether we have the right to kill a man who lies in wait for us?" (10). Quintilian directed their attention to moral questions inextricably bound up with any factual account and conversely to the ethical evaluation to

---

<sup>29</sup> E. D. Hirsch Jr., *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967). Concepts of "meaning" and "significance" are based on self-identical schema-tied to literal statements or the original speech event.



which all descriptions are amenable<sup>30</sup>. He perceived thus an elective affinity between intention and structure which renders fictitious themes (the subject of declamation) an exercise in moral cognition. The use of extensive descriptive details – drawn not only from admitted facts but also from fictional suppositions (their epistemological status being the same) – were meant to activate critical understanding of “issues”. Concepts and ideas were not conceived as theoretically distinct or conceptually separate from facts. Quoting the exemplary method of Isocrates and Cicero he argued that the cause or the essential basis upon which the case rests is concerned with “definite persons, circumstances of time and place, actions and business” (III, V, 18). His theory emphasised the power of fiction to pose generic questions, even more to make visible the qualifications that guide human beings in life, making these available for future negotiations<sup>31</sup>.

While discourse on rhetoric had moved away from considerations of practice and from a concern with practical wisdom, it remained firmly entrenched within a context that assumed that the non-verbal universe is implicated in all verbal textures. Moreover it underscored meaning as inseparable from ethical/political questions. Modern theorist, vexed with the problem of the intelligibility of the literary text, have relied on co-texts (the archives) and sub-texts (hidden ideologies) to uncover its sense. But if we can assume that textuality need not cut off meaning from the communicative values outside the generalized literary structures we may be encouraged to re-think literature as value-laden activity. And we may be able to resuscitate meaning as moral cognition implicit in the act of verbalization and revealed in every stance taken or choice made, even at the linguistic level. If the interrelation of invention and disposition (prescribed in rhetoric) is a pointer to the activity of adjudication of experience in the act of speaking and/or writing, it is also an invitation to our engagement with it in critical, evaluative terms. Fictional hypothesis or the act of poesis in its dual processes of interpretation and representation engages us in its temporal evaluative perspectives, but leaves room for all future dissent. To withhold this premise in our consideration of the literary work would be to allow it to be submitted to interpretative stringency, which according to its own

<sup>30</sup> Quintilian discusses thesis as having deliberative intention. It forms the embryo of “Chrea” or moral essay. *Institutio Oratoria*, II, ix, 26.

<sup>31</sup> For Quintilian’s elaborate discussion of “particulars” as visible configuration of the general idea see *Institutio Oratoria*, IX, entire section.

laws promotes unchecked determination of meanings: truth once objectified can be constructed and reconstructed at will and literature as physical object may offer endlessly definite answers to all kinds of questions<sup>32</sup>.

This essay has concerned itself with some and not all assumptions behind current critical practice. It has proposed classical rhetoric as an alternative conceptual model for literary understanding whence meaning becomes concomitant with value negotiations, and thus close to the way we generally make sense of our own lived experience. In this way literature may be considered as having a worthwhile function similar to a political engagement or a moral commitment. If a literary work may be seen as capturing the inherent dynamism of thought and action, it follows that we are free to accept or reject the insights it thus makes available, making interpretation truly judicative. What we have then is scope for ethical divergence, not meaning disagreements.

---

<sup>32</sup> Cf. E. D. Hirsch Jr., "A physical object may offer endlessly definite answers to our later questions about what its various aspects were... But with verbal meaning answers ...are not always definite". "Meaning and Significance Reinterpreted", p. 203.



## RETORYKA, TEKSTUALNOŚĆ I ZNACZENIE

(Streszczenie)

Teoria krytyki radykalnie zmieniła nasze rozumienie literatury. Nie uważamy już jej za wyraz ludzkiego doświadczenia, lecz za odnoszący się do siebie samego system znaczeń zdeteterminowanych przez językową i intertekstualną strukturę. Nacisk teorii na znaczenie zawarte w momentalności języka wspiera także spojrzenie na literaturę jako na nieodróżniane pole dyskursu podlegające opisowi i analizom należącym do nauk przyrodniczych i społecznych. Ścisłe oddzielenie podmiotu i przedmiotu doświadczenia, które wynika z metody nauk eksperymentalnych, jest również wrogiem pokrewieństwu podmiotu i doświadczenia, które jest przesłanką sensu literackiego. Celem niniejszego eseju jest ponowne potwierdzenie idei, że literatura znaczy coś na sposoby odmienne od rozumienia przedmiotów czy istnień i że znaczenie literackie jest zorientowane moralnie, a nie ontologicznie.

Przytaczam zatem argumenty za takim krytycznym podejściem do literatury, które zwróciłoby uwagę na należne jej zaangażowanie moralne w przeżycie, którego nie udaje się uchwycić teorii jako nadrzędemu powszechnemu prawu. Jako przykład przytaczam „sztukę przekonywania” retoryki klasycznej, aby na nowo ustawić zagadnienie znaczenia literackiego w kontekście wartościowania ludzkiej rzeczywistości. Argumentacja retoryczna, zwłaszcza *enthymeme* w retoryce Arystotelesa dostarcza nam wzoru rozpoznania rzeczywistości przypadkowych w celu podjęcia pewnych praktycznych decyzji. Jako uporządkowane wyjaśnienie tego, co wymaga natychmiastowego działania, *enthymeme* podkreśla, że znaczenie odnosi się do indywidualnych osób w indywidualnych sytuacjach, bo zarówno rozmaitości, jak i zmienny charakter doświadczenia, nie pozwalają na żadną „systematyczną wiedzę”. Celem rozumowania retorycznego jest odkrycie w ten sposób „sposobu na takie zbliżenie się do sukcesu, na jakie pozwalają okoliczności każdej poszczególniej sprawy”, inaczej mówiąc odkrycie „powodów” wydarzeń.

Retoryczne zaangażowanie w rzeczywistość zakłada wiedzę jako czynną znajomość tego, co należy czynić, a nie coś, co może być zawarte w definicji albo pojęciu. Za pomocą tego niuansu retoryka klasyczna określa się w opozycji do filozofii z jej pragnieniem prawdy i pewności, i deklarowała swe powinowactwo z przesłankami etyczno-politycznymi poetyki mimetycznej. Podążam śladem retoryki klasycznej od Arystotelesa poprzez Kwintyliana, aby wykazać wagę jaką nadaje funkcji języka w kontekście wzajemnego i społecznego działania. Retoryczne pojęcie znaczenia jako partykularnego rozumienia doświadczenia nie odniosło się do struktury kodów językowych, ani też do już istniejącej prawdy. Na przykład Cicerono, z troską o ułomność ludzkiej wiedzy, zalecał użycie *causa*, praktycznej tezy, dla potraktowania spraw, co do których „istnieje jakaś wątpliwość”. I odnosił indywidualne zrozumienie mówcy do kompetencji uzyskanej z doświadczenia wynikającego z zajmowania się sprawami państwowymi. Jego intuicyjne ujęcie sporu, jakość czyli status sprawy, zwłaszcza w sytuacji sądowej, zależało od praktycznej znajomości społecznego użycia języka, jako dowodów prawnych albo jako *loci communes* – zbiorowych powiedzeń. Przechodząc do Kwintyliana i do literackiej apoteozy sztuki retoryki, prowadzącej do jej systematyzacji jako reguł pisanie, odkrywamy jeszcze mocniejszy akcent kładziony na „naturę sprawy”, na temat której należy skonstruować argumentację, tj. jej stan w danym czasie. Dyskusja Kwintyliana na temat „wzajemnych stosunków tezy i hipotezy”, fikcji i moralności, wyjaśnia, że uważał on iż

zagadnienia moralne są nierozłączne z każdym przedstawieniem faktów i, odwrotnie – iż wszelkie opisy werbalne podlegają ocenom etycznym.

Bardzo dla nas interesujący jest Arystotelesowski nacisk położony na działanie jako źródło i domenę znaczenia w przeciwieństwie do poglądu, że „wszystko zawiera się już w języku”. Literatura staje się aktem stawiającym pytania o wartość poszczególnych doświadczeń i werbalizującym implikowaną postawę moralną w tej orientacji. Współczesny wywód krytyczny ignoruje osądający charakter literatury i w ten sposób czyni ją irrelevantną w stosunku do sposobów, jakimi nadajemy sens naszemu własnemu doświadczeniu życiowemu. Nic dziwnego, że dzieła literackiego już się nie ceni za jego zdolność refleksji, albo wgląd moralny, co do których można się nie zgadzać, lecz patrzy się na nie jak na strukturę werbalną nie mającą bezpośredniego odniesienia do niewerbalnego wszechświata. Dlatego jesteśmy wpłatanymi w interpretację, która jest albo wewnętrzna, odnosząca do jej proceduralnej osi (literatura jako system), albo zewnętrzna, której aprioryczne założenia (ideologia) uprzedmiotowiają się w praktyce (tekście). Retoryka klasyczna jako konceptualny model rozumienia tekstów literackich przywraca do życia swe znaczenie jako moralnego poznania, które jest mocno usytuowane w świecie, gdzie możliwe jest porozumienie się – komunikacja.