

## South Atlantic Modern Language Association

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The Spirit and Its Letter: Traces of Rhetoric in Hegel's Philosophy of Bildung by John H. Smith

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These include one omission of an entire line, completely garbling the sense. There are also four omissions of single words. Admittedly, these words are small words, mere “of’s” and “to’s.” Yet, their omission rudely trips the careful metrical balance of lines like “The common shore of Paris and of Rome.” Elsewhere, it is the sense as well as the meter that suffers. The flattering groom in *London* apparently “retains” (rather than “retails”) the “favours of his lord.” In the same poem, the French parasite is quoted as being “Obsequiousness, artful, voluble, and gay.” Wolsey’s end in *The Vanity of Human Wishes* shall, it seems, “by thine” (rather than “be thine”). In the same poem, Johnson’s parallel phrase “the robes of pleasure and the veils of woe” is ruined when “robes” are misquoted as “riches.” What could have been a useful essay has become a very shoddy book.

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□ *The Spirit and Its Letter: Traces of Rhetoric in Hegel’s Philosophy of Bildung.* By John H. Smith. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988. 283 pp. \$32.50.

Recent literary criticism has paid increasing attention to the historical conditions of cultural artifacts (historicist and sociological criticism) and their uses of language (structuralist and poststructuralist criticism). John Smith unites the two approaches by reading Hegel’s early writings in the light of Hegel’s acquisition of rhetorical knowledge and his employment of rhetoric. It is an original approach, rich in historical-biographical discoveries and textual-rhetorical description. Smith’s major claims are that Hegel’s philosophy is informed by the prehistory of his own rhetorical education, that the style of his philosophy develops in tune with his employment of various rhetorical devices, and that traces of this rhetoric can be found throughout Hegel’s philosophy, even in those passages where the philosopher adopts an explicitly antirhetorical stance. In studying Hegel’s rhetorical education, Smith also reflects on Hegel’s concept of education or *Bildung*. The two intertwine by way of Hegel’s self-reflection and the parallel development of each.

The book consists of two introductory sections and five subsequent chapters. In “On Prefacing” Smith studies the paradoxes of Hegel’s own preface to the *Phenomenology*. Hegel writes in the very form he criticizes: the preface is a rhetorical critique of rhetoric. In his “Introduction” Smith considers the contemporary debate on representation and offers preliminary definitions of rhetoric and *Bildung*. Literary critics will find especially interesting Smith’s focus on a tradition of

*Bildung* that associates the concept with civic responsibility, not interiority (45-54).

Chapter 1 is a fascinating account of young Hegel's immersion in traditional rhetoric. The basic goal of Hegel's rhetorical-pedagogical program in Stuttgart was threefold: the stylistic mastery of figurative language; the internalization of tradition through imitation; and dialectical argumentation in a public sphere.

In the second chapter Smith successfully shows that Hegel develops his own style by imitating and transforming the rhetoric of earlier religious and philosophical texts. Our awareness of this strategy adds a new dimension to Hegel's own view of the history of philosophy as a series of attempts to think through one's antecedents.

The third chapter, which sees the Jena period as the next step in Hegel's rhetorical *Bildung*, discusses Hegel's attempt to publicly differentiate his position from that of others. The focus here is on Hegel's developing concept of *Kritik*.

Chapter 4 seeks to interpret Hegel's *Phenomenology* as a rhetorical narrative. Each stage of consciousness consists of the adoption, mastery, and transcendence of a different rhetorical moment (or form of representing truth). For Smith, it seems, there is no clear developmental or organic sequence in the *Phenomenology*, merely the suggestion that one acquire the ability to assume a variety of positions. Though Smith rightly stresses the rhetorical and representational dimensions of the individual positions and though the chapter contains some interesting reflections on the ambiguities of the "wir" in the *Phenomenology*, I fail to see why the stress on rhetoric frees one from evaluating the legitimacy of the sequence of positions or the viability of individual transitions. Smith does not restrict himself to adding what is a just stress on rhetoric; he transforms the text into an unsystematic array of rhetorical stances.

The fifth chapter discusses the propedeutics of philosophy, analyzing Hegel's theory of the education of the individual and the origination of philosophy in Greece. In each case rhetoric is a necessary tool for philosophical development.

The book has a variety of strengths. It provides us with historical insight into Hegel's rhetorical education. It presents a strong claim for the influence of rhetoric on Hegel's philosophy and draws clear parallels between figures of rhetoric and various aspects of Hegel's philosophy. It provides those not versed in rhetoric with the vocabulary to describe and understand Hegel's use of a variety of general and particular tropes. It draws attention to some central paradoxes (and possible contradictions) in Hegel's more antirhetorical utterances, and it raises

an issue on which Hegel sometimes reflects but never fully integrates into his system, namely intersubjectivity (not surprisingly, the *Logic*, in its macrostructure, has only two parts, objectivity and subjectivity), as well as related issues of the communication of philosophy and the transformation of the true into the good. Hegel, the philosopher of the owl of Minerva, never fully answers the question: why must philosophy express itself? Finally, the book offers a number of substantial insights into the institutionalization of rhetoric and into the German concept of *Bildung*.

With its just stress on the *ars disputandi*, the book also invites critical reflections. There are ambiguities in the term "rhetoric," of which Smith is aware, though he does not always keep them sufficiently clear: rhetoric as the art of persuasion; rhetoric as (secondary) form in opposition to philosophy as (primary) content; and rhetoric as the (ideal) unity of spirit and letter. These confusions may explain some of Smith's difficulties with Hegel: Hegel rightly rejects rhetoric insofar as it means Sophistic persuasion (or what he would call external reflections), and he embraces the technique of immanent critique (the refutation of a position based on internal contradictions), which is not to say that Hegel denies the need for (rhetorical) mediation, that he himself does not deviate from his own high standards, or that he overlooks the congruent structures of dialectic and rhetoric. Related to this, Hegel's occasional stress on the need to realize truth (and thus to persuade audiences) does not mean that truth is determined by consensus (see 8, 21, 25, etc.). Hegel is a transcendental thinker who embraces a theory of truth based on coherence, not consensus. Though Hegel's mastery of imitation and transformation appears to derive from his rhetorical schooling, it may also have been influenced by his study of the Socratic method, which gives one a philosophical measure by which one can defend *how* one is to transform the other, *in what way* sequences of rhetorical figures follow a rational pattern, and reasons (other than merely teleological ones) as to *why* certain rhetorical figures are imperative for philosophical justification. At times Smith's study gives the impression that Hegel's philosophical task was directed solely by his rhetorical development and a power-positivistic desire to dominate the philosophy of his time and not also by his interest in (and his act of thinking through) the positions themselves. As a result, the tenability of Hegel's philosophical claims is not given as much weight as this reader would have liked. Finally, the book presents a strong argument for rhetoric as unavoidable and uncircumventible without reflecting on the *Unhintergebarkeit* of certain transcendental arguments (which are now being more directly related, by Karl-Otto Apel and

Wolfgang Kuhlmann, for example, to dialogical situations) that would have helped the reader better grasp what is at stake in any attempt to overcome the schism, which Smith rightly sees as ultimately belonging to the realm of *Verstand*, between (antirhetorical) philosophy and (anti-philosophical) rhetoric.

Though the student of Hegel will find points on which he or she disagrees, there is no doubt that Smith's book introduces a new technique of historical-textual criticism and raises a variety of demanding philosophical-rhetorical issues.

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□ *Victorian Prose Writers before 1867*. Edited by William B. Thesing. *Dictionary of Literary Biography*. Volume 55. Detroit: Gale Research Company, 1987. xiv + 379 pp. \$90.00.

□ *Victorian Prose Writers after 1867*. Edited by William B. Thesing. *Dictionary of Literary Biography*. Volume 57. Detroit: Gale Research Company, 1987. xiv + 571 pp. \$90.00.

Since the first volume was published in 1978, the *Dictionary of Literary Biography* has continued to live up to the stated purpose of its advisory board, "not only to provide reliable information in a convenient format but also to place the figures in the larger perspective of literary history and to offer appraisals of their accomplishments by qualified scholars" (xi). Two of the latest volumes, *Victorian Prose Writers* (*DLB* 55 and *DLB* 57), join earlier works on Victorian novelists and poets to make all but complete the *DLB* series on the Victorian age. Only the drama of the period has yet to receive consideration. I have high praise for all of the volumes to date. The earlier volumes on the Victorian period, under the editorship of Ira B. Nadel and William E. Fredeman, have proved useful to both novice and scholar alike. William B. Thesing's careful editing makes the latest volumes equally indispensable.

The consideration of Victorian prose writers is divided into two parts by necessity. Victoria's rule saw the production of some of the greatest works of nonfiction in English literary history. Ruskin, Carlyle, Arnold, Mill, Newman, Morris, Darwin, and Pater are only a few of the giants of the age. But other writers also receive attention in Thesing's volumes, including Samuel Smiles, Richard F. Burton, Edward Pusey, Vernon Lee, and John Addington Symonds. The division of the two volumes around the year 1867 is hardly arbitrary. As Thesing reminds us in his introduction, the year saw not only the adoption of the Second Reform Bill, but also the thirtieth anniversary