DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 039 242 TE 001 838

AUTHOR Sloan, Thomas O.
TITLE Rhetoric and the Interpretation of Poetry.
PUB DATE Nov 69
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of National Council of Teachers of English, Washington, D.C., November 29, 1969

EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF-$0.25 HC-$0.75
DESCRIPTORS Characterization (Literature), Critical Reading, *Interpretive Reading, *Literary Analysis, *Literary Perspective, Persuasive Discourse, *Poetry, Poets, *Rhetoric
IDENTIFIERS I Heard a Fly Buzz When I Died, My Last Duchess

ABSTRACT

The ability to think of poetry rhetorically is a valuable instrument for interpreting poetry. The poet is the speaker "of" the poem, the persona the speaker "in" the poem. The communicative circle is complete when it includes the reader who combines an analysis of the text (the words of the persona) with an analysis of the context (the message of the poet). The poet's strategy is to control the sympathies of his audience (as seen in Browning's "My Last Duchess" and Dickinson's "I Heard a Fly Buzz When I Died"), white the audience participates in a kind of dialectic by its search for the poet through his literary strategies. Unlike literary criticism, which attempts to determine the poem's value and what it should mean, literary interpretation is the process by which the reader finds out what the poem actually means to him. Rhetoric, then, allows one to describe the activity of interpretation, for in interpreting a poem the reader must play all roles in the dialectic, performing both the explorations of the reader and the words of the poet. (MF)

# RHETORIC AND THE INTERPRETATION OF POETRY

by Thomas O. Sloan, University of Illinois

Whether one is discussing classical rhetoric for modern students or assisting students with the rhetorical analysis of literary works, he finds nowadays that he must acknowledge the original and most basic denotation of rhetoric as "the art of persuasive oratory."[1] The great rhetoricians who formed our tradition usually had two major conceptual models: the oration for the rhetorical product and public speaking for the rhetorical act. When our language was drowned in a sea of print, rhetoric showed amazing buoyancy but at the expense of keeping its mouth shut. Thus what has passed for rhetoric until only recently has often been either a water-logged version of the original or some of its Ramist flotsam and jetsam. Of course, calling a certain concept traditional does not these days automatically provide sanctions for it. We prefer our truths to be less authoritarian, more existential. My thesis is one that I hope can be proved existentially: thinking of poetry rhetorically, that is in terms of public speaking, is an invaluable instrument if not in the criticism of poetry, then in the interpretation of poetry.

Obviously, the identity of interpretation as an analytical activity apart from criticism is central to my thesis. But I think the nexus of that distinction may lie in the rhetorical analysis of poetry. Therefore, I shall turn to two examples of rhetorical analysis as part of my attempt to describe what interpretation is.

Robert Browning's My Last Duchess presents a persona who is himself in a very clear rhetorical situation, a situation within which he attempts to persuade another man of a certain attitude. The rhetorical purpose of the Duke of Ferrara is to make unmistakable to another man exactly what he expects in

a wife. The other man is an emissary from a Count, whose daughter the Duke intends to marry. The Duke's purpose is rhetorical. Suppose we assume Browning's is, too.

First of all, examining the Duke's rhetorical action, one becomes struck with the degree to which the audience in the poem participates. The Duke seems to be speaking not simply to one person, but to several, each of whom takes part in the action of the poem. Interestingly enough, the participation of the audience is an effect that has always been implicit in the great rhetorical theories; it is receiving new attention in our time, perhaps because of our new-found delight in anti-linear processes. The audience is not merely a passive receptor. It is an active, creative presence. In the Browning poem, there are at least three people who are present, either before the Duke's eyes or in his thought, and who form parts of the motivating context of his utterance: the Duke himself, the emissary, and the last Duchess. First, it is perhaps for himself that the Duke insists upon his abhorrence of "stooping." Second, the emissary "speaks" at the first of the poem in some way, through a silent gesture, that the Duke interprets as a question concerning how such an "earnest glance" came to be painted on the last Duchess' face. Besides responding to the Duke's utterance throughout the poem, the emissary also speaks, again silently, at the very end of the poem when he rises and bows to the Duke, causing the latter to respond with ostentatious deference, "Nay, we'll go/ Together down, sir!" Finally, the last Duchess is a very prominent audience in the poem. The message which her painted expression presents to the Duke is still at times unbearable for him, so much so that he keeps the painting shrouded. Her painted presence--whose life-likeness is commented on twice by the Duke--gives him

exactly the kind of audience she was never capable of giving him in real life; one that allows him to say to her "Just this/ Or that in you disgusts me; here you miss/ Or there exceed the mark," all without "stooping." Thus, in a precarious balance between these forces the Duke forges the peculiar rhetoric of his message. And, as Browning well knew, it is in the forging of this peculiar rhetoric that the Duke reveals his own character most clearly.

If this, then, is the persona, where or what is the poet? And if we are the poet's audience, do we, too, like the persona's audience, participate in the rhetorical action of the poem?

To the rhetorician, Browning the poet is, first of all, a composite of certain choices which he characteristically makes concerning poetic matter and poetic manner. Browning is the dramatist, stage-manager, and voice in the masks, who fashioned the character of the Duke, placed him against a certain setting, and presented his utterance in barely perceptible rhymed couplets. Looking at the Duke from Browning's perspective and considering the choices of the craftsman, we see clearly another aspect of the total communicative structure of the poem. The world of the poem, the little universe within which we find the Duke, is constituted mainly by the participants in a small domestic tragedy, divided to reveal two characteristic responses: on the one hand the Duchess' response to Fra Pandolf, the Duke, some officious fool, her white mule; and on the other hand the Duke's response to the last Duchess, the next Duchess, the Count, the emissary, Claus of Innsbruck. To counterbalance these two responses may be the poet's major strategy in controlling the sympathies of his audience.[2] Thus, the rhetorician finds Browning mainly in his choices and in his strategies. I shall return to this point later.

So far as the poet's audience is concerned, rhetoric always offers the expectation that any willing reader is the poet's audience--even though to fulfill that expectation may require some special preparation on the reader's part. Do we as the poet's audience participate in the poem? We have already touched on one kind of participation: the search for the poet through his choices and his strategies. And we have already made a major assumption about those strategies: that they are there to serve the poet's rhetorical purpose, the control of his audience's sympathies. But how, through what kind of action, does the poet manage through the poem to work his strategies on us? How do we become fully involved as his audience? In short, how do we interpret? The question is almost impossible to answer.

I am going to offer a conjecture, however, one that is a natural complement of the rhetorical approach: we become the poet's audience and participate in the poem through a kind of arbitration or dialectic. This process is dramatically presented in one of the most ancient examples of hermeneutics in Western culture. In The Protagoras Socrates interprets a poem by Simonides who Socrates claims is the persona in the poem. He interrupts his recitation to step into the role of the searching reader, asking questions and raising objections. Through this dialectic in which Socrates plays both roles, an understanding of the poem is reached. It is an understanding, moreover, that is based on a rhetorical concept of Simonides' poem as a speech delivered by the poet to an audience about whom he had made certain assumptions. (And we must acknowledge, too, that for all his brilliance as an interpreter, Socrates characteristically discounts literary interpretation from the modes of discovering wisdom about important matters, matters which throughout the Platonic

dialogues rarely include poetry.) Of course, the dialectical method is always the primary one for Socrates in every type of endeavor. In The Phaedrus Socrates complains that the written word is a strange respondent in a dialectic for it keeps on saying the same thing, an unforgiveable strategy in a Socratic dialogue. However, if we begin with the rhetorical approach and, like Socrates, see the poem as a man's speech, these ancient examples may help us describe the hermeneutics of a printed poem. Perhaps the work of interpreting a poem is still a kind of dialogic process, with the interpreter sounding the words of the poem and--silently or aloud--questioning their meaning, values, emphasis. The poet, the other participant in this process, responds only with the poem. Of course, the interpreter must also imitate the persona, or at least empathize with the persona's perspective in the poem. But the total interpretive process is not fulfilled until the interpreter comes to an understanding of the poet's role and of the interpreter's own participation as the poet's audience.

Rhetoric, then, offers certain presuppositions concerning what a poem is. Let me review them before proceeding to a second example.

Rhetoric, in sum, is a concept or discipline whereby a poem is heard as speech spoken by someone (the poet) to someone (the reader) through someone (the persona) for purposes of sharing an attitude or viewpoint. The poet and his persona, then, are always heard as the two major speakers of any poem. It is a simple matter to conceive of the persona as a speaking role; one need only think of such personae as the Duke of Ferrara. But which Browning is it that we seek? To conceive of the poet as a speaking role may be more problematic, for it necessitates separating a man's role as poet from other roles he may

play--as dutiful son, or Liberal Anglican, or lover of music, nature, Italy, and Elizabeth Barrett. Ethos is the rhetorical term for a man's role as a certain kind of speaker, and like most rhetorical terms it is audience-centered. In this case, it pertains to two kinds of images of the poet: the image of the poet which we bring to any one poem, formed from previous acquaintance with his work (say, Browning as the creator of a poetic fashion in dramatic lyrics), as well as the image which is developed during our experience of the poem under study, particularly our response to the poet's personae, his "stance," his values, his means of persuasion (say, Browning's craftsmanship in the total structure of My Last Duchess and the poet's own observable feelings about the Duke). These are the images which Wayne C. Booth in his study of the novel has called "the implied author."[3] An emphasis on the poem as our major source of knowledge about the poet is not simply pedantic; without it, the poem could become merely what Northrop Frye calls "the oratory of its creator,"[4] whose quotidian personality gives the utterance value.

The persona may speak to anyone--to another person, to himself, or to God. The poet, we assume, is speaking to us.[5] The poet is the speaker of the poem, the persona the speaker in the poem. The communicative circle is complete when it includes another person, the reader. This is a role which a person consciously and only momentarily assumes, in expectation of certain rewards--even if they are only the pleasurable filling up of gaps in time. And he brings to his task as reader of poetry certain ideas about that task and about the nature of poetry. If that were not fundamentally true, and important--that is, if there were not an actual role which one plays as reader--there would be

little justification for all those "introductory" courses which are the hors d'oevres for the great immovable feasts offered by departments of literature. Readers may be trained to become proficient interpreters, and I think the interpreter's work is best described as proceeding through a dialectic with the poet to emerge as a full participation in the poem as speech. Walter Ong has argued that a participation in the poem as speech is potentially one of the most intimate modes of communication: once the author and the reader are willing to adopt the conventions of poetic communication (one becomes the poet, the other the reader--the poet speaks through his persona in the poem to the reader) the two are brought into close communion.[6] To place this matter in terms not used by Ong: the ultimate effect of poetic communication becomes an identification, or consubstantiality, between poet and reader, an effect which rhetoricians from Aristotle to Kenneth Burke and beyond have insisted is the sine-qua-non of rhetoric.

Let us call textual our analysis of the persona and his speaking within the work. And let us call contextual our analysis of the poet and his speaking to us through the work. In this way, poem in the rhetorical view means text plus context. Of course, any critic or interpreter must pay careful attention to the personae in the work he is studying. His task, however, becomes specifically rhetorical when he attempts to assess what Booth might call the reliability of any one persona.[7] Does this persona speak for the implied poet? Am I as reader meant to be sympathetic toward him? Once these questions are raised, the line between text and context is diminished; these questions raise others, concerning values, ethics, and morals; and in confronting these questions the rhetorician or interpreter finds himself alone--except, of course, for the company of the critic's bugaboo and the aesthetician's bête-noir.

In the Browning poem there is a disparity between the speaking levels. The poet and his persona are separated by that gulf called "reliability." Obviously, their audiences are separated, too. Emily Dickinson's poem I Heard a Fly Buzz When I Died presents quite the opposite situation, if one accepts the interpretation of Charles Anderson. Indeed, according to Anderson the only viable disparity in the poem is apt to arise between the modern reader and Dickinson's intended audience. Poet and persona are virtually inseparable, their audiences virtually identical. In part, Anderson's argument is this:

> To take this poem literally as an attempted inside view of the gradual extinction of consciousness and the beginning of the soul's flight into eternity would be to destroy its meaning, for this is not an imaginative projection of [Dickinson's] own death. In structure, in language, in imagery it is simply an ironic reversal of the conventional attitudes of her time and place toward the significance of the moment of death.[8]

Ancient traditions which had survived into Dickinson's time and which had been MADE even more prominent by the religiosity of the Puritans placed great importance upon the last moments on earth--that final sentence, those last words uttered by a dying person, words springing to his lips when at the moment of death he sees God. This is the audience that is addressed by the poet, and it is also the audience that appears in the text of the poem, hovering around the persona's bedside, their crying all done, waiting, "Breaths . . . gathering firm/ For that last Onset--when the King/ Be witnessed--in the Room."

But the persona reverses their expectations. What are her last words? She wills away her keepsakes, assigns away whatever "be/ Assignable." Does she see God? No. First she is most aware of a fly. Then she cannot see to see. The existence of God is not necessarily denied. What is denied is the power to perceive with earthly senses after death. Only the most sophisticated Christian

traditions attempt to view the afterlife as an existence that does not depend upon the senses. The popular traditions are full of angels, music, streets paved with gold, and a God in long beard and flowing white robes. Conventional attitudes, traditional expectations--these are the subject of the poet's ironic reversal.

In this poem, then, the poet and the persona are not fully separated, neither are their audiences, but the poet's audience and the modern reader are apt to be. The poet and the persona present a double image, with the persona a fictive abstraction of the poet. For the poet's rhetorical purposes, the fictiveness of the persona has to be strongly underscored, as indeed it is throughout the poem--from the outrage committed on a reader's willing suspension of disbelief right in the first line, to the poet's open flaunting of dramatic probability in the very last line. The poem begins and ends with the senses--"I heard a fly . . . I could not see to see."--and the experience is recounted, we are asked to believe, through the voice of someone who has quite literally left her senses. Perhaps the disparity, the assault upon our credulousness, the overt improbability would not be noticed by the reader to whom the poem is not speech but only an abstract, objective recording of a past experience. Yet that disparity or assault or improbability, I should argue, has rhetorical function when the modern reader is brought through speech into the immediate presence of the poem. And unless he grasps the persona's obvious artificiality, unless he experiences the unique duality of poet and persona in this poem, he will miss not only the separation between himself and the poet's audience but also the poet's rhetorical purpose.

Of course, the rhetorical approach as I have described it, with its simple paradigm concerning the possible speaking levels in a poem, teaches nothing in itself but the name of the tools. But with this approach I think it is possible to describe a great number of interpretive insights: for example, the contemporary role of the poet and the new directness of utterance which students claim is characteristic of poetry "in the age of McLuhan."[9] George T. Wright has suggested other studies which may center upon the persona.[10] For my own work I am particularly interested in the way in which rhetoric allows one to describe the activity of interpretation. Let me conclude with a brief discussion of this final point.

Poetry is speech and therefore communication. That is both the rhetorician's basic proposition and the answer which he necessarily gives to questions concerning poetic ontology. Moreover, all of us in the field of interpretation--whether we call our work hermeneutics or new criticism or explication or simply reading--have necessarily regarded poetry as speech communication even during those years when the vagaries of critical fashion have required us to apologize for that view, make a deferential bow to the formalists, or shyly offer the excuse that we are seeking merely to be heuristic. But these pedagogical strategies--and other circumlocutions of our trade--would perhaps never have been necessary even at the height of formalism if we had had a modern hermeneutics, if we had had some clear modern principles whereby we could distinguish between the work of the interpreter and the work of the critic.

Like rhetoric, the act of interpretation is necessarily participatory and personal. That is, the person who interprets a work of art, or an experience,

or an emotion, or a gesture, does so from a point of view within the thing itself. In the case of a poem, the interpreter seeks to understand it first by assuming the point of view it offers through the persona. In effect he becomes the persona through imitation or empathy, two terms which are used for this kind of participation. And the process is also personal. In spite of all our attempts to emulate the objective methods of the sciences and in spite of all our efforts to banish impressionism from the realm of literary criticism, we are still left dealing with an artistic product that is non-objective, personal, and humane. Literary criticism may tell the student what the poem should mean to him. Interpretation is the process whereby he finds out what the poem actually does mean to him. In a sense, interpretation precedes criticism, for the critic must have some assessment of the poem's meaning before he attempts to determine its value as a poem. But in an important way, interpretation continues after criticism: because the poems that continue to mean the most to us are those that we continue to feel a high-level involvement in, a feeling that is separable from any demonstration of the poetic value of the work.

The poet and the reader--McLuhan would have us believe that print technology separated these two into roles that are as discrete as producer and consumer.[11] Yet the reader who enters poetry through rhetoric must know that even when confronted with the printed page his role, his task, is not simply that of passively consuming. Best reject that metaphor entirely. Ernst Cassirer has argued that our experience of all art is accomplished by means of a dialectic or dialogic process.[12] In interpreting a poem the reader must play all the roles in the dialectic, performing both the explorations of the reader and the words of

the poet. He is Socrates who must also don the poet's mask, his persona, and, as Socrates complains, always answer with the same words. Rhetoric is not merely the counterpart of this dialectic. Properly used, it may become the discipline whereby this dialectic is understood.

## FOOTNOTES

1. My statement alludes to my examples: see Edward P. J. Corbett, Rhetorical Analyses of Literary Works (New York, 1969), p. xi; and Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student (New York, 1965), p. 21.

2. For a related view of the strategy whereby Browning compels us to suspend our moral judgment of the Duke until his utterance is completed, see Robert Langbaum, The Poetry of Experience (New York, 1957), pp. 82-85, or reprint in Corbett, Rhetorical Analyses of Literary Works, pp. 139-143.

3. Wayne C. Booth, The Rhetoric of Fiction (Chicago, 1961), pp. 71-76.

4. Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism (New York, 1966), p. 21.

5. A similar argument is presented by George T. Wright in The Poet in the Poem (Berkeley, 1962), p. 19.

6. Walter J. Ong, S. J. "Voice as Summons for Belief," Literature and Belief: English Institute Essays, 1957 (New York, 1958), p. 103.

7. See Booth, pp. 158-159.

8. Charles R. Anderson, Emily Dickinson's Poetry (New York, 1960), p. 232.

9. There can be little doubt that the style of modern poetry has changed. The rhetorical approach would study this changing style as the outcome of the changing speaking roles of the poet and his personae; in this view, style is the man speaking. "The Sound of Poetry in the Age of McLuhan" is the title of Chad Walsh's amusing account of how his experiences in reading aloud before college audiences caused a change in his style; see Book World of the Chicago Tribune (Oct. 15, 1967), p. 6. Charles Olson's popular essay on "Projective Verse" is an attempt to articulate a program for the new poetic manner; see reprint in Donald M. Allen, The New American Poetry (New York, 1960), pp. 386-397.

10. op. cit. (note 5 above).

11. Marshall McLuhan, The Gutenberg Galaxy (Toronto, 1962), see esp. pp. 272-277.

12. Ernst Cassirer, An Essay on Man (New Haven, 1944), p. 149.