

Rhetoric of Silence in American Studies

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RECENZJA/REVIEW

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“Rhetoric is the study of men persuading men to make free choices”
Everett Lee Hunt

There is no doubt that democracy needs great speakers. Their vital role is not only to inspire the crowds and channel the energies of the citizens when a political upheaval is gaining momentum, but, first and foremost, they are indispensable in our everyday labor of community building, no matter if we talk about a big city council or a local school district. Some of us might wish to have been born with the skills of Martin Luther King or Barack Obama, but such charisma is a truly special gift granted only to few. How about precision of thought accompanied by eloquence? The authors of *The Speaker. The Tradition and Practice of Public Speaking* have undertaken a commendable task to convince us that the latter are the skills within reach of those who are willing to dedicate their heart to the art of speaking as a strategically crafted endeavour. With a keen sense of the subtlety of language and its persuasion-generative power, Joseph M. Valenzano III, Jim A. Kuypers and Stephen W. Bradento addressed their book primarily to novices, but also practitioners, whose goal, either academic or professional, is to turn their speech from an ordinary activity of throwing words together without much thought to a highly conscious effort. The authors demonstrate how to use these words to carve and chisel our thoughts with the precision of a highly skilled artisan who at each stage of their work is totally focused and almost organically interfused with their creation. I draw my comparison from the world of art, taking a full responsibility for the conceptual metaphor of an artisan. For **speech is an art**, and no matter how skill-oriented *The Speaker* may seem at first glance, the artistry of speech is the book’s underlying message which emerges from its pages after a thorough examination of its chapters.

Chapter one sets the stage by describing the ancient Greek and Roman tradition of civic instruction through the practice of rhetoric, which, at the same time is constantly put in conversation with the recent and ongoing phenomena of the digitally mediated world. The strength of the authors' approach to the Aristotelian tradition lies in their reliance on Aristotle's often disregarded definition of rhetoric as "the process of discovering in any particular case all of the available means of persuasion." *The Speaker* takes no shortcuts to reduce the classical approach towards rhetoric to a few general clichés, which seems a common practice of a "quick-guide" type of public speaking courses. Instead, in a gently implied challenge to the hegemony of a "shortcut" approach, where the finished product of a speech takes precedence over the labor of the process of its preparation, the authors demonstrate the mutually constitutive relationship of both speech and thought. All of this is presented against the background of the ancient philosophers' sensitivity to the value of the word and its persuasive potential. If I were to identify the fragment with the most powerful overtone for the remaining chapters, my choice would be the following:

Aristotle noted that **rhetoric, as a means rather than an end**, fulfilled four functions in an open society. First, rhetoric, through the application of speech, **allowed for true and just ideas to prevail**, because he noted all things in public debate are not equal and capable speakers need to advocate for them to win out. Second, in addition to the preservation of truth and justice, Aristotle believed rhetoric **offered the ability to instruct people on how to connect their ideas with the experiences of their audiences**; in short, it allows us to teach others. Third, Aristotle saw rhetoric as **the means of analyzing both sides of a question**—similar to the view taken by Protagoras as we saw earlier. This practice, known as contrarianism, was essential practice for someone to establish the best arguments for or against a particular case. Finally, Aristotle understood rhetoric as **a means to defend oneself, noting that speech and rational thought are abilities unique to human beings**. He understood public speaking as among the most important tools a person can possess for engaging in civic life (p. 7, emphasis added).

I believe that I might be expressing the sentiment of a lot of rhetorical scholars for whom this paragraph constitutes the gist of our writing and teaching about rhetoric. The authors borrow the blueprints from Aristotle to position their book beyond the boundaries of the popular "this is mere rhetoric" discourse, perpetuated to a large extent by contemporary media. The authors' effort to erase and redraw the boundaries of the reductive conceptualization of rhetoric allows them to carve a new and definitely more multifaceted landscape for the "not-so-instrumental" art of speaking.

The value of *The Speaker* lies also in revisiting the popular fears of speaking in public. Interestingly, the book does so already in chapter two, where the phenomenon is discussed at length as an emotional and physiological response to the combination of the "fear of rejection, fear of criticism, fear of judgment and

fear of failure” (25). The authors’ acknowledgment that “everyone has fear and everyone experiences anxiety in their lives” (25) would probably have drawn less attention if it was not for the fact that the communication apprehension, as a form of anxiety disorder, is discussed at the outset, even before the reader gets acquainted with a basic definition of a good speech. In this move, Valenzano, Kuypers and Bradento convincingly argue that the anxiety associated with a public performance is an inherent element of public speaking. The new quality that the book offers is the appreciation of the commonly underappreciated experience to help us realize that (1) public speaking *is* a frightening experience; and (2) public speaking is a frightening experience not only for *us*. Sometimes the simplest things are the hardest to notice. These authors seem to have found the way to make us, if not less frightened, then at least more knowledgeable and mentally empowered to rise to the challenge and tackle the unwanted task ahead of it, before it strikes back with an unexpected panic attack. Undoubtedly, being aware that public speaking is reported as the number one most frightening experience by more Americans than ghosts, darkness and flying combined, does bring some comfort, even if only theoretically. A more practical contribution of the chapter offers specific ways to combat the tension associated with preparing and delivering presentations, such as visualization and breathing techniques.

Chapter three on civility is a new addition to this fourth edition of *The Speaker*, first published in 2009. The authors define civility as “communicating with others in a respectful manner, while also respecting oneself.” Further, they make this definition more precise by asserting that a prerequisite for the “lasting, peaceful and stable” interactions is a “genuine and reciprocal expression of respect for ourselves and others through our actions and statements” (44). Through the discussion on civility, a compelling case is made for assertiveness. The authors posit that we should assert ourselves in a civil society since “[t]he ability to say “no” to others and “yes” to ourselves is a key element of civility” (47). Such a conceptual combination of civility, assertiveness and public speech propels us to rethink our underlying motivations to speak in public in the first place. It also offers a noteworthy lens through which we could not only frame our arguments, but also analyze the frameworks of argumentation of other speakers on the scale from deference through assertiveness up to disrespect and overt hatred. Although the chapter does not mention the term, but the concept of hate speech is immediately brought to mind. Thus I really appreciate how the book is not confined to ready-made solutions, but generates some room for the independent development and interpretation of its ideas in a classroom.

The chapter on civility demonstrates another noteworthy strategy employed by the authors. This strategy again confirms their dedication to a more substantial

rather than purely strategically oriented approach to a public speaking instruction. On page 48, Valenzano, Kuypers and Bradento trace the social nature of what they call “facework”, or the “behaviors we employ to maintain the positive image with others.” There we learn of the three “faces” we seek to present to others: the *fellowship face* when we want to exude an aura of friendliness; the *competence face* when we want our expertise be recognized and appreciated; and the *autonomy face* when we want to maintain the perception of independence and capability to decide on our own. What resonates with me at this point is the fact that it is only after a lengthy exposition of “faces” and their psychological underpinning that the reader is exposed to the term “image management.” What might pass for an insignificant detail, to me, speaks volumes. To treat the speech strategically on the part of the authors would have meant to restrict themselves to an easy “how to” model and thus respond to a popular demand for easy solutions. In such a case, they would most probably have opted for a reversed logic and they would have placed the ready-made recipes for “faces” under the large section on “image management.”

Chapters from four to twelve offer an array of choices for those who wish to take their public speaking skills to a new level either by taking a holistic approach or by selecting the elements they want to improve. The chapters are dedicated to developing both the structure and the delivery of the speech. Therefore, chapter four on crafting the speech is followed by the chapters on delivery (chapter five), presentation aids (six), speech locations (seven), audience analysis (eight), considerations of style (nine), outlining principles (ten), and goals and types of informative speaking (eleven and twelve). What makes these chapters highly readable is the authors’ attention to keep the balance between theory and examples. Parallel to theoretical considerations, there is a good selection of vivid examples, which may serve a double function of an illustration for a given technique and a model for a speech analysis.

As for the special sections included in each chapter, two noteworthy features in *The Speaker* are the fragments of both the historic and contemporary speeches, which, according to the authors, have made some difference; and the “Spotlighting theorists” featuring the authors’ selection of the most influential scholars who have made a significant contribution to the field of speech communication. The chapters conclude with the summary section, the list of key terms with a page reference and the review questions. Moreover, the authors have prepared an engaging extension which may help the readers apply the discussed topics in a broader context. As an example, the chapter on civility in a “Think about” section poses a question: “Are people naturally civil, or is this a psychological restraint put on our natural state of being?” As a closure, the authors devised for each topic some ready-to-apply “Activities for action,” such as, for instance:

Watch a series of political advertisements or a listen to an airing of a political talk show. Write down what you believe the central message to be and also the ways the person makes the case. Were they civil in their approach? Did the host or the guest try to understand the views of the other side? What behaviors encouraged or discouraged dialogue and understanding? What behaviors could have been employed to encourage understanding?

If we add to it a clear layout of the chapters with most important terms defined on the sides and all the typologies laid out in tables, these well designed components contribute to a high didactic value of the volume, which could definitely serve as a textbook in a general public speaking course at a university level.

That is not to set every aspect of the book beyond critique. As a rhetorical scholar who firmly opposes the 16th century reform by Peter Ramus, who deprived the Aristotelian *Organon* of the crucial elements of *inventio* and *dispositio*, I shall advocate for moving chapters thirteen to fifteen towards the beginning, right after chapter three on civility. Granted, in chapter four there is a Research and Preparation section, but the reference to these first two canons of rhetoric is made only indirectly. The canons get their proper mention no sooner than in chapter thirteen, but I will argue that you cannot craft a persuasive speech with the knowledge of persuasive appeals limited solely to the skills-based, instrumental approach.

Nevertheless, I am still of the opinion that given the complexities of an increasing pervasiveness of the digital and the visual, *The Speaker* still has a lot to offer to those who do not give up on a spoken word. Joseph M. Valenzano III, Jim A. Kuypers and Stephen W. Bradento were successful in balancing the depth of the classical theory on persuasive speaking with the contemporary popular demand for skills-based curricula and the growing expectations of educational administrators to produce results rather than focus on processes. This proves how much the authors were attuned to the expectations of the target audience, even though the readers well-versed in the art of rhetoric might find this type of instruction too strategically oriented and not challenging enough for, say, philosophy students. Yet, there is no doubt that this book was written with a more general audience in mind and its own subtlety of persuasion lies precisely in the appreciation of a presumably broad base for whom the attention to stylistic sheen may be more apt, if not supreme, to the texture of their argument. While epitomizing many aspects of the ancient practices, the authors help us come to terms with the fact that just as not everyone in antiquity was lucky enough to have Aristotle for an instructor (the story of Alexander the Great sets the scene for this book brilliantly in the opening chapter), by analogy, not everyone today must design their speech as a philosophical treatise featuring five modes of persuasion as an essential feature.