
The influence of Eric Griffiths looms large in this book. In his 1989 study *The Printed Voice of Victorian Poetry*, Griffiths examines the negotiation between spoken and written language that is central to the reading of Victorian poetry. In *The Art of Eloquence*, Matthew Bevis uses a similarly comparative approach to the languages of speech and writing as the basis for his analysis of the relationship between literature and political oratory. His central contention is that ‘writing wards off the decisiveness of the tongue’ (p.265); that the subtleties of written literary language can modulate the strident rhetoric of political speakers into ‘another type of eloquence’ (p.124), more measured and disinterested. The concept of disinterestedness is a key one for Bevis. He argues that the literary texts that he considers explore and weigh up the competing claims of different political stances, and that this disinterested approach means that the texts can ‘be seen as models of responsible political conduct, for their willingness to engage with multiple and sometimes contradictory values can prepare the ground for a richer political response in future’ (pp.8-9).

Although the authors that Bevis discusses initially seem rather disparate, he succeeds in locating all four writers in the context of the political culture of the nineteenth century, which he calls ‘the most insistently parliamentary age in Britain's history’ (p.16). By examining Byron’s speeches in the House of Lords, Dickens’s early career as a parliamentary reporter, Tennyson’s view of his civic responsibilities as Poet Laureate, and Joyce’s interest in the political career of Parnell, Bevis shows that these writers were intensely aware of political ideas and language. He also makes effective use of sources such as *Hansard’s*, *The Times*, and *Punch* (which frequently satirised political figures by likening them to characters from Dickens) to demonstrate how literature and
parliamentary politics consistently impinged on one another throughout the nineteenth century. The impressive contextual research that is evident in *The Art of Eloquence* is accompanied by a close attention to the linguistic and stylistic features that separate literary writing from political speech, and the book is full of insightful readings of individual texts, such as an analysis of the parodies of parliamentary debate that occur throughout *The Pickwick Papers*.

However, Bevis is not always successful in his attempts to identity individual works of literature as responses to specific political questions, and at times his criticism lacks the disinterested quality that he praises in other writers. It is one thing to say that ‘Tennyson’s ‘Ulysses’ remains within ear-shot of political debates’ about the abolition of slavery in the 1830s (p.166); but when Bevis goes on to assert that the speaker of the poem ‘raises the two main issues of the abolition debate (what is to be done with the slaves? and by whom?)’ (p.168), it is difficult for the reader to accede to this unduly definitive description of the poem’s political concerns. On other occasions, Bevis’s focus on the disinterestedness of his authors fails to take sufficient account of the personal political opinions that may have informed their writing. For example, Byron’s ‘impatience with Parliament’ and his ‘admiration of Napoleon’ are mentioned (p.56), but they are never reconciled to Bevis’s account of the political disinterestedness of Byron’s poetry. Nevertheless, if the four writers discussed in *The Art of Eloquence* were not always disinterested, they were unquestionably concerned with politics, and this book provides a valuable and thought-provoking account of how their writings investigated and challenged the oratory that helped to shape the political concerns of their times.

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