
Reviewed by James A. Berlin, Purdue University

An effort to re-examine the received histories of rhetoric has lately been conspicuous in the pages of journals and in the meeting rooms of conference hotels. Recent issues of PRETEXT and Rhetoric Review, as well as the last two CCCC gatherings, have featured the turn to revisionary histories of rhetoric. William Covino was one of the earliest contributors to this discussion, particularly in a 1983 PRETEXT essay entitled "Thomas De Quincey in a Revisionist History of Rhetoric." In The Art of Wondering: A Revisionist Return to the History of Rhetoric, Covino attempts to situate a new rhetorical tradition, a tradition that is revisionary in at least two senses: it offers a new interpretation of figures already a part of the rhetorical canon, and it includes intellectual figures not previously considered within the rhetorical domain. The result is one of the most original and challenging treatments of the history of rhetoric in print.

Covino states his intention at the outset: "Surveying the history of rhetoric with a postmodern sensibility, this study advances two 'repressed' propositions: (1) The major figures of classical rhetoric—Plato, Aristotle, Cicero—define and demonstrate rhetoric as the elaboration of ambiguity. (2) These figures anticipate more overtly renegade advocates of open discourse: Montaigne, Vico, Hume, Byron, and De Quincey" (2-3). He acknowledges that his treatment is an interpretation of selected works, not an exhaustive chronological report, and challenges the reader to regard his "chapters as provocation rather than information, as interruptions in the long-standing conversation about the elements of rhetoric" (3). Covino might also have mentioned at the start (as he suggests in the Afterword) that his post-modernist stance is grounded in Kenneth Burke—rather than, say, Jacques Derrida, whom he also names in his closing chapter. Covino's reliance on Burke means that in every figure examined he seeks out points of textual ambiguity and displays how these ambiguities demonstrate not only (or simply) indeterminism, but a recognition of the perspectival nature of knowledge. In other words, Covino is committed to indicating the unwillingness of the figures he forwards to rest in any univocal, monolithic conception of truth. Covino is allied with Frank Lentricchia in identifying Burke as a post-modern equal to the French in his understanding of the contemporary condition, and superior to them in the response he offers. (The important difference between Lentricchia and Covino is that until the very last page Covino is all but silent on the political question, his project focusing instead on intellectual history and intellectual history alone, a choice I will try to respect in this review despite my reservations about it).

Covino's treatment of Plato and Aristotle is indeed provocative. The philosophical canon's most revered exponent of eternal and unchanging truth and its foremost representative of rationalism are placed among those rhetoricians who regard rhetoric as "an art of wondering, and writing as a mode of avoiding rather than intending closure" (9). Those who have read them otherwise have forced them into the "technical" tradition of rhetoric, making them sponsors of algorithmic formulas that mechanically govern the production of discourse. Covino challenges the accuracy of this charge by fixing on Plato's Phaedrus and Aristotle's Rhetoric, arguing that we must place the explicit statements supporting rhetorical rules in their works against contradictory statements within the very same texts, as well as against the polysemic structure of the works as wholes. It should be noted here, however, that Covino's is not a deconstructive reading. He does not demonstrate self-contradictions in each work that result in a radically indeterminate meaning. Instead, he argues that Plato and Aristotle intended to encourage multiplicity in interpretation, consciously endorsing in their statement and structure a plurality of perspectives in addressing experience. This, I would argue, attenuates Covino's claims to post-modernism, since it shifts the emphasis from an interpretation that arises in the interaction of text and interpretive strategy to one that privileges an...
authorial intention inscribed in the text. This, I hasten to add, does not negate the value of his interpretation. It does, however, cast doubt on his method, a method that claims for itself self-reflexiveness and indeterminacy in forwarding a decentered, nonfoundational, and nonessentialist reading, yet finally claims for itself a rendering of the text’s real meaning.

The appropriation of Plato and Aristotle in the service of a rhetorical tradition that recommends plurality and openness is a worthy project, but it invites a number of questions. I wonder how Covino could have ignored the Sophists, particularly Gorgias and Protagoras, when historians as diverse as Nancy Streuver, Richard Enos, Susan Jarratt, and Victor Vitanza have forwarded them as the earliest sponsors of the radically indeterminate rhetoric Covino describes here. Considering them would, indeed, have rendered problematic his reading of Plato, the sophistbaiter, but Covino is equal to the challenge of this difficulty. I also wonder why Covino insists on regarding the rhetorical tradition of free play as a philosophical rhetoric, a "philosophy of composition that exploits rhetoric and writing as philosophy" (10). Covino, it is clear, intends a postmodern formulation of philosophy in line with the anti-foundationalism of Richard Rorty and the anti-metaphysics of Derrida. Unfortunately, his usage puts him at terminological odds with those sympathetic to him who are calling for an anti-philosophical rhetoric that, like Covino's, refuses claims to origins, presence, and identity found in Western philosophy.

Covino's reading of Cicero is a compelling one, especially since the effort to see Cicero as a perspectival rhetorician has already been inaugurated by Michael Halloran. Covino's reclamation of Montaigne, Vico, and Hume for the rhetorical tradition of indeterminacy is an even more important contribution. Here, he shows how figures outside the rhetorical canon can be regarded as sponsoring theories on the relations of language and meaning in the public forum—that is, of having put forth rhetorics. Covino sees in Montaigne a continuation of "the fantastic motley" of Plato's Phaedrus, with its dialectical patchwork of multiple voices" (48). He further places Montaigne in this context by attributing to him a notion of rhetoric as the creation of the pluralistic self through the conjuncture of multiple texts. In Vico, he finds the abstract, certain, and fixed world of Cartesian rationalism—the realm of natural philosophy and science—placed up against "the philosophical imagination, which is the capacity to connect 'matters lying far apart,' that is, the capacity to think metaphorically" (59). Here, invention is conceived as creating relationships not previously made, rather than simply analyzing relationships provided by rational and empirical investigation. Covino's discussion firmly locates the significance of Vico for modern rhetorical studies (although he might have been more careful in the multiple uses to which he puts such terms from his source as "philosophy" and "common sense.")

His treatment of Hume is also suggestive, showing how the British skeptic continually revised his texts to reflect his growing realization of the perspectival nature of knowledge. The effort to find authorial intention inscribed within the text is also more successful in this chapter, as Covino is able to locate specific passages that support his reading rather than relying on structural and propositional contradiction. In other words, in order to make his case for Plato and Aristotle, Covino was forced to deconstruct texts and treat his deconstructive readings as intentional. In dealing with Montaigne, Vico, and Hume, on the other hand, he used more conventional interpretive techniques to discern in them unity and coherence, albeit in the service of an epistemology of pluralism and incoherence. This is especially apparent in his treatment of Hume, as pages are given to documenting Hume's extensive revisions over a period of several years.

In turning to Blair, Byron, and De Quincey in Chapter 3 and to Jacques Derrida, Paul Feyerabend, and Clifford Geertz in the Afterword, Covino situates himself in the post-Kantian problematic and the post-modern response to it. Again, he extends the rhetorical canon, showing the rhetorical method of Byron in Don Juan—doing so, significantly, in the interests of indicating the rhetorical design in a poetic text. In treating De Quincey, Covino builds on his earlier interpretation in PRETEXT to demonstrate that, for
De Quincey, rhetoric "maintains a tension between convention and invention, mechanic and organic, closure and wonder, and one becomes a rhetorical animal through the process of intellectual play" (118). He also finds in De Quincey a concern for the communal and the community, although I do not find his case here convincing, given De Quincey's obvious Romantic preoccupation with the self. In the Afterword, Covino calls on Derrida, Feyerabend (the philosopher of science), and Geertz (the cultural anthropologist) in support of his argument for a rhetoric open to the play of perspectives as the appropriate response to the polysemic nature of knowledge and experience. He closes the text by recommending that writing teachers encourage a rhetoric of "speculation and exploration" (129) in their classrooms, a discourse of open rather than closed forms, and a practice marked by "thoughtful uncertainty" in which "we consistently locate and relocate ourselves in play" (130).

*The Art of Wondering* is a remarkable project, an effort to refashion the rhetorical tradition in a way that situates a rhetoric of multiple perspectives and uninhibited play in a rich variety of historical texts. In so doing, it is not always as polyvalent and playful as it itself recommends, preferring coherence and closure to wonder and openness (compare, for example, Victor Vitanza's response to a similar problematic in his recent essays). And it might also have touched upon the discontinuities, differences, and elaborations of the figures considered as well as their common core. It does, however, make a powerful case for a rereading of the rhetorical canon and a reconception of the received rhetorical traditions. It further locates, in unexpected places, speculation that points to the possibilities of a reconceived modern rhetoric and rhetorical pedagogy. Thus, despite its occasional flaws and false turns, it is a book we cannot now do without, and one that I cannot recommend too highly.


Reviewed by Timothy R. Donovan, Northeastern University

Initially, I was wary of *Consensus and Dissent,* if only because the dichotomous title sounds like so many of the rhetorical readers that come across one's desk, each one promising to stir some debate in the classroom and to put seriousness into student writing. But eventually I warmed to this book, though there is more consensus in it than dissent. What the title characterizes is merely the last seventy-five years, during which time there has been plenty of serious debate as to what English should be, both within and without the "profession," "field," "subject," "discipline" (choose one). In this era of paradigm shifts and alternative literacies, *Consensus and Dissent* is yet another effort in the latest round of redefinition. We may yet succeed, but Marjorie Farmer, the editor of this collection of essays from NCTE, knows we haven't yet done so and, perhaps, are unlikely to very soon. Her title thus acknowledges and, to some degree, celebrates that fact.

It is, however, the subtitle, "Teaching English Past, Present, and Future," that gets directly to its purpose. The seventeen contributors to *Consensus and Dissent* in one way or another grapple with the question, "How do we come to be teaching what, and as, we are now teaching?" The prevailing approach to this question is historical: the concept behind the volume is that of a "yearbook." And though that term suggests an annual retrospective, publication of this book coincided with NCTE's Diamond Jubilee in 1986. As a result, the essays focus on recurring themes, though generally of more recent vintage. This volume, then, is a rendering of what you might have seen and heard had you been an English teacher since, say, the legendary Dartmouth Seminar of 1966 or even the "Why Johnny Can't Write" issue of *Newsweek* in 1975.