

Being Made Strange: Rhetoric beyond Representation. By Bradford Vivian. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2004. 229 pp. ISBN 0791460371.

With *Being Made Strange: Rhetoric beyond Representation*, Bradford Vivian offers an innovative attempt to apply poststructuralist insights to the field of rhetoric. This book inquires into the social and ethical changes to the field of rhetoric brought about by an understanding of subjectivity based on difference rather than identity.

By studying the texts of the founding fathers of rhetoric and their later North American adaptors, the author intends to offer a novel understanding of rhetoric, free from the exclusion and denial of cultural differences. By criticizing the logic of representation on which, Vivian argues, rhetorical scholarship is based, he attempts to show how rhetoric continues to promote humanist ideals based on a universalist conception of mankind, of which reason, truth, and morality are defining characteristics. This allows him to underline the inherent limitations of such a position and to prove the contributions French poststructural theory can make to the field by developing an account of rhetoric “no longer sanctioned by the socially and intellectually prejudicial values of representational thought” (p. xii). Although the author seldom questions French social theory, *Being Made Strange* remains a very stimulating call for a rhetoric of the twenty-first century by rhetoricians and communication scholars alike. After the first section of the book, dedicated to the description of the field of rhetoric and its main postulates, Vivian exposes his original contribution to the field. The last section consists of an application of this new “rhetoric in the middle voice” to two case studies, giving the reader prime examples of the contributions of which such an approach is capable.

The main argument of *Being Made Strange* is that the field of rhetoric, since its beginnings in ancient Greece, has appealed to universalist notions of the human being, which Vivian claims constitute “a partial and privileged view of humanity” (p. 9). This conception of rhetoric as the basis of universalist humanist ideals is doubly representative, with speech representing transcendent phenomena as well as “the activity in which humans personify the truth of their being” (p. x). This primacy given to representation reflects the authority of identity and explains the fact that “the subject and the object of rhetoric has always been one and the same: an ideal conception of human being” (p. 52). The primacy of identity and the position given to the universal (read: moral and reasonable) human being is further intensified by the ideal medium of rhetoric, namely, speech. Speech, by positing an identity between a speaker’s thought, his discourse, and the reception of this discourse in the minds of an audience, only strengthens the humanist ideals at work in the field of rhetoric by giving the authoritative role in communication processes to the speaker’s intention.

By relying on poststructural critiques of representation and speech, Vivian distances himself from conceptions of rhetoric in which representation and the intentions of the author dominate, in order to develop a rhetoric in a “middle voice” that goes beyond representation and does not appeal to essentialist notions of human being. Rather, Vivian’s rhetoric in the middle voice is to be understood as

a conception of rhetoric defined neither by the supposed truth or character nor that of custom (neither by an essential nor social self) but by the self-enactment of discourse in which such apparently antithetical categories acquire sense and value as constitutive features of subjectivity. (p. 77)

Following Foucault’s account of discourse, rhetoric in the middle voice examines the field in which communication can occur and accounts for the (trans)formation of truth, morality, knowledge, and subjectivity. Such a position therefore emphasizes the discursive formation of subject positions rather than the representation of a universalist humanity. There are no transcendent benchmarks with which to evaluate a given rhetorical arrange-

ment; style allows one to pinpoint the characteristic configuration of given social, economic, and political elements without relying on any moral evaluations.

Being Made Strange is very well written. The prose is elegant and accessible, and the standpoint adopted seems to be consistent with Vivian's stated intentions. Furthermore, Vivian has succeeded in writing a book about rhetoric without burdening the reader with long taxonomies of rhetorical figures. The author focuses more on the main influences in rhetorical scholarship, and he does not mention the various debates and opposing views in that field much. This focus, while rendering the author's thesis more appealing, leaves the reader wondering if rhetoric has been as homogenous throughout space and time as Vivian argues.

Overall, it would seem that Vivian has succeeded in offering a model of rhetoric that accounts for the formation of subjectivities, rather than one that is based on a conception of human beings attuned to humanist ideals. In promoting an open-ended view of social arrangements and of the self, Vivian does point to the ways in which rhetoric could account for the contingent dimensions that dominate in any given social arrangement. Nonetheless, one wonders to what extent such a position is not already found in rhetorical scholarship. Indeed, by presenting a picture of rhetoric as uniform and homogenous, Vivian only makes his thesis stronger. However, numerous other authors have pointed out the diverse influences in rhetorical scholarship and the various paradigmatic changes the discipline has gone through, such as the fusion between rhetoric and poetics at the end of the Middle Ages that lead to the constitution of literature (Barthes, 1985). Such shifts are left unaccounted for in Vivian's book, and this undermines his critique.

One major hidden assumption dampens Vivian's endeavour. In Vivian's own words, "the premise that speech is the ideal form of rhetoric in relation to which all other forms are defined requires little demonstration" (p. 61). Indeed, Vivian associates the humanist ideals at work in rhetoric with speech, be it at the level of representation or at the level of authority for interpretation. This claim allows him to apply Derrida's critique of logocentrism to the rhetorical tradition, and to question the value of representation. This move, however, is made by ignoring the role rhetoric has played in education as a form of literary training since the early Renaissance (Barthes, 1985).

In summary, although a rigorous account of the field of rhetoric is missing, Vivian's book does point to new avenues of research for rhetoricians. The cultural and social aspects of rhetoric, or the technology of discourse, are the main foci of the book. As such, it provides the reader with a broader understanding of rhetoric, which goes beyond an enumeration of rhetorical figures or an analysis of the different parts of the trivium. The case studies on Jefferson and on silence at the end of the book show how this rhetoric in the middle voice allows one to address hitherto-ignored questions regarding the role of rhetoric in the constitution of collective memory and subjectivity. Furthermore, Vivian's call to pursue the rhetorical endeavour rather than abandon it altogether illustrates the sensibility and nuance of which the author is capable.

Reference

Barthes, Roland. (1985). L'ancienne rhétorique. Aide-memoire. In *L'aventure semiologique* (pp. 85-164). Paris, France: Points.

Alexandre MacMillan
Université de Montréal