

ISSA Proceedings 2006 - Modern Rhetoric And The End Of Argument

✖ 1. Introduction

A remarkable number of critics and historians have asserted—sometimes with dismay, sometimes with delight—the death of rhetoric. The exact time of this termination and the precise cause of the capitulation are matters of considerable conjecture. Yet there is perhaps a consensus that after a long and celebrated life rhetoric died sometime between the end of the eighteenth and middle of the nineteenth centuries. Thus for Tzvetan Todorov the history of rhetoric is one of “splendor and misery” and for Roland Barthes the same history is “triumphant and moribund.” In his *Figures of Literary Discourse* Gérard Genette offers what he calls a “cavalier account” of these developments which ends with the “great shipwreck of rhetoric” (p.114).

For Genette, rhetoric’s career has been a “historical course of a discipline that has witnessed, over the centuries, the gradual contraction of its field of competence...from Corax to our own day, the history of rhetoric has been that of a generalized restriction (pp. 103-104).” For Genette, this “generalized restriction” is a movement from rhetoric, classically conceived, to a theory of figures, to a theory of tropes, to a final “valorization” of metaphor as the surviving heir of the rhetorical tradition.

Like Genette and others Paul Ricoeur also sees rhetoric as having followed a course of gradual decline from its classical origins to its present moribund state. In *The Rule of Metaphor*, Ricoeur offers an account of rhetoric’s career that concludes with its “dying days” (p. 28). One cause of rhetoric’s death was its reduction to “parts,” that is, the figures. Ricoeur decries the taxonomic tendency of rhetoric, as exemplified by the lists of figures, largely because these taxonomies are, in his view, “static.” The more crucial problem is that the taxonomies contributed to rhetoric “severing” itself from argument. Ricoeur recognizes that Greek rhetoric was “broader, more dramatic, than a theory of figures” (p.12). After all, says Ricoeur, before taxonomy there was Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* (RM, p.12). And, moreover, says Ricoeur, “before rhetoric was futile, it was dangerous” (p.11).

Ricoeur agrees with Genette's thesis that "the progressive reduction of the domain of rhetoric" was its undoing (p.44). Ricoeur agrees with Genette that "since the Greeks, rhetoric diminished bit by bit to a theory of style by cutting itself off from the two parts that generated it, the theories of argumentation and of composition. Then, in turn, the theory of style shrank to a classification of figures of speech, and this to a theory of tropes (p. 45)."

This interpretation of rhetoric's history as a "progressive reduction" in its scope away from invention and argument in favor of a limited view of tropes has gained considerable currency. It is probably appealing to scholars of argument to believe that abandoning invention and argument led directly to the demise of rhetoric. And while the "progressive reduction" position is plausible, it may not be historically accurate. For if Genette and Ricoeur are correct rhetoric, or at least rhetoric with a significant inventional component, should no longer be evident by the second half of the nineteenth century.

To test the claims of Genette, Ricoeur, and others I propose to examine works on rhetoric published in the late 1800's in the United States. In other words, I will examine treatises on rhetoric which appeared after the presumed death of that subject. I have selected two such works for particular scrutiny: Henry Day, *The Art of Discourse* (1867) and David J. Hill, *The Science of Rhetoric* (1877). Nan Johnson identifies these works as two of the most widely used and commonly quoted textbooks on rhetoric in the U.S. in her *Nineteenth Century Rhetoric in North America*. Thus a consideration of Day and Hill provides a reasonable picture of how rhetoric was understood in late nineteenth-century America. Although it is not, strictly speaking, a rhetoric, I will also consider George Pierce Baker's *The Principles of Argumentation*, because it is important document for understanding the relationship between rhetoric and argument.

2. Henry Day, the art of discourse (1867)

It is apparent from the outset of *The Art of Discourse* that Day does not intend to reduce rhetoric to style, much less to a mere catalogue of tropes. Indeed, Day's intent is quite the opposite. In his preface he notes that *The Art of Discourse* is a revision of *Elements of the Art of Rhetoric* (1858). A "distinctive peculiarity" of that earlier work, says Day, was "the elevation of Invention, or the supply of the thought, to the first and commanding rank in rhetorical instruction" (p. v). He promises that his revision will continue what he began in the earlier work and will include "more definite indications of the relations of Rhetoric to Logic and Aesthetics, and the fuller and clearer application of logical and aesthetic

principles to the construction of discourse" (p. v).

Day specifically objects to certain influential rhetoricians who he believes have presented at best limited views of rhetoric. Certain popular treatises mistakenly render rhetoric a department of one of the three "mental sciences:" logic, aesthetics, and ethics. He maintains that Richard Whately "has regarded Rhetoric as an offshoot of Logic" and Hugh Blair treats it "as a mere department of Aesthetics" and that Franz Theremin makes the art "a purely ethical procedure" (p. 7).

Day therefore proposes to present what he believes to be a complete rhetoric. This complete rhetoric consists of two "departments:" invention ("the art of supplying the requisite thought in kind and form for discourse") and style. As Day's definition of invention suggests, his conception of invention subsumes the traditional rhetorical component of arrangement of disposition. It is within invention that Day, like his classical predecessors, deals with argumentation. There are four parts of invention: explanation, confirmation, persuasion, and excitation. The goal of confirmation is conviction which is achieved through the "exhibition of proof." Thus it is within the context of confirmation that Day discusses argument. Argument, in turn, is understood almost exclusively as topical argumentation. The topics, says Day, were "regarded by ancient rhetoricians and orators as one of the most important in the whole province of rhetoric" (p. 120). The topics have "fallen so much into disuse" for the same reasons that invention itself has been neglected. Day intends to remedy that neglect by providing "a distinct view" of the topics (p. 120).

The function of the topics is "to facilitate and guide rhetorical invention in confirmation by a distribution of the different kinds of proofs into general classes" (p. 121). Accordingly, Day employs the topics to organize his discussion of argument. He divides the topics into two classes: analytic proofs and synthetic proofs. Analytic Proofs are proofs "derived from the very terms of the proposition" (p. 124). Such proofs possess "the highest validity and force in all confirmation" (p. 123) but because such proofs are very nearly self-evident, they apparently have little role in argumentation. Synthetic proofs are "derived from without the proposition" and are subdivided into two categories: intuitive and empirical. Intuitive proofs are mental operations like mathematical reasoning and thus, like analytic proofs, require little argumentation to achieve conviction. Empirical proofs, originate "from without the mind" and are at the heart of rhetorical

argumentation. There are three types of empirical proofs. The first of these is antecedent probability (or a priori proof) which includes inferences of effect from cause and attribute from substance. The second type of empirical proof is signs (or a posteriori proof) which includes inferences in which the whole is inferred from the part and cause is inferred from the effect. Signs also include arguments from testimony and authority. The final type of empirical proof is the example. Examples are proofs that derive from the resemblance, commonality, or relations that exist between parts of a larger whole. Of the various kinds of arguments he presents, Day says it is obvious that "while some are applicable to all subjects, others are adapted only to particular kinds of subjects" (p. 152). Despite this variation in applicability, it is clear that Day intends the topics presented to exhaust the possibilities of rhetorical argument.

Although Day believes the neglect of topical argument was a serious deficiency of many rhetorical texts, *The Art of Discourse* is not devoted exclusively to invention. For Day invention is only half of the art of rhetoric. Style, "the expression of thought in language" (p. 288) comprises the only essential department of rhetoric. And while invention may be conceived as "a distinct branch of the art, style is yet involved even in that; as the exercises of invention cannot proceed but in the forms of language" (pp. 208-09). Thus invention and style, "while they may easily be conceived of as distinct ... are nevertheless bound together by an essential bond of life" (p. 209). Not only does Day not reduce rhetoric to style, but he also affirms the irreducibility of the art itself. And in his treatment of style does not devolve to a discussion of tropes. Indeed, the tropes make up a relatively small part of his treatment of style.

3. David J. Hill, the science of rhetoric (1877)

Like Day, Hill begins *The Science of Rhetoric* (1877) by promising readers a complete rhetoric. He complains that "most of the text-books on Rhetoric take a one-sided view of the subject. In language reminiscent of, and probably derived from, Day's *The Art of Discourse*, Hill complains that rhetoric was treated by Whately "as a branch of Logic," by Blair as a "department of applied Aesthetics," and by Theremin "as belonging to Ethics" (p. 3). Unlike these distinguished predecessors, Hill "aims to explain the whole theory of effective discourse, for whatever purpose and in whatever form it may be used" (p. 4).

Although Hill, like Day, believes that many writers on rhetoric have been too limited, he does not agree with Hill that rhetoric is an art. Rather, for Hill rhetoric

is a science and as such the rhetorician must search for scientific laws to explain its workings. This for him rhetoric, or discourse, “aims to produce a change (1) in the mind, (2) by means of ideas, (3) expressed through language. The science of producing mental changes must account for the laws of the mind, the idea, and the form” (p. 39). The mind, the idea, and the form serve as the three fundamental divisions of *The Science of Rhetoric*. The “laws of the mind” include considerations of reason, imagination, feeling as well as age, experience, affiliation. The “laws of form” comprehend the traditional category of style. The “laws of idea” seek to explain the nature of the idea to be communicated. There are, according to Hill, four classes of ideas which require four different types of discourse:“(1) The parts of a simultaneous whole are presented to the mind by Description. (2) The parts of a successive whole are presented to the mind by Narration. (3) A general notion is unfolded to the mind by Exposition. (4) A proposition is confirmed to the mind by Argumentation” (p. 74, *italics original*).

Thus Hill, much like Day, devotes a significant portion of his work to argumentation. However, Hill does not use the terms “topics” or “invention” when discussing argument. Indeed, Hill maintains that invention has little place in rhetoric. Rather than organizing arguments by topics Hill proposes to categorize them by their “essential nature.” A classification derived from the essential nature of argument looks to “the kinds of relation which may subsist between things” (p. 109). The resulting classification of relations bears a remarkable resemblance to the topical scheme presented by Day. There are three categories of argument. The first is a priori arguments or arguments from cause to effect. The second category is argument from sign or arguments from effect to condition including testimony & authority. The third and final category is argument from resemblance.

Just as Hill follows the same general pattern of argument presented by Day, so too, he omits arrangement or disposition as a separate part of rhetoric. He does, however, discuss arrangement in the context of argumentation and offers advice on the order of argument. He suggests that arguments should be ordered according to type and that a priori arguments precede a posteriori arguments. While Hill does indeed discuss argument, he also includes a lengthy discussion of style under the “laws of form.” And once again like Day, Hill’s discussion of style goes well beyond an account of the tropes. Hill devotes more attention to the figures than Day, but his “laws of form” are about more than figures.

The rhetorics of Day and Hill clearly indicate that in nineteenth-century America

rhetoric neither died nor was reduced to a theory of tropes. Nor can it be said that rhetoric abandoned argument on its way to embrace tropology. But both Day and Hill do recognize with concern earlier attempts to restrict rhetoric's scope. In particular, both object to a tendency to restrict rhetoric, not only to style, but to any one of its traditional counterparts: logics, ethics, and aesthetics. One consequence of these restricted rhetorics is frequently the neglect of argument. Day, in particular, believes that "invention must constitute the very life of an art of rhetoric" (p. 40). And yet "In many of the most popular treatises on rhetoric in the English language... invention, has been almost entirely excluded from view" (p. 39).

Day attributes this exclusion to reluctance on the part of many rhetoricians to separate invention from its ancient origins. Greek and Roman founded their systems of invention "on their peculiar logical views, inapplicable to present modes of thought" (p. 39). In particular, "the ancient systems of invention which were constructed in strict reference to the modes of speaking then prevalent are ill-adapted to present use. The systems of Cicero and Quintilian, for example, are for the most part illustrated from the peculiar practice of the Roman bar" (p. 40).

British rhetoricians had long expressed reservations about the applicability Roman argumentation to modern oratory. Hugh Blair, in his immensely influential *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (1783) expressed the common view that the complexity of British law limited the utility of classical precepts. Blair says that our "system of law is become much more complicated. The knowledge of it is thereby rendered so laborious an attainment, as to be the chief object of a lawyer's education ... The Art of Speaking is but a secondary accomplishment" (II, p. 43). This is very different from antiquity when "strict law was much less an object of attention than it is become among us. In the days of Demosthenes and Cicero, the municipal statutes were few, simple, and general; and the decision of causes was trusted, in a great measure to the equity and commonsense of the Judges. Eloquence, much more than Jurisprudence, was the study of those who were to plead causes" (II, p. 76).

Thus ancient forensic oratory and ancient topical systems based upon it were no longer relevant in the modern world. Day says that modern writers "have been reduced to this alternative,-either of leaving out this part of the science, or of constructing an entirely new system" (p.40). According to Day, most writers in English, at least, opted for the second alternative and omitted invention

altogether. There is, however, a third alternative and that is the restriction of invention or argumentation to specific forms of discourse. It is this third alternative that Day and Hill in fact pursue.

Both writers accept the validity of what would come to be called in the United States the “modes of discourse.” These four modes or kinds of composition are explained concisely by Adams Sherman Hill in another popular nineteenth-century text, *The Principles of Rhetoric* (1878). The four are: “DESCRIPTION, which deals with persons or things; NARRATION, which deals with events; EXPOSITION, which deals with whatever admits of analysis or requires explanation; ARGUMENT, which deals with any material that may be used to convince the understanding or to affect the will” (p. 247). The modes of discourse appear in both *The Science of Rhetoric* and *The Art of Discourse*. Hill employs these four modes as a way to organize his “laws of idea.” Day, on the other hand, employs a somewhat different four-part division (explanation [including description], confirmation, excitation, and persuasion) to explain invention.

Arguments or topics no longer seen as specific to a genre or “scene” of oratory (forensic, deliberative, and epideictic) but rather argument is restricted to one type of discourse. Arguments, then, occurred only in argumentation. This is restriction from the earlier classical view which saw all discourse as persuasive and therefore dependent upon argumentation. The relegation of argumentation to one of four modes does not necessarily mean that argument is diminished. There is, however, yet a fourth alternative to the three mentioned above. This is an alternative Day does not consider, and of which he may have been unaware. This fourth option would be to detach argumentation from rhetoric and elevate it to an independent discipline to ensure that argument could not be neglected.

4. George Pierce Baker, Principles of argumentation (1895)

Baker’s *Principles of Argumentation* is almost certainly the first work of its kind written in English or perhaps in any other language. Baker was compelled to write a book about argumentation exclusively because of his dissatisfaction with the four modes of discourse which had come to dominate rhetoric in England and the United States. Baker observes that some believe that “Argumentation is far less important to them than Narration, Description, or Exposition” (p. v). He further maintains that argumentation was receiving insufficient attention in most late nineteenth-century texts and so what was needed was “a more elaborate treatise than that which in most books on Rhetoric space permits” (p. vi).

Argumentation, as “the art of producing in the mind of someone else a belief in the ideas which the speaker or writer wishes the hearer or reader to accept,” transcends both logic and rhetoric (p. 1). Logic, as “the science of the laws of thought... teaches us how to think correctly” (p. 14) but “argumentation means much more than the mere application of the Laws of Logic” (p. 20). This is so because argumentation includes three elements that go beyond coherent thinking: persuasive methods; rhetoric; and rules of evidence. The compelling arguer must understand emotional appeals of persuasion, the style and structure of rhetoric, and the credibility of witnesses as defined by evidentiary rules. Therefore, “Formal Logic, — is but the warp which runs through the cloth of Argumentation; and knowledge of the rules of Persuasion, of Rhetoric, and Evidence are the threads of the woof” (p.20).

Baker’s advancement of argumentation as a field rooted in logic and rhetoric and yet distinctive from either obviously struck a cord in late nineteenth-century America. Other works adhering to the precedent set by Baker to regard argumentation as a separate field of study followed in a few years time. These include: Gertrude Buck, *A Course in Argumentative Writing* (1899); Elias J. Mac Ewan, *The Essentials of Argumentation* (1899); and Craven Laycock, *Argumentation and Debate* (1904). Baker’s *Principles* appeared in 1895, 1899, 1902, and 1905. In the preface to the 1905 edition he could proudly proclaim that “the study of argumentation has increased so rapidly in schools and colleges during the ten years since the first edition of this book was published that it is no longer necessary to justify the educational importance of the subject. Nor is it necessary now to explain in detail the kind of argumentation taught in this book. For these reasons a large amount of justificatory and explanatory material which filled the early pages of the first edition has been removed” (p. v). Baker no longer finds it necessary to explain in detail how argumentation differs from rhetoric and logic. Baker is confident, and probably correctly so, that argumentation has emerged as a new field of study together with the arrival of a new century.

5. Conclusion

An examination of the works of Day, Hill, and Baker demonstrate quite clearly that the “death” of rhetoric in the nineteenth century simply did not occur. Indeed, much of the evidence indicates that quite the opposite occurred: that rhetoric, rather than collapsing, experienced a renewal. Title and keyword searches of library databases reveal that the number of works on rhetoric

published in the nineteenth century increased by at least tenfold over the number published in the previous century. Obviously, the volume of published works alone does not tell the entire story of a discipline. Nevertheless, it is difficult to imagine that publishers would print so many books in a field which no longer existed.

Nor is it the case that rhetoric experienced a “contraction of competence” from a broad study of discourse, to a catalogue of the figures, and finally to a theory of metaphor. While this “generalized restriction” may explain some aspects of rhetoric’s history in the nineteenth century, the thesis cannot be applied universally. Some authors certainly did restrict rhetoric to style, but others maintained a much more comprehensive view. The work of Day and Hill are, of course, clear evidence of this. Day recognizes two broad divisions of rhetoric, invention and style, and devotes about one half of *The Art of Discourse* to each of them. His treatment of style is comprehensive and the figures are but a small part of it. Metaphor receives no more attention than do many other tropes. For Hill style, or the ‘Laws of Form,’ is one of three major division of rhetoric. Although Hill devotes more attention than does Day to the figures, the figures are by no means the only concern of the “Laws of Form.” For both Day and Hill the figures maintain their traditional importance as an apparatus of style, but they do not displace other stylistic concerns.

Although rhetoric does not disappear in the nineteenth century, it most certainly undergoes significant changes. The alterations to rhetoric are complex and have been detailed by many historians of rhetoric. And perhaps no change is more important than the emergence, already noted, of the four modes of discourse. The effects of this quadruple division on argumentation were decidedly mixed. On the one hand, this approach ensured that argument would remain a part of rhetoric. Yet, on the other hand, argument was only one of four modes and thus restricted to specific kinds of discourse. Argumentation, or invention, now merely one of the four modes, could not be, in Days words, “the soul and substance of discourse” (40). In particular, argument was often presented by textbook authors as the final of the four modes. This was more than an organizational convenience. Rather, it signified that argument was not inventional—that is, the creation of discourse did not necessarily, or even typically, begin with the discovery of arguments. Indeed, composition often began with description and proceeded to narration, exposition, and only then to argument (or persuasion). Invention and argument were not abandoned, but they were compartmentalized and condensed.

Day attempted to change this displacement of argument by reasserting the centrality of invention in rhetoric. Day's work was well-received, but he does not seem to have been entirely successful in his efforts. Baker offered another approach to correct this neglect of argument. By advancing argument as a discrete discipline—separate from rhetoric, from logic, and from law—its importance becomes more conspicuous. Argumentation is allied to these other fields but for Baker, at least, the study he conceives is broader than any of its cognate disciplines. His concern is "the argumentation of everyday life" which all intelligent human beings must understand (p. vi). Given the success of *The Principles of Argumentation* and the many similar works which followed upon its publication, Baker had obviously recognized a serious intellectual need. An examination of the variety of rhetorical texts written in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century and of those of the emerging field of argumentation reveals that neither rhetoric nor argument disappeared from the modern intellectual milieu. Therefore, it is really more accurate to talk not of "Modern Rhetoric and the End of Argument" but rather "Modern Rhetoric and the Beginning of Argumentation."

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