

# ISSA Proceedings 2010 - “War With Words”: I.A. Richards’ Attack On Argument



In *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (1936) I. A. Richards proposed to revive “an old subject” that had “sunk so low” that it perhaps should be simply dismissed to “limbo” (Richards 1936/1965, p. 3). In Richards’ view rhetoric’s sorry condition was a result of the flaws of the “old rhetoric” which he says began with Aristotle and ended with Richard Whately in the nineteenth century (Richards 1936/1965, p. 4). The “old rhetoric” was “an offspring of dispute” that “developed as the rationale of pleadings and persuadings; it was the theory of the battle of words and has always been itself dominated by the combative impulse” (Richards 1936/1965, p. 24). Whately’s *Elements of Rhetoric* (1828) represents the inadequacies of the old rhetoric because it offers nothing more than a “collection of prudential Rules about the best sorts of things to say in various argumentative situations” (Richards 1936/1965, p. 8).

Richards’ rejection of traditional rhetoric and his promise to revive the subject made *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* one of the foundational documents of the “New Rhetoric” of the twentieth century. Thus it is important to examine the assumptions of Richards’ indictment of rhetoric and consider if he is correct that it is no more than a “war with words” (Richards, 1955, p. 52). And even if Richards’ historical analysis is accurate, it does not necessarily follow that a disputational model must be abandoned if rhetoric is to prosper in our own times. Richards’ identification of argumentation as rhetoric’s chief disability has had significant implications for the direction of both rhetoric and argumentation. I will argue that Richards’ program to remove argument from rhetoric would, if followed fully, eviscerate rhetoric by stripping away stripping away much of the most fully developed and articulated aspects of rhetorical theory and practice. Moreover, Richards’ self-proclaimed “microscopic” view of rhetoric means that *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* has little to contribute to the development of rhetoric, or argumentation, in the twenty-first century.

## 1. Richards’ Indictment of the Old Rhetoric

Richards finds very little in the old rhetoric that is agreeable. From its very beginnings in antiquity, "from Gorgias onward too much in the literature of rhetoric has been sales-talk selling-sales talk; and for good reasons we are more interested today in defensives against than in aids to eloquent persuasion" (1955, p. 166). Persuasion is suspect, primarily because persuasion proceeds by argumentation and Richards genuinely abhors augmentative and disputative situations. "A controversy," claims Richards, "is normally an exploitation of a systematic set of misunderstandings for war-like purposes" (1936/1965, p. 39). Again and again when discussing disputation and debate, Richards resorts to martial metaphors: disputation is a "battle," rhetoric is "combat," argument is "ordonnance" (1936/1965, p. 8). Richards is correct that rhetoricians, especially the ancients, often describe rhetoric as a combative activity. Thus in *De inventione* Cicero says that "the man who equips himself with the weapons of eloquence, not to be able to attack the welfare of his country but to defend it, he, I think, will be a citizen most helpful and most devoted both to his own interests and those of his community" (p. 5). Cicero sees rhetoric as a conflict but one born, not from confusion or querulousness, but rather from civic responsibility. Richards, in contrast, does not recognize that in some disputes the disputants might understand each other very well and nevertheless be compelled to argue about matters of principle and policy. Thus Richards almost invariably describes traditional rhetoric in terms of bellicosity and never of rationality. Indeed, rhetoric has been "narrowed" and "blinded" by "that preoccupation, that debaters' interest" (Richards 1936/1965, p. 24).

Perhaps no treatise reflects "that debaters' interest" more than Richard Whately's, *Elements of Rhetoric*, which Richards identifies as the last of the "old rhetorics." A glance at the full title of this book may help explain why Richards chose it to exemplify the rhetorical system he would replace: *The Elements of Rhetoric: Comprising an Analysis of the Laws of Moral Evidence and of Persuasion, with Rules for Argumentative Composition and Elocution*. Whately proposes "to treat of 'Argumentative Composition,' generally and exclusively; considering Rhetoric (in conformity with the very just and philosophical view of Aristotle) as an offshoot of Logic" (1828/1963, p. 4). Therefore, "the finding of suitable ARGUMENTS to prove a given point, and the skilful arrangement of them, may be considered as the immediate and proper province of Rhetoric, and of that alone" (p. 39).

In emphasizing the discovery and disposition of arguments as the only exclusive

duty of rhetoric Whately is atypical, if not unique, among early nineteenth century rhetorics. And I believe it is this emphasis on argument that led Richards to identify *The Elements of Rhetoric* as the final chapter in the history of rhetoric. Richards has an obvious aversion to argument and, not surprisingly, he has an equally low regard for logic. In *Speculative Instruments* Richards complains about “the innumerable cogwheels of logic” (1955, p. 147). And logic, like rhetoric, was a product of “scholastic drudgery” (1955, p. 169). Thus Whately, who also wrote *Elements of Logic* as a companion to his *Elements of Rhetoric*, is doubly damned.

Yet Richards’ analysis that the preoccupation with argumentation, most apparent in Whately, caused the collapse of traditional rhetoric differs dramatically from many other observers who interpret the history of rhetoric quite differently. As I have demonstrated in “*Splendor and Misery: Semiotics and the End of Rhetoric*,” critics writing from a semiotic perspective argue that rhetoric’s demise results from an obsession, not with argument, but rather with style. Thus writers like Barthes, Genette, Todorov, and Ricoeur see rhetoric’s neglect of argument and invention in favor of the elocution and the figures the cause of its decline (2006, pp. 305-11). In other words, these semioticians interpret rhetoric’s history in a way that is virtually the opposite of Richards’ analysis. Historical accuracy almost certainly is to be found between these two opposing positions. From its inception rhetoric has been dominated by a tension between argument and invention, on the one hand, and style and elocution, on the other. At various times in rhetoric’s long history, one or the other, invention or elocution, may have seemingly achieved dominance, but the achievement has inevitably been transient at best. Thus Richards’ account of the old rhetoric is a result of a highly selective reading of historical texts.

But even if Richards’ analysis of the causes of rhetoric’s demise is flawed, does this mean that his conclusion, that Whately’s *Elements of Rhetoric* really represents the end of the “old rhetoric,” is equally mistaken? Richards implies that nothing of note had happened in rhetoric from Whately’s *Elements of Rhetoric* in 1828 until the publication of his own *Philosophy of Rhetoric* in 1936. But here too Richards’ view of rhetoric’s history does not quite tell the whole story. A great deal did happen in rhetoric in the 100 years between Whately and Richards. A key term search for books about rhetoric published between 1828 and 1936 in the “Worldcat” online library catalog returns 2,579 titles. Forest Houlette’s *Nineteenth Century Rhetoric: An Enumerative Bibliography*, covering a

slightly different period, the years 1800 to 1920, catalogues 2,546 entries. While bibliographic records do not tell the complete story, the publication of some 2500 books suggests that the “old rhetoric” was not quite as moribund as Richards claims. Richards’ dismissal of nineteenth-century rhetoric was shared by many early twentieth-century writers on the subject. As Linda Ferreira-Buckley notes, “historians of rhetoric once claimed there was little ‘rhetoric’ in the nineteenth century worth studying, but our understanding of nineteenth-century theory and practice has benefitted recently from scholarly attention demonstrating that the period boasts many different ‘rhetorics’” (p. 468). A recent survey of research confirms Ferreira-Buckley’s conclusion that that contemporary scholars increasingly find the nineteenth century a rich period in the history of rhetoric (Gaillet, 2010). While Richards’ account of the “old rhetoric” is myopic, he probably is correct to claim that in the preceding 100 years no one had proposed a role for rhetoric quite like the one he had in mind.

## *2. Richards’ Proposal for a New Rhetoric*

In the beginning of *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*, Richards proposes that rhetoric “should be a study of misunderstanding and its remedies” (1936/1965, p. 3). “A revived Rhetoric or study of verbal understanding and misunderstanding,” he says, “must itself undertake its own inquiry into the modes of meaning – not only, as with the old Rhetoric, on a macroscopic scale, discussing the effects of different disposals of large parts of a discourse – but also on a microscopic scale by using theorems about the structure of the fundamental conjectural units of meaning...” (1936/1965, p. 23). Those “units of meaning,” we are quickly informed, are simply words. Therefore, “a persistent, systematic, detailed inquiry into how words work that will take the place of the discredited subject which goes by the name of Rhetoric” (Richards 1936/1965, p. 23). Rhetoric, then, is no longer a study of persuasion, nor of argument, nor perhaps even of style, but a study of the meaning of words.

Meaning, says Richards, is determined almost entirely by context. “Most generally,” he says, context “is a name for a whole cluster of events that recur together” (Richards 1936/1965, p. 34). The meaning of individual words derive from what he calls their “delegated efficacy:” from a particular context “one item – typically a word – takes over the duties of parts which can then be omitted from the recurrence.... When this abridgement happens, what the sign or word – the item with these delegated powers – means is the missing part of the context” (Richards 1936/1965, p.34). Understanding this “context theory of meaning,”

Richards claims, will help humans avoid misunderstandings (1936/1965, p. 38). In Richards' estimation the "old rhetoric" failed to recognize the "context theory of meaning." Rather, it perpetuated "a chief cause of misunderstanding" that Richards labels the "Proper Meaning Superstition": the assumption that each individual word has only one acceptable meaning (1936/1965, p. 11). Thus he also calls this misconception the "One and Only One True Meaning Superstition." Richards sees this "superstition" as rampant in the rhetorics that preceded his. As a major offender he cites George Campbell's *Philosophy of Rhetoric* (1776). This is a surprising choice because Richards generally praises Campbell and he takes Campbell's title for his own *Philosophy of Rhetoric* 160 years later. Campbell's *Philosophy of Rhetoric*, says Richards, "is otherwise an excellent book in many respects" (1936/1965, p. 51). His identification of Campbell as a chief proponent of the "proper meaning superstition" becomes even more surprising when you begin to look for evidence of this belief in Campbell's work. I can find nothing in Campbell that suggests he believes every word possesses one and only one meaning. Campbell does discuss usage in detail, but he is certainly not dogmatic about proper use. Indeed, when Richards cites an example of this "superstition" he quotes, not from Campbell, but rather from a book he identifies as a *Manual of Rhetoric* (1936/1965, p. 54). Richards is referring to a *Manual of Rhetoric and Composition*, an introductory textbook published in 1907 and thus a work very different from Campbell's *Philosophy of Rhetoric*. Even Richards seems to recognize that he has perhaps overstated the perniciousness of this superstition. He concedes that the doctrine of proper usage "can be interpreted in several ways which make it true and innocuous" (1936/1965, p. 54).

### *3. Metaphor and the Figures*

For Richards, nothing illustrates the difficulties of proper meanings and the contextual interdependence or "interanimation" of words more than metaphor. He devotes the final one third of *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* to an analysis of metaphor and it is this analysis for which the book is best known. His goal is to "put the theory of metaphor in a more important place than it has enjoyed in traditional Rhetoric" (1936/1965, p. 95). "Throughout the history of Rhetoric," he argues, "metaphor has been treated as a sort of happy extra trick with words.... In brief, a grace or ornament or added power of language, not its constitutive form" (1936/1965, p. 90). Metaphor, says Richards, "is the omnipresent principle of language" (1936/1965, p. 92). Metaphor illustrates his "context theory of meaning" because "fundamentally it is a borrowing between and intercourse of

thoughts, a transaction between contexts. Thought is metaphoric..." (Richards 1936/1965, p. 94 [italics original]).

With his treatment of metaphor Richards is addressing a concern that had occupied rhetoric from its very beginnings. And Richards is correct that rhetoricians had often treated metaphor and other tropes and figures of speech as something that could be added to non-figurative language in order to enhance a writer's style. However, simply because metaphor could be employed as a stylistic device does not necessarily mean that rhetoricians regarded metaphor as exclusively additive. Campbell, in the other *Philosophy of Rhetoric*, observes that certain tropes "have a closer connection with the thought than with the expression" and thus should not be viewed as an aspect of style (p. 293). Metaphor, however, has an "intimate" connection with both style and thought and may "therefore be considered under either head" (p. 294).

Metaphor, of course, was only one of many figures of speech that occupied traditional rhetoric. Richards is aware of this but seems ambivalent about figures other than metaphor. In *Speculative Instruments* he admits that "some sort of systematic study of at least some of the devices of language so painstakingly labeled and arranged by these logicians, rhetoricians, and figurists may still be what education chiefly lacks" (Richards, 1955, p. 163). Yet a few pages later in the same book, referring to the multiplicity of figures often found in traditional rhetorics, he confesses "we fear codification in these matters and with good reason" (p. 165). In the end, Richards is content to focus on metaphor as the fundamental figure of thought and language.

#### *4. Poetry*

Although *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* is about prose, Richards' interest seems to be as much about poetry as it is prose. Richards had been led to a study of meaning by observing the difficulty his students had with interpreting poetry. And poetry, far more than rhetoric, would remain an interest throughout his life. Richards defines poetry as discourse in which words "are free to move as they please" (1955, p. 150). Richards favors poetry in part because the fluidity of meaning makes argument almost impossible: "If the meanings of words are free to move about, then there can be no pinning an opponent down, no convicting him of self-contradiction, no catching him out shifting his ground; indeed none of the rules of that amusing old game will hold. The comedy of argument and its practical purposes alike depend upon a convention of constancy in meaning"

(1955, p.149).

While Richards is discussing poetry in this passage, he believes that meaning in prose is also highly unstable: “in most prose, and more than we ordinarily suppose, the opening words have to wait for those that follow to settle what they shall mean – if indeed that ever gets settled” (Richards 1936/1965, p. 50). Ultimately, says Richards, “the world of poetry has in no sense any different reality from the rest of the world and it has no special laws and no other-worldly peculiarities. It is made up of experiences of exactly the same kind as those that come down to us in other ways” (1929, p. 78). For Richards, then, the inconstancy of meaning makes traditional approaches to argument futile. Yet he offers no real alternative to the disputation he so despises. He seems to believe that if meanings are communicated and interpreted as effectively as possible fundamental differences can somehow be resolved.

### *5. Richards’ “Design”*

While *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* examines meaning and metaphor it does not, with any specificity, explain how his “new rhetoric” will remedy misunderstanding. He recognizes this limitation when he admits early in the book that “what follows is unavoidably abstract and general in the extreme” (Richards 1936/1965, p. 26). While he does not regard *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* as the proper place to present a pragmatic program, Richards would devote much of his career to offer what he believed to be practical solutions to the problems of misunderstanding. This approach is evident, for example, in one of his last books, *Design for Escape* (1968). This book offers a “design” to “escape” from many of the problems of the modern world. But Richards had been offering such designs for decades.

Of these various “designs for escape” probably none occupied Richards more than “Basic English.” Richards was convinced that understandings among peoples could never fully be achieved without a universal language and that the language most suitable to this role was English. However, to become a medium of international understanding would require a language that could be learned readily by anyone. Thus Basic English, a simplified version of English, was developed by Richards and his colleagues. As he explains in *Basic English and its Uses* (1943) “Basic English is English made simply by limiting the number of its words to 850, and by cutting down the rules for using them to the smallest number necessary for the clear statement of ideas” (p. 23). Richards and others promoted “Basic” and “translated” various works into that language. Yet despite

Richards' efforts over several decades Basic English never became the international medium of communication that he had intended.

A rather different, and less grandiose, effort to minimize misunderstanding was Richards' development of "specialized quotation marks." Like conventional quotation marks, these consist of words or phrases surrounded by superscripted symbols. These "quotation marks" (later labeled "metasemantic markers") are intended to give the reader additional information about the text they surround. These were introduced in *How to Read a Page: A Course in Efficient Reading with an Introduction to a Hundred Great Words* (1942) which includes a key to the seven marks used in that book. The following are examples, together with Richards' explanations, of the marks presented in that work (*see: illustration*):

<sup>w</sup> indicates the word – merely as the word in general – is being talked about. The marks are equivalent to 'the word.' E. g., <sup>w</sup>table may mean an article of furniture or a list.  
<sup>!</sup> indicates surprise or derision, a Good Heavens! What-a-way-to-talk! attitude. It should be read 'shriek' if we have occasion to read it aloud.  
<sup>nb</sup> indicates that how the word is understood is a turning point in the discussion, and usually that it may easily be read in more than one way or with an inadequate perception of its importance. The sign is short for *Nota Bene* (p.68)."

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Richards would continue to use these marks in most of the books he wrote after *How to Read a Page*. Whether the marks minimized misunderstanding in the way Richards hoped is debatable. Although the specialized quotation marks may give a more precise understanding of how Richards is using a word, the marks also may require the reader to turn to the key to recall the meaning of each mark. Richards seems to believe that the establishment of "designs" like a universal language and an improved system of quotation marks misunderstandings would be minimized sufficiently that the unpleasantness of argument might be avoided altogether.

## 6. Conclusion

What, then, has been the legacy of Richards' "new rhetoric" in the nearly seventy five years since the publication of *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*? Although Richards' has influenced the development of literary criticism, his direct influence on rhetoric, I believe, has been neither considerable nor constructive. Certainly very few have heeded Richards' call to make rhetoric a study of "how words work" on



a microscopic level. But Richards' concern that rhetoric is too divisive, too confrontational, and too argumentative to be beneficial surely appealed to those already suspicious of the art of persuasion. As I have observed in "Modern Rhetoric and the End of Argument" the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw efforts to separate argumentation from its traditional place within rhetoric. Richards' attack on the "old rhetoric" would have reinforced the movement already underway to divorce argumentation from rhetoric.

Following Richards the twentieth century saw attempt to formulate a view of rhetoric that was less combative, less agonistic. But these efforts, like those of Richards, have proven difficult to achieve. No one can oppose efforts to find better ways to resolve conflicts. But what has happened, I believe, is that much rhetoric has simply abandoned the study of argumentation altogether, rather than confront the messiness of debate. This has had the effect of restricting rhetoric's traditional scope in much late twentieth-century writing about rhetoric. But the ancient Protagorean model has proven remarkably persistent, because the need to make decisions between two competing views of the world in courts, legislatures, elections, and all manner of human affairs has not abated. Even Richards recognizes the difficulty of abandoning the study of argument altogether: "In the old Rhetoric, of course, there is much that a new rhetoric finds useful - and much besides which may be advantageous until man changes his nature, debates and disputes, incites, tricks, bullies, and cajoles his fellows less" (1936/1965, p. 24). Despite I. A. Richards very considerably efforts, we human beings have not much changed our nature and so we continue to debate and dispute with considerable enthusiasm.

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