

AN UNDERGRADUATE THEORY (COURSE): POLITICAL RHETORIC

Handout Item 1

Main list of longer texts

Plato – Plato: Gorgias, Menexenus, Protagoras (Cambridge)

Plato – Phaedrus (Hackett)

Lippmann – Public Opinion (Free Press)

Dewey – The Public and its Problems (Swallow)

Aristotle – The Art of Rhetoric (Penguin)

Aristotle – Politics (Cambridge)

American Speeches: Political Oratory from the Revolution to the Civil War (Library of America)

American Speeches: Political Oratory from Lincoln to Bill Clinton (Library of America)

Cicero – On The Ideal Orator (Oxford)

Cicero – Ten Speeches (Hackett)

--“man’s glassy essence” Rorty (1979)

Handout Item 2

First, can theory be given sufficient attention within the rubric of traditional genre/author/subject classes? Second, should classes be offered that are dedicated to theory? Should they be tailored to the needs of classicists, and if so, how? Should they be team-taught? Third, what are the pros and cons of teaching theory within a less formal colloquium structure? Fourth, should theory be taught as part of a Classics undergraduate curriculum, and if so, how? Fifth, how do programs collaborate with or tap into the courses taught in other programs such as English or Comparative Literature?

Handout Item 3

Early-stage writing assignment: Write a brief (300 word) response paper to the following statement: “This sentence contains three errors.”

--Fish (2011) “a formal system that refuses to efface itself before the demands of content and instead claims generative and determining powers; meanings serve it and not the other way around.”

Handout Item 4

APOPHASIS OR PRAETERITIO: HOW (NOT?) TO DO THINGS WITH WORDS

“I find it interesting that it was back in the 1970s that the swine flu broke out then under another Democrat president, Jimmy Carter. And I’m not blaming this on President Obama. I just think it’s an interesting coincidence.” (Representative Michele Bachmann, April 28, 2009).

The speaker here makes a claim by the process of denying that such a claim is being made. Truly effective statements (like the one above) also provide an escape route, the plausible deniability of any malignity in the suggestion that the author is too inert to draw conclusions from a passing observation.

You may grow angry or excited at the implicit message, which most likely gives rise to an indomitable sense of either rage or righteousness (depending on your commitments within the poverty of American political discourse). In lieu of doing so we may also want to ask how such a reaction is even possible. What does this text contain—not just at the level of “ideology”, but within its underlying rhetorical structure—and how does this content shape our reaction to it? What might it say about our agency as readers that we are prone to “react” to this text, and does any text exist in which we do not react along similar lines? The author does not simply shift the burden of meaning onto the reader, but in fact establishes the norms by which we can react, forcing us to take one position or another and forcing us to forget that we are doing so along the way. Therein lies its dangerously brilliant power: the effects of the text are not the same as the narrative within it (in fact, this text explicitly tells nothing at all).

In the face of this essential feature of a text, your goal as a reader and writer is to document the relationship between a story and the reactions it elicits from you (or others). How well can you describe the space between narrative and effect?

-- “Pretending is not necessarily doing something without really feeling it. It might improve a show of sorrow if you can manage to work up a spot of genuine anguish.” Eagleton (2012)

--Poetry excites us to artificial feelings, makes us callous to real ones (Coleridge)

Handout Item 5

Response paper to Deman *Rhetoric of Temporality*: “No one in his right mind will try to grow grapes by the luminosity of the word “day,” but it is very difficult not to conceive the patterns of one’s past and future existence as in accordance with temporal and spatial schemes that belong to fictional narratives and not to the world. This does not mean that fictional narratives are not part of the world and of reality; their impact upon the world may well be all too strong for comfort. What we call ideology is precisely the confusion of linguistic with natural reality, of reference with phenomenalism.”

For the author of a response paper two problems present themselves. Does DeMan actually condemn “ideology”? How does the gulf between “language” and “reality” affect our processes of reading and our processes of writing?

--“a nineteenth-century liberal, a free intelligence, a type hated with equal hatred by all the smelly little orthodoxies which are now contending for our souls.” Orwell (1941) [*Dickens*]

Handout Item 6

“[I]t was not a question of analyzing the internal or external criteria that would enable the Greeks and Romans, or anyone else, to recognize whether a statement or proposition is true or not. At issue for me was rather the attempt to consider truth-telling as a specific activity, or as a role. ... Who is able to tell the truth? What are the moral, the ethical, and the spiritual conditions which entitle someone to present as, and to be considered as, a truth-teller?” (Foucault (2001) 169).

“the beginning of criticism, not the end” Feeney (2008)

Handout Item 7

BAD WORDS AND VOCABULARY CHOICE (OR: OMG, I F’N HATE THAT!)

A word’s potential to annoy or fascinate us often eludes the power of explanation. The matter on some level is personal: we align an author’s identity with the command of vocabulary. And so an ethos emerges in part through associative jargon, words or phrases that evoke a current of academic thought, a political stance, or a social group. Compare two political adversaries: one speaks of “big government,” the other of “big business.” These are vacuous phrases, but you immediately know that the speakers stand at opposite ends of the political spectrum.

As it is, only partial autonomy exists in our choice of idiom, since singular expression still requires adherence to a preformed system. Language shares this trait with all the social phenomena into which we are born. For any writer the rival claims can be difficult to balance: a clumsy or unorthodox lexicon is a vice as much as stale phrases and officious jargon make us the disciples of thoughtless protocol.

For this assignment select five commonly used words (or phrases) and briefly (75-100 words per entry) indicate why they bother you. Your goals are twofold: to make a point about what underlies the term and to describe the nature of your discontent as concretely as possible. This is an exercise in invective. You have license to be savage, but you must substantiate every criticism. “Thoughts are the shadows of our feelings—always darker, emptier, and simpler.” Nietzsche traces out the vacant land between visceral reaction and suasive reasoning. That’s your territory: fill it in by saying not just what you feel, but why, exactly.

“Arguably”